

PEACE IS MY RESPONSIBILITY

by Lester J. Start

Undated

We have seen how peace is our responsibility from the point of view of the home. In the intimate relationships of the family circle are generated those generous attitudes which must radiate in ever widening circles to embrace the whole brotherhood of man if true peace is ever to be attained. I should like to discuss some of these wider circles of human relationships and their problems during the next few minutes - to show how peace is our responsibility from the point of view of our relationships in the country as a whole.

It is not always easy for us to see our responsibility in these wider circles. There is a favorite story we use in our philosophy classes at Utica College which illustrates this difficulty. A little boy saw a strange new word in something he was reading. "Dad", he asked, "what does ethics mean?" "Well, son, I'll try to explain," said the father. "I'll give you an example. You know, your uncle and I run a store downtown. Suppose now that a customer comes in the shop one day when I'm there, buys a dollar item, tosses a bill on the counter, and starts to walk out. I look at the bill and see that it's a ten spot instead of the dollar the customer thought he gave me. Now here is what we call a problem in ethics. Should I keep that extra nine dollars myself and not say anything, or should I split up with your uncle."

Yes, it's very difficult sometimes to realize that we have responsibilities and duties outside the circle of our more intimate relationships. But if we are to have true peace, mutual trust and obligations must replace such examples of tribal morality as the storekeeper's idea of ethics. If we are to make peace our responsibility, we must see that the ideal of the brotherhood of man is the ruling pattern for all our social relationships.

This is not an easy task. The primitive habits of tribal and class morality are still painfully with us. It is too easy to think that your responsibilities apply only to your kind of people, that outside of this circle anything goes. It takes a deep and abiding faith in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man to overcome these primitive habits.

For example, we quote from our American scriptures: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created free and equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." So wrote our forefathers. But what did they mean - we hold these truths to be self-evident? Are these truths self-evident in the same way as so-called self-evident mathematical principles? It takes little reflection to see that they are not self evident to vast numbers of people; at least, vast numbers of people reject these truths, - not just in other countries, but (and this concerns us more immediately) here at home.

There are those pressing problems of racial minorities - so pressing that it seems necessary to many people to pass new legislation guaranteeing civil rights because there are too many Americans who would deny them. There is the poll tax, the problem of discrimination in employment and wage practices, the ugly specter of a Ku Klux Klan riding the south again, and

everywhere examples of that gentleman's agreement which would politely, but cruelly, make tight circles of exclusion in our social relationships. Some of these problems may seem remote to us here, but all of us, I am afraid, hear and rarely protest those slurring remarks about people of different cultural, religious and racial origins; remarks which are opposed to our democratic and Christian faith, and serve to undermine it. With recent world events before us, we cannot afford to forget that terrible hate breeds in prejudice and intolerance. How often do we listen to someone praise or condemn a neighborhood because it is or isn't made up of "Americans." Recently in an ad in our local papers, a man seeking an apartment to rent, described himself as an "American" accountant. (The current New Yorker reports that the Times recently rejected an ad by a man who wanted to rent a studio to an artist with a soul. The Times assumes that everyone has a soul, was the explanation.) Similarly, it seems we can assume that a member of the American population is an American

There is little need to elaborate on the examples of prejudice, intolerance, and social injustice which are so destructive to the causes of peace, and so opposed to our basic faith. We are all painfully aware of them. The problem is, what can we do about it? How do we make peace our responsibility in the fields of social justice and human rights in the country as a whole?

How does one combat prejudice, bigotry and intolerance? All of us who have tried, I am sure, are convinced you don't do it by argument. It is irrelevant to show the Negro hater that the white man's blood is the same as the colored man's. He may accept this logical argument, but it remains irrelevant to his prejudice, simply because any prejudice is irrational, not logical.

The same difficulty is found (as we saw) when we try to found the democratic principles on self-evident truths. They simply aren't self evident - any rational or scientific appraisal would indicate the opposite. What, then, can we do?

The answer is to be found, it seems to me, in a more penetrating analysis of the sources of our ideology. The principles of our democracy are not truths at all truths, that is, in the sense of proved or self-evident principles. They are rather truths in the sense of true beliefs, truths based not on what is, but what should be - in short truths based on faith, faith in the dignity of man and brotherhood of man, as a child of God. There are religious roots that nourish the fruits of democracy, deep roots which extend from the 18th-century religion of nature far back into our Hebrew-Christian heritage. This is the true basis for our ideology - this is the foundation to which our forefathers appealed. This is the rich tradition to which we must appeal, as we make peace our responsibility in working for the rights, justice, and dignity of man. We can never afford to forget to these religious roots, for without them the fruits of democracy wither and die.

We combat prejudice and injustice, then, not by argument, but by an appeal to this our common heritage. We destroy intolerance not by showing it is unreasonable, but by showing one cannot believe in the fatherhood of God and deny the brotherhood of man. One cannot accept the spiritual foundations of democracy on the one hand, faith in the dignity of the individual the right of every man to be treated as an end in himself, and, on the other hand, deny this faith in practice.

What is needed is a moral and spiritual reawakening. It is our responsibility to help supply it. Rousseau, whose ideas influenced our democratic faith, insisted that the good society can come only when men first undergo a moral conversion. Only when men change inwardly will their outward actions improve. A moral awakening must begin in ourselves, and then, by precept and example spread to others. We must reawaken a firm belief in the dignity of the individual and the brotherhood of man; if we really believe in these ideals we cannot push our fellow man aside, we cannot feed upon prejudice and bigotry. We must rather see anew that no man is an island unto himself, that wherever there is hate and bigotry, there is danger for all. We must remember the folly of asking for whom the Bell tolls.