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# What Can the Church Do to Benefit the Condition of the Laboring Man?

## Speech at the First Baptist Church of Terre Haute — March 22, 1896

### by Eugene V. Debs

Published in *Terre Haute Express*, March 23, 1896. Reprinted as "Eugene V. Debs in the Pulpit" by the *American Nonconformist*, April 2, 1896. Copy preserved in *Papers of Eugene V. Debs* microfilm edition, reel 9, scrapbook 2, pp. 38-39.

*Eugene V. Debs spoke from the pulpit of the First Baptist Church last night on the subject of "What Can the Church Do to Benefit the Condition of the Laboring Man?" There was a great crowd at the church. The galleries were packed to the stairs; not a seat on the lower floor was left unoccupied. The aisles were filled with chairs. When the President of the American Railway Union entered the church with the Rev. Dr. Holmes there was a faint applause, which it was plain to be seen embarrassed Mr. Debs.*

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*Mr. Debs spoke, in substance, as follows:*

Ladies, gentlemen, and friends:—

First of all I desire to thank the reverend gentleman and he congregation of this church for the kindness which made it possible for me to stand here tonight. In discussing the question of the relation of the church to the laboring man it is my purpose to speak in kindness and in the spirit that prompted the invitation. The labor question is the supreme question of the day, the great question into which all other questions are merged, the question which embraces the interests

of society. There are many Christian people, I regret to say, who are prejudiced against the laboring classes, or rather against organized labor. Organized labor, as I see it, is for the uplifting of humanity; it is to save those poor creatures who are the victims of circumstance they did not create, but which they are powerless to overcome. We have passed the point referred to by Goldsmith, when he wrote

Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,  
Where wealth accumulates and men decay.<sup>1</sup>

We have passed this point, I say, and today thousands of human beings are the victims of man's inhumanity and rapacity. In speaking of our beautiful Christian civilization, I desire to call your attention to something I saw in Kalamazoo, Michigan, not a great while ago. Kalamazoo is a great furniture manufacturing point of the country. I went to that city and to one of the factories and there found men working for the pitiful sum of 50 cents a day — \$3 per week. I saw more than this — something that should bring the blush of shame to the face of a Christian man or woman. I saw little girls in that factory working at the machines, maidens on whose faces the pangs of hunger were to be seen in every feature and on whose hands there were missing from one to four fingers. We can but exclaim what a commentary on Christian civilization.

But this brings me to the tramp question, one of the most melancholy phases of life, and a question I have given much attention. I venture the assertion that non one tramp in 10,000 is a tramp from choice. Most of you can remember a time when the sight of a tramp was an uncommon thing. Then people rushed to the windows and exclaimed in horror: "There goes a tramp!" You know what the condition is today.

The tramp question is easily explained. In the march of human ingenuity has come the introduction of the machine. It is to be found everywhere. The introduction of the machine takes men out of positions. He kisses his wife and little children goodbye and starts in search of employment. He has not gone far before he finds he is one of he army of thousands which is being recruited daily. He is an unfortunate as yet, not a tramp. His clothes become ragged as the weeks pass, society frowns on him, all doors are barred against him. He

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<sup>1</sup> Couplet from the poem *The Deserted Village* (1770) by **Oliver Goldsmith** (1728-1774).

passes the fine church which is fast filling up with fashionably dressed people. He looks at his own clothes, once more at the church, and then passes on a tramp and social exile.

It has been said by a man, I regret to say a being who is a pillar in one of the Christian churches in Chicago, that the cheapest commodity on the market today is human flesh and blood. Thomas Wicks, of the Pullman Company, says that man is a commodity. I can conceive of no more horrible thing, think of no more terrible condition than the soul of a man being a commodity.

Going back to the subject of tramps, we will picture the man I referred to looking back, as it were, at the little cottage he left with the introduction of the machine. He sees his wife and babe, but oh how different from what he left them. He has tried to find work, but there is none to be found. It is a fact, friends, that every position has 100 people waiting to fill it. This tramp — we will now call him — becomes embittered against society. I would not be a tramp for \$10,000 a day and be compelled to undergo their hardships and experiences.

I know from personal experience that it takes courage to face idleness. I was out of a job, far from home and without money. I know how to sympathize with them and my heart goes out to him — he is my brother. But society does not permit of his redemption, the doors are closed and he is an exile. It seems to me the church has done little or nothing to help these unfortunates. I mean the church as an institution, for these pastors are ever doing all in their power to lift up the poor. It cannot be denied the powerful and rich churches have been arrayed against the poor and unfortunate.

*Mr. Debs here read from The Arena an article by Carlos Martyn, DD, on "Churchianity vs. Christianity." It is in part as follows:*

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The church contents itself with elevation and does not study to cure. It gives pity, not justice. It provides charity instead of insisting on a rearrangement of the situation. The church builds cathedrals, not men. It meets on Sunday for worship in splendid exclusion and seclusion, and shuts the building through the week while the congregation is occupied at the theaters, in the ball-room, or on Wall Street. The pulpit, warned off from the treatment of living issues, drones through a parrot-like repetition of the

creed and puts the emphasis on belief when it should put it on conduct.

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The man who said this is not a wild-eyed anarchist, but is one of the most prominent Christian ministers.

Two years ago the great Pullman strike was on, and 14,000 men, women, and children were starving because they had the courage to resist conditions that were making them the victims of the greed and rapacity of a great corporation; the churches of Chicago were against them. There were, I am glad to be able to say, a few exceptions. At that time the big ministers, without ever considering the justness of the cause that prompted these men to act as they did, welcomed with loud voice the arrival of the United States troops, which were to send to the souls of some men to the bar of God. These men had done nothing except demand living wages. From their pulpits these ministers denounced the Pullman sufferers. Thus the modern church has departed from the doctrine of Jesus Christ. The Savior preached universal love and equality. the bending sky was the roof of his church and the walls were measured by the extent of the universe. It occurred to me then that the minister who preached the doctrine of Christ is soon going to find himself minus a congregation, or, rather, without a job. During this dark period there was one minister, the Rev. Dr. [William H.] Carwardine, who took the trouble to investigate before he condemned. He had the courage to tell the whole truth, but he was dismissed for doing it.

The labor question is up now as it never has been before, and is appealing to the hearts of all the people. You can hear it discussed in the banking houses and elsewhere. People are beginning to see. They are able to discern that crime springs from this social disorder, from this present system of production and distribution. Ministers can, in my opinion, discuss these questions in the pulpit and still be in the correct work.

*Mr. Debs read from the work of George D. Herron, a professor in an Iowa college, in part as follows:*

We are and have been in a state of anarchy, of social lawlessness. Selfishness is always social disintegration. Competition is not law, but anarchy. That competition is the life of industry is the most profane and foolish of social falsehoods. Cain was the

author of the competitive theory. The cross of Jesus stands as its eternal denial. It is social imbecility. It is economic waste. It is the destruction of life. The whole social question is fast resolving itself into a question of whether or not capital can be brought into submission to law.

Again, if I had made these statements I should have been called an anarchist. Following Prof. Herron's theory, he says of the social problem, it is explained in the words "survival of the fittest," which really means the "survival of the strongest." Fitting illustration is given by reference to the large department stores. According to Dun and Bradstreet there are 65 business failures daily. These large department stores are slowly crowding the smaller concerns out of the business. You may pass up the streets of Chicago and there see the places where once there was a thriving little business, for rent. They have simply been driven out and in a little while will be recruits to the army of the unemployed. We hear people say there are better times ahead. My friends, I am of the firm belief there will be no better times under the present system. There can be no improvement in the times so long as it is possible for one man to achieve success on the failure of another. Phillips Brooks said that competition running riot would ultimately destroy itself. This I also believe. We hear of overproduction. It is nothing of the kind. It is underconsumption. You and I know that if the mills and factories were kept running the year round there would not be an overproduction.

Wealth is concentrating and that very rapidly. We can number our millionaires by the thousands and the mendicants by the million. But you ask what can the church do to remedy this evil? One thing it can do, and it seems to me with the utmost propriety: Give attention to the social question. This is a question that will not soon wear out. Ministers sometimes attend labor meetings, and I have noticed them urge the laboring men to be law-abiding. Now this advice may also be given to the rich. There are rich law-breakers and many who feast on spoils are pillars of the churches. Ministers can talk about these things. It wouldn't do well to do it in Trinity Church. It would be unwise to condemn a system of which it is a beneficiary.

I do not fail to see the great power of the church for good. If Christ was here on earth, I am sure he would be on the side of the wronged and suffering. He would not tolerate the present wrong social system. I believe he would give some of our courts attention. In

some courts justice has been purchasable. Like human flesh and blood, it has been a commodity. Judge Dundy, of Denver, sentenced a tramp to prison for life for stealing one cent. Another man stole \$200,000 and got two years. The railroads of this country annually spend \$40 million to debauch legislation. This subject can be discussed by the ministers.

Some people believe the strike to be unlawful and I might agree with them. At the same time, it does not occur to the average businessman that the men are driven to it. None of you are in ignorance of the fact that railroad corporations combine. They do this often to reduce wages. Then why has not the employee the right to do the same thing? It is a matter of self-preservation with him. He strikes and the people are too ready to condemn him. The responsibility should be divided. labor has made mistakes, serious mistakes. Capital has done the same thing. There is only one right way to settle them. Laboring men do not want charity, they want wages. I can conceive of no more humiliating thing than for an able-bodied man receiving charity. Employers do not willfully wrong their employees. They are simply victims themselves of this wrong system, and, like the laborer, require emancipation.

We see the coal miner come out of that great whole in the ground, after having worked for hours. He goes to his hovel — he has no home. He hasn't even a cottage. It's a hovel, a hut or a cave. Talk of home seems a mockery when we think of the home of a section hand on the Louisville & Nashville Railroad, the home of a man getting 65 cents a day for his work. Ruskin said the American nation was one of cottages. It is nothing of the kind.

Let us all believe in the brotherhood of man. The world is not just, not even generous, but I believe it is getting a little better. I have attempted to give a brief outline of the social conditions as they exist. There is a great work before us all and we must be up and doing. From the cradle, where the mother pours her heart in lullaby to her dimpled babe — from there it is but a few short steps to where youth bends above old age and kisses for the last time the clay cold lips of death.

Thanking you, my friends, from the bottom of my heart for your attention and attendance and my good brother whose invitation brought me here, I bid you all good night.

*Edited with a footnote by Tim Davenport*

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First Edition.