

REPORT

WAS JESUS A SOCIALIST?

MINISTER MIXES UP QUESTION AND IS TAKEN TO TASK.

By DANIEL DE LEON

LAST Sunday evening, November 27, the Rev. Harvey Graeme Furbay, Ph.D., delivered a sermon or lecture on the above subject. The gist of the lecture consisted in citations, some from Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*, and from Kautsky, and in one or more citations from John Spargo. Quoting the passages from Marx, Engels and Kautsky, all of which referred the proletariat as against the bourgeois, the lecturer said: "If this is Socialism then Jesus was not a Socialist. Jesus did, Marx, Engels and Kautsky do not represent a world force for the regeneration of the race, for virtue, moral and spiritual uplift." Quoting John Spargo, the lecturer said: "If this is Socialism then Jesus was a Socialist. John Spargo wars against no class but declares Socialism to aim at the regeneration of the race."

After the lecture several questions were put followed by answers by the lecturer, who then invited criticisms. No one offering to make any—the audience was small—Daniel De Leon rose and said in substance:

"It is not quite fair to criticise a lecturer 'on the wing.' One has heard him reading rapidly. One has had no opportunity to read the lecture. One may have understood the lecturer correctly; and one may not have understood him correctly. With this caveat I beg leave to submit the following criticism.

"If I understood the lecturer correctly, he quoted several passages—from Marx, Engels, Kautsky,—foundation authorities on Socialism, in which passages discrimination is made between class and class. If I understood the lecturer correctly, basing himself upon those passages he declared that Marx, Engels, Kautsky, were not engaged in a world-force to regenerate the race, whereas Jesus

was. Now, then, Jesus declared that it was as easy for a camel to go through a needle's eye as for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God—it seems to me that somebody is 'discriminated' against in this passage: somebody is 'left out.' There are other passages that occur to me. Jesus called the Pharisees a 'generation of vipers'—it looks to me that this element of the human race is left out. I also recall the passage where Jesus said: 'I have not come for peace but as a sword to bring'—I am no theologian, I do not recall the exact word here used but if was not a word denoting 'peace,' it was a word denoting feud—'to bring feud between mother and daughter, father and son,' etc. While I do not pretend to quote the passage literally, I believe the lecturer will agree I quote it with substantial accuracy. Now, then, if the passages quoted from Marx, Engels, and Kautsky, are enough to bar them from credit for being engaged in the rejuvenation of the race, then the passages I cited from Jesus would bar him out likewise.

"Now, the fact is, that Jesus, like Marx, Engels, Kautsky, was a revolutionist. The word 'debts,' which I was pleased to hear to-night inserted in the so-called Lord's prayer, instead of the word 'trespasses' very commonly found there, help to tell the tale that Jesus was engaged in a political-economic movement, in behalf of the bankrupt class, whose debts clamored to be canceled. There is no revolutionist who does not aim at a race rejuvenation. Nor is there any revolutionist who does not feel bound to oppose a certain element of his times.

"Neither have the allusions, made by the lecturer against Marx's materialist conception of history, any foundation. The materialist foundation of human action was no Marxian invention. Marx only ascertained the law, and worded it, which underlies the acts of the mass of the race, and which knowingly or unknowingly is observed by all—even by those who declaim against it. What, for instance did the passing of the plate to-night mean but a recognition of material necessities—even for this, the lecturer's church?

"Whether Jesus was a Socialist or not, is not to be determined by any such considerations. I, as a Socialist, find great fault with many of my fellow Socialists for saying Jesus was a Socialist. They confuse the issue of the day. I hold Jesus was not a Socialist—could not be one. He could not be a Socialist for the same reason that he could not have talked through a telephone, or ridden from Bethlehem to

Jerusalem on a railroad train. There was not in the days of Jesus any telephone to talk through, or railroad to travel on. Before one can be a Socialist the material conditions must be there for Socialism. The material condition for Socialism is the existence of the giant tool of production that compels co-operation. As I look around at the carpentering of this very church it bears the unerring marks of such production—large production—co-operative production—a system of production unknown and unknowable in the days of Jesus—the days of small craftsmen’s production.

“Socialism is the adjustment of production and distribution to this modern system of industry. Socialism proves that by leaving production and distribution subject to a system of industry that production and distribution has outgrown, pauperizes the masses, and breeds the Exploiter and the exploited—the capitalist class and the proletariat. Marxian Socialism, accordingly, by the very fact of planting itself upon a material basis, is the chiefest promoter of race-rejuvenation. All others preach race-rejuvenation while they ignore or uphold the existing social system, thereby making race-rejuvenation impossible. Marxian Socialism bends to the work of laying the material foundation for the rejuvenation of the race.”

In attempting to reply to the above criticism, the lecturer acted like one who felt the need of rehabilitating himself with his audience. He launched into a multitude of irrelevancies. Obviously anxious to escape the issue, and the logic that had made splinters of his lecture, he sought, by the use of big words and the names of philosophers, to save what he could of the wreck of his effort. Among the funny things that the lecturer said was: “Edward Bernstein made Marx look like a silly school boy”—this said with all the assumption of infallibility and the slickest mannerisms of fairness that are typical of the ecclesiastic, the fraternity that deals in what Goethe called the “Hexen Ein-mal-eins”—the witches’ multiplication table.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official website of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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slpns@slp.org