

## Ministers and Civic Morals (January 26, 1916)

It appears from the extended reports in Monday morning's issue of the *Star* [Jan. 10, 1916] that the leading ministers of the city united Sunday in attacking from their pulpits the "wide open" tendencies which have become so marked again in the municipal administration of our city. For a few brief months this tendency was held in restraint but the pressure was too great and, according to the ministers, the reports of whose warning sermons I have carefully read, the old conditions which culminated in a federal trial and convictions that gave the city national notoriety, are rapidly reappearing.

The ministers were severe enough in their condemnation of evil conditions, but what is chiefly remarkable about their attacks from my point of view is that they were directed almost wholly against effects, while ignoring the cause of these effects.

The chief reason why people tolerate evil conditions is not that they are innately bad, but because they are either directly or indirectly dependent upon or in some way profit in a pecuniary way by these conditions. In other words, it is the system rather than its individual victims that ought to be condemned.

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When our ministers were denouncing evil conditions did it occur to them that beneficiaries of these conditions occupied the pews before them?

There is profit in vice in the present system, and often they that reap that profit are quite remote from the vice, smug and respectable, and not infrequently loudest in their denunciation of vice.

The truth is that the whole profit system reeks with corruption and is rank with stenches, and the evils attacked by the ministers are but the social and political manifestations of that corruption.

Saloonkeepers are denounced as wicked, and yet they are often given the preference in the renting of buildings (owned by people who denounce the saloon) because of the economic fact that they can be held up for a higher rent which, as a rule, utterly smothers the alleged moral fact that the saloon is a crime against the community.

The saloonkeeper, because of the exorbitant rent he is compelled to pay to the property owner or real estate shark, who may also be a church-goer, rents out to the gambler to ease his own burden and save his own means of life, and oftentimes for the same reason the saloon also merges with the brothel.

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Why is there vice and gambling here and elsewhere and which absolutely defy suppression? Simply because they “pay” and that is precisely the reason why men are in every other sort of “business.” There are any number of businessmen who if they are candid will admit that they favor the saloon and gambling and a “liberal” administration because it helps “business,” and so it does in the present system.

The subject is too large to treat in a brief communication, but there is food for thought in the fact that West Virginia and Alabama have gone into total financial bankruptcy since their adoption of statewide prohibition and unless the reports sent out from there through the capitalist press are totally misleading, nearly all lines of “business” are languishing in those states as a consequence.

Trace the profits of vice from the saloonkeeper and gambler to the property owner, the manufacturer, the businessman, the lawyer, the doctor, and the workingmen, to their ultimate beneficiaries in the community — and you will have no trouble in fixing the responsibility where it properly belongs, nor will you wonder why the protests of the ministers are utterly impotent to stem the torrent of evils flowing from the profit system. It is this system that is responsible for gambling, for the entire fabric of capitalism is a gamble wherein the small and comparatively harmless gamblers are compelled to bear the whole burden of curses and condemnation.

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I once knew a glass manufacturer who was also an active church member. One day he expressed his hostility to the saloon. The next day he was waited on by the wet goods interests that were closely allied with the glass houses. He never again attacked the saloon. The moral is obvious enough. It is easy to see here why the material influence of the saloon outweighed the moral influence of the church.

“Business is business” and it is “business” that “pays” and therefore rules the community in spite of all the protests that may be registered in the name of high morality.

It is the system, the profit system with its material basis in competitive individual greed and graft that flowers in filth that is responsible and must be condemned and done away with instead of the helpless victims who, as a rule, are enmeshed in spite of themselves, and would, if they could, gladly escape their evil environment and lead lives of decency and self-respect.

Some of the warmest-hearted and most generous and kindly-natured men I know are saloonkeepers and gamblers and in my opinion God is not going to damn them for being the unfortunate victims of a system in which a rich and respectable rogue can make (?) millions overnight and a poor shop girl can get more for an hour’s traffic in her soul than she can get for a week’s honest work.

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