
The Teaching of Christ

by Eugene V. Debs

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Cardinal Gibbon,¹ in an address, delivered at Chicago at a recent date, among other things said:

The Savior of mankind never conferred a greater temporal boon on mankind than by ennobling and sanctifying manual labor, and by rescuing it from the stigma of degradation which had been branded upon it. Before Christ appeared among men manual and even mechanical work was regarded as servile and degrading to the freemen of pagan Borne, and was consequently relegated to slaves. Christ is ushered into the world not amid pomp and splendor of imperial majesty, but amid the environments of an humble child of toil. He is the reputed son of an artisan, and his early manhood is spent in a mechanic's shop. "Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" The primeval curse attached to labor is obliterated by the toilsome life of Jesus Christ. Ever since he pursued his trade as a carpenter he has lightened the mechanic's tools, and has shed a halo around the workshop. If the profession of a general, a jurist, and a statesman is adorned by the example of a Washington, a Taney and a Burke, how much more is the character of a workman ennobled by the example of Christ. What DeTocqueville said 60 years ago of the United States is true today — that with us every honest labor is laudable, thanks to the example and teaching of Christ.

It is always a little difficult to discuss Christianity in connection with what Cardinal Gibbon calls "manual labor." Certainly Christ was referred to as "the carpenter's son," and as "the carpenter," and because he was a carpenter, and the son of a carpenter, the Jews, in his "own country," treated him scornfully, to an extent that "he could

¹ **James Gibbons** (1834-1921), was made the youngest bishop in America by the Roman Catholic church in 1868 and was the Archbishop of Baltimore from 1877. In 1886 he was named a Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII.

there do no mighty works,”² and from that day to the present, the church, though in some countries clothed with imperial sway, has done no “mighty works” for manual laborers. All along the line, the church has ceaselessly pointed to Christ as “the son of a carpenter” and “the carpenter,” but to what extent such references have benefited carpenters, or the sons of carpenters, or manual laborers of any class, it would be difficult to find out. Cardinal Gibbon says, “Christ is ushered into the world not amid pomp and splendor of imperial majesty but amid the environments of an humble child of toil.” Has the church emulated the humility of Christ? Is the church free from pomp and splendor? Cardinal Gibbon says, “Ever since he pursued his trade as a carpenter, he has lightened the mechanic’s tools.” When, where, in what Christian land has the mechanic’s tools been lightened (by which is meant, we presume, that his toil has been lightened) by any act of the church? by any decree of the church? The church, like “men of words and not of deeds, is like a garden full of weeds.”³ We give the church credit for every generous word it has spoken.

We are glad to believe the acts and precepts of Christ were designed, as the cardinal says, to benefit manual labor, to elevate and dignify labor, but it so happens that in Christian lands labor has been required to fight its battles alone and singlehanded. True, in the United States, labor has advanced a little, that is to say, organized labor has shown a determination to move up to a higher plane, but as a general proposition it has moved by virtue of the force of organization. We doubt if by searching all the records in all the archives of Christendom, there will be found so much as the “scratch of a pen,” showing that the church ever formulated or fulminated a decree informing men that the degradation of labor was a crime and in violation of the precepts of Christ. Something may have been done in the

² Reference to *Mark*, chapter 6, verses 1-5: “*And he went out from thence, and came into his own country; and his disciples follow him. And when the sabbath day was come, he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing him were astonished, saying, From whence hath this man these things? and what wisdom is this which is given unto him, that even such mighty works are wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary, the brother of James, and Joseph, and of Juda, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us? And they were offended at him. But Jesus, said unto them, A prophet is not without honour, but in his own country, and among his own kin, and in his own house. And he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them.*”

³ Couplet from an archaic nursery rhyme, inspiration for which is sometimes attributed to Elizabethan author **John Fletcher** (1579-1625).

way of emancipating slaves, redeeming them from chattel bondage, but even in this the church has been divided. But we are discussing manual labor aside from chattel slavery and we recall nothing, indicating, even remotely, the obligations of the church to do more than to exhort to patience, to bear afflictions, and vague promises of something better when the tools of toil fell from the grasp of the toiler, and death removed his burdens.

Even as we write we have before us the self-laudations of a divine, in which he tells how many addresses he has delivered before college students, how anxious he has been to have his church in vital alliance with higher education, and how literary and Shakespearean clubs have been profited by his labors, but in all this stilted self-commendation, there is not one word showing that he cared more for working men than he did for working cattle.

We do not hesitate to believe there is an awakening in the church, betokening a livelier interest in "manual labor." We hail it as a cheering sign of the times, but once let organized labor put its trust in anything else than organization and its doom will be recorded then and there.

Every blow organized labor strikes for the emancipation of labor has the endorsement of Christ. It is, reverently speaking, in alliance with Christ to oppose pomp and splendor, always and everywhere designed to degrade labor and fasten upon the world the abominations of paganism utterly regardless of the name it wears.

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