

The Disciple

of Christ

and

Trade Unions

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Foreword

THE delegates from all parts of the country who elected the present Military Service Committee in 1981 expressed a wish that in addition to our main concern with conscientious objection to military service we should give careful consideration to other aspects of the believer's relationship to the state and its institutions with a view to being able to offer helpful advice. One of these matters is the disciple's attitude to trade unions and those professional associations which have recently undergone a change of character.

We have given many hours of study and discussion to this question. We soon found ourselves able to endorse in general terms the counsel offered by Brother A. D. Norris in *The Christadelphian* for June, 1979, pages 205-209, and by editors and other brethren from 1874 onwards, though not all who wrote shared the same point of view. However, since 1979 the legal standing of trade unions has been altered and their power diminished, whilst their intolerance and disregard for innocent third parties sometimes appear to have increased. We agreed therefore that the good advice already given to the brotherhood might helpfully be expanded and developed.

The scriptural principle of separation from worldly pursuits is not in doubt: its application in day-to-day decisions is often hard to achieve with honesty; humility, unselfishness and freedom from humbug. We are confident that all our fellow-believers will agree that our Master's teaching is incompatible with active participation in strikes or any other form of militant conflict. How such a conviction should affect us in the varying circumstances of our lives as employees, employers or those seeking employment is a matter for each individual conscience, prayerfully guided by the Word. Does the union's readiness to use the strike weapon completely rule out membership for us? Or is an entirely passive adherence acceptable if employment is either denied to non-members by employers or made unbearable by fellow-workers?

These and related questions have been thoroughly explored with the help of papers submitted by Committee members and others. Our different occupations have understandably produced differing degrees of emphasis among us but we were all content to ask the member with the most relevant experience and the strongest conviction to write this booklet. He received our numerous suggestions with exemplary patience and complied with them, when his conscience would allow him to do so. We commend the result to the prayerful attention of all our brethren and sisters.

H. A. TWELVES
Chairman

THE DISCIPLE OF CHRIST AND TRADE UNIONS

WHILST trade unions in recent years have lost some of their political influence, they are still a significant feature of modern working life. There are few occupations nowadays—manual, clerical or professional—in which some or most of the participants are not organised into unions or associations. Their principal objective is the protection and furtherance of the interests of their members in regard to wages or profits, conditions of service, and their mutual or financial support during disputes, sickness and retirement.

The question of membership of such unions and associations has exercised the conscience of the brotherhood for over a century, during which time the power and influence of the unions have waxed and waned, depending on the economic prosperity of the country and the political flavour of its government. Now is an opportune time to review our position in relation to membership of trade unions and similar bodies, and to rehearse the scriptural principles governing our responsibilities in regard to employment. Every brother and sister must, in the end, decide their own personal attitude, but it is desirable that, as a community, we should be clear about the scriptural principles involved, and for these to be stated.

What follows is an attempt to restate the principles governing the relationship of the disciple of Christ with his employer, or employees, and their application to the question of trade union membership.

It is hoped that this booklet, though written against the background of U.K. legislation and practice, will have a wider application and will be of value to the brotherhood as a whole.

‘Unity is Strength’

A trade union can be an association either of employers or employees who band together primarily to take collective action to defend, or to further, the professional interests of the group. It has the object of regulating relations between employees and employers, or between various groups of employees, or of employers, and, if necessary, of imposing restrictions on trade or business practices. It has also been a

further function of trade unions to provide financial benefits to their members and dependants, in the event of sickness, old age, death and sometimes during strikes. The primary concern of all trade unions is to engage in collective bargaining on behalf of their members, with the right to strike (or lock-out) the ultimate sanction when persuasive argument fails to impress. The term 'union' is usually applied to a combination of wage or salary earners—employees—as distinct from professional fee-earning people, although it does now include combinations of such salary-earning professionals as civil servants, local government officers and teachers. Under present U.K. law any organisation which negotiates the wages or working conditions of its members must be formally registered as a trade union. Learned societies and similar professional institutions, whose primary concern is the dissemination of knowledge, maintenance of professional qualifications and insistence on professional ethics, do not, as a rule, engage directly in negotiations over the conditions of service of their members and so do not fall within the compass of this present consideration, except insofar as they may, by organising concerted action, seek to bring pressure to bear upon employing authorities or local or national government. To this extent what follows would apply to them also.

Historical Background

The origins of modern trade unionism may be traced back to the beginning of the industrial revolution when manufacture began to be transferred from homes and local workshops into factories and mills, and when coal-mining developed in scale and importance. Local combinations of workers were formed in an attempt to secure reasonable wages and conditions and to curb the worst excesses of some unscrupulous employers. The efforts of these workers were vigorously opposed both by the employers and the governments of the day, for it was, and still is, illegal under the common law of England to attempt to restrain trade by concerted action. This served only to reinforce the desire for collective action on the part of the workforce, and 'solidarity' became the watchword. To combat the threat posed by groups of workers demanding fairer treatment and just remuneration, the employers likewise formed themselves into groups and associations, and countered the strike threat with the lock-out. As mechanisation of industrial production progressed, fewer people were required to produce more goods, and the resulting unemployment, coupled with periods of economic depression, caused great hardship. This provoked,

on the part of the unions, the claim for the right to be consulted on key aspects of the running of their industry (worker participation), countered by the insistence on the part of employers and managers on their right to manage their own enterprises.

A landmark in trade union history was the London dock strike of 1889, because it signalled the beginning of the effective organisation of lower-skilled workers, and the emergence of socialist doctrines, including such measures as the nationalisation of wealth-creating activities. The trade union leaders, themselves mainly socialists, worked to attempt to persuade the trade unions, the members of which were largely of liberal inclination, to create and support a working-class political party offering a broadly socialist programme. In 1900 the Trades Union Congress set up a labour representation committee which, six years later, became the Labour Party. The first Labour government was returned in 1924 and since then the Party has formed several administrations.

Political Affiliations

Whilst the Conservative and other parties enjoy the support of a large number of union members, many of the trade unions continue to find their political affiliation with the Labour Party, and their political funds help to maintain the Party, as well as being used to promote Labour candidates in parliamentary elections and to sustain Labour members of Parliament after their election. These, in their turn, represent in addition to those of their constituents, the interests of their sponsors, and lobby on their behalf. Just as the Conservative Party derives much of its financial support from business and employers' organisations, so the Labour Party relies to a considerable extent on the financial support of trade unions, and these funds are obtained from union members by means of a political levy.

This financial contribution to political activity was, until 1913, held to be illegal, but in that year the Trade Union (Political Funds) Act allowed unions to take political action subject to certain conditions, one of which was that any member who objected to contributing to the political fund, which had to be kept separate from the general funds, could 'contract out' of so doing without prejudice. In 1927, after the general strike of the previous year, the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act substituted 'contracting in' in place of the earlier procedure of opting out, which meant that anyone wishing to support the political aims of the union had so to declare and sign.

In 1946, the Labour government repealed entirely the 1927 Act, and 'contracting out' became again the procedure. This remains the case, and an employee who objects to contributing to his union's political fund if it has one must first notify the union in writing of his objections, and then his employer, so that no deduction is made from his wage packet for this purpose. The use of union funds for political purposes is also subject to a postal ballot of union members.

All shades of political thought allow that trade unions are a fact of industrial and commercial life, and the fact that they can and do now function effectively is due in no small measure to the immunity from prosecution which the law accords to unions and their officers in carrying out their lawful functions. An official strike is lawful if it be called following a secret ballot of the membership, and, under these circumstances, claims from aggrieved employers for damages resulting from restraint of trade cannot be allowed.

Of the conditions of service that trade unions seek to maintain and improve perhaps the most significant are wage and salary levels. Negotiations on these are usually conducted at national level with representatives of the employers' 'union' and it is here that difficulties frequently arise. Local matters are usually resolved with local managers without acrimony, but the same cannot always be said of negotiations at the national level. The phrase 'free negotiation' so often comes to mean 'the right to strike' if management does not agree to union demands. The right to strike and legal immunity from claims for damages arising from the strike are the two most cherished principles of most trade unions, and are zealously guarded. A 'strike' in this context is the concerted cessation of work, a 'downing of tools', on the part of employees in order to coerce the employers to make some concession; and clearly, the force of the threat of strike action is greatly enhanced if the union can speak for all the workforce involved in the dispute, and not just a part of it.

The Closed Shop

For this reason most unions, though not all of them, would wish to have, in a given workplace, a 'closed shop', i.e. one in which all employees of a given class are members of one or more trade unions. In this way, union officials are able to exercise a degree of control over those whom they represent. Often employers, too, welcome a closed shop agreement, preferring to negotiate with one rather than many trade unions and so to have the reasonable assurance that agreements

so reached will be honoured by all the workforce. Single-union agreements covering a whole plant and sometimes including a 'no-strike' clause do exist, but these are not popular with many active trade-unionists, who are suspicious of this 'new realism'.

The Law Today

The industrial closed shop is now regulated by law, principally by the Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act of 1978, and the Employment Acts of 1980 and 1982. Under these provisions a closed shop agreement has to be approved in a secret ballot by a large majority of the workforce involved, whether members of the union(s) concerned or not. Even so, any employee who genuinely objects on grounds of conscience or other deeply held personal conviction to being a member of a trade union is legally protected from dismissal on this score and from any 'action short of dismissal' which may be used by the employer to induce him or her to join a trade union. Furthermore, any employee in the class covered by the closed shop agreement who was not a member of a trade union before the agreement came into being, and who has not subsequently joined a trade union, may enjoy the same protection under the law from dismissal.

Closed shop agreements which require workers to belong to a union before they can be employed, styled the 'pre-entry closed shop', are considered to infringe the liberty of the individual to work, and these, where they exist, will be phased out.

In coming to a closed-shop agreement, the parties concerned might agree that, in the case of non-unionist workers, a sum equivalent to the union subscription be paid to charity as an alternative to union membership. Refusal on the part of the worker to do this would not, however, constitute grounds for dismissal; and any action by the employer to compel the worker to make such a payment, as for example by deducting it from the wage or salary, would itself constitute 'action short of dismissal' from which the employee is protected in law.

Similar legal protection from dismissal is afforded to professional persons whose work and conduct is governed by a professional code of ethics which precludes participation in so-called 'industrial action' (strikes and working-to-rule) or any action contrary to the public interest.

It is clear from the foregoing that any person who, on genuinely held grounds of conscience, does not wish to join a trade union need not do so for fear of losing his employment, even in a closed shop. Sometimes,

however, the hostile attitude of the work-force itself may give rise to such tension as would oblige a non-union member to leave and seek a more congenial company. It may, of course, be more difficult as a non-unionist to obtain employment in a closed shop, since no employer can be forced to engage anyone who he thinks may be a source of embarrassment to him, but even this is not impossible: much depends on what the worker has to offer.

“With good will doing service”

That life involves working is a principle which dates back to creation: “And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it” (Genesis 2:15). From this it is clear that purposeful activity was to be an important element contributing to man’s physical and spiritual health. Work, however, was not to be all absorbing: “Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work; but the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work . . . ” (Exodus 20:9,10), and a six-day working week was established for Israel. “The sabbath was made for man”, said Jesus. Under the law of God Israel were constantly reminded that their work was to be holy, “as unto the Lord”, and regulations were made governing trade practices and master/servant relationships, in which fairness and honesty were required and cruelty and oppression excluded. This was seen even in some of the ceremonial when, symbolically, the fruits of men’s labours, represented by the meal and drink offerings, were dedicated unconditionally to the Lord.

Man’s original work environment was mainly an agricultural one, and one which, on account of man’s sin, which is selfishness, was cursed by God: “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it . . . thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth . . . in the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat . . . ” (Genesis 3:17-19), an experience which is not limited to husbandry but which is seen to be true in all human work places, be they the field, the shopfloor, the office, the classroom or the home. For who can deny that wherever people work together thorny problems arise and prickly characters are encountered? And until the curse is lifted it is vain to expect a perfect working environment. While human beings are involved, this can never be. Nevertheless, the right to work, which is not necessarily the right to be employed by somebody else, is something which is fundamental to human nature; indeed it is a divinely ordained privilege, and there is “nothing better” for our physical well-being. “There is nothing better for a man, than that he should eat and drink, and that he should make

his soul enjoy good in his labour. This also I saw, that it was from the hand of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:24). “I know . . . that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labour, it is the gift of God” (Ecclesiastes 3:13). Ironically, it is a fact of human life, and one of the reasons for the existence of trade unions, that a man does not always enjoy the good of all his labour, nor even a fair share of it. He may plant, but all too often another eats!

Scripture teaches us that God expects us to work for our living, and that the way we do it is an aspect of our service to Him and to His Son, the Lord Jesus. “And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance: for ye serve the Lord Christ” (Colossians 3:23-24). “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might” (Ecclesiastes 9:10). A diligent application to the task in hand should be a characteristic of all our work, be it for the Lord, for ourselves, for our families, for our customers or clients, for our pupils and students, or for our employers. The Lord requires this of his disciples. Nothing short of our best is expected, for he will not say “Well done, good and faithful servant” to anyone who has not done well. There is no suggestion here that we should refuse God’s gift of work and walk away from our workplace, or down tools, when things get difficult or when we feel aggrieved; still less when others have a sense of grievance which we may not share.

Masters and Servants

The scriptures have much to say about human relationships, including those between employer and employee, master and servant. The apostles Paul and Peter are quite specific. Mutual respect is enjoined, although the absence of respect on the one part does not absolve the other from showing it. “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; not with eyeservice (i.e. when you are being watched), as men-pleasers (i.e. to curry favour); but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; with good will doing service, as to the Lord and not to men”, and this, note, whether ye “be bond or free” (Ephesians 6:5-9). “Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward (i.e. untoward, perverse, harsh). For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully” (1 Peter 2:18-19).

In saying this, both Paul and Peter are echoing the teaching of Jesus

himself, who taught his disciples to “resist not evil . . . and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain”. This ‘gospel of the second mile’, the giving of the double portion unstintingly, should be characteristic of our service generally: “Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal shall it be measured to you again” (Luke 6:38).

There is counsel for supervisors, managers and employers too: “Ye masters, do the same things (i.e. the will of God from the heart; with good will as to the Lord) unto them (your servants), forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven” (Ephesians 6:9). “Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a master in heaven” (Colossians 4:1). The ideal at which to aim in industrial, as well as in other relations, is well summarised by Paul: “Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. Owe no man anything, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:7-8). “Love worketh no ill to his neighbour” (verse 10), be that the neighbour next door, your employer or employee.

“Be content with your wages”

The whole thrust of scripture teaching is against the pursuit of wealth for its own sake, a temptation likely to affect the employer as much as, if not more than, the employee. Contentment is a virtue not highly regarded in these days of ‘progress’. The getting of gain and success in such attempts is not a mark of divine favour nor evidence of godliness. On the contrary, “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

It has to be remembered, too, that much of the advice of the apostles already considered is set in a context which would be totally unacceptable in these days, namely that of slavery. Many of the ‘servants’ referred to were in fact slaves, and the ‘masters’, even believing masters such as Philemon, were slave-owners. This was the social order of the time, and there is no hint in any of the apostles’ writings that disciples of Christ should seek to overthrow the social order. Obviously, in absolute terms, freedom was preferable to slavery, although it is arguable whether a freed slave, who had to fend for himself, was necessarily better off than one who served in the household of a just

and benign master. This point was made under the law of Moses, in which there was provision for the slave, about to be freed, to elect to continue his service to his master on account of the affection he had for him, and his devotion to him (Exodus 21:5). That the “free-born” Paul valued his freedom is clear from his advice to his brethren in Corinth, many of whom were slaves: “Art thou called being a servant (lit. a slave)? Care not for it: but if thou mayest be made free, use it rather. For he that is called in the Lord, being a servant, is the Lord’s freeman: likewise also he that is called, being free, is Christ’s servant. Ye are bought with a price” (1 Corinthians 7:21-23). And you serve the Lord Christ, remember? (Colossians 3:24).

Nevertheless, service to God and the benefits of His grace giving rise to that service apply to all, whatever their status in employment terms. “We are all baptized into one body . . . whether we be bond or free” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Having put on Christ, “there is neither . . . bond nor free . . . ye are all one in Christ Jesus . . . and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:27-29). So, referring to disciples who were under the yoke of slavery, Paul tells Timothy: “Let as many servants as are under the yoke count their own masters (not necessarily Christians) worthy of all honour, that the name of God and his doctrine be not blasphemed. And they that have believing masters (e.g. as Philemon was), let them not despise them (i.e. take advantage of them), because they are brethren; but rather do them service, because they are faithful and beloved, partakers of the benefit” (1 Timothy 6:1-2).

Similarly, in writing to Titus, Paul sets out standards of performance which apply to all workers, whether they consider themselves to be slaves of the system or not: “Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, *and to please them well in all things*; not answering again (i.e. contradicting—a difficult one, this!); not purloining, but shewing all good fidelity; that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour in all things” (Titus 2:9-10). In other words, the faithful disciple is expected to be an utterly trustworthy employee, and the reference to purloining implies that under no circumstances will he break that trust. Joseph is a good example in this respect (Genesis 39:8-9). “Showing good fidelity” is a testimonial which should apply to all disciples of Christ.

Scripture thus confirms the normal employer/employee relationship in which the contract of service, not necessarily a written one but binding nonetheless (“Let your yea be yea”—James 5:12), is between

the employee and the employer and not with some third party purporting to represent the employee's interests.

Much industrial strife is caused by unions encouraging in the workforce discontent with their wages, particularly in comparison with other workers. Wage differentials are a significant factor in collective bargaining, each major union seeking to maintain or improve its position in the 'pecking order'. Few trade union negotiators would accept the argument which Jesus put into the mouth of the employer in his parable of the vineyard labourers (Matthew 20:1-16): "Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me" your wage? "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" His goodness was construed by the first group of workers as unfairness, and they complained bitterly at the wage-rate differentials. The principle seems to be that in this case the employer kept to his agreement and expected the workers to keep to theirs. This parable provides a classic example of normal human reaction to a sense of injustice. When those who had endured unpleasant working conditions throughout the day came to receive their agreed wages, "they supposed that they should have received more; but they likewise received every man a penny (as agreed). And when they had received it, they murmured against the goodman of the house, saying, "These last have wrought but one hour, and thou hast made them equal unto us" (Matthew 20:12). It was this equality that rankled. Compared with the late starters, their hourly rate was most unfavourable, and they complained that the adverse differential in the rates of pay was unfair. The answer of the 'goodman' is revealing: "Friend"—no abuse, no animosity—"Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me" your wage?

Of course, the parable is primarily a lesson in grace and teaches that the grace of God is not constrained by human notions of justice; but it does serve as a reminder to the believing worker that he, or she, must not envy the greater take-home pay of a fellow-worker who may be doing virtually the same job. This may apply especially to sisters working in situations where 'equal pay for equal work' is still not a fact. Faithful service for the agreed remuneration is what is expected of the servant of Christ in his everyday occupation. A disciple might justifiably feel aggrieved if his employer failed to pay the agreed salary, but he cannot enter into conflict in order to force the employer to increase the pay. If dissatisfied with pay or conditions, the disciple is at liberty to request improvement or to seek more congenial employment,

and to leave after fulfilling the agreed conditions of notice; but if unsuccessful, he or she must continue to give faithful and unstinting service to the existing employer, even beyond the call of duty, as opportunity presents. This is the 'gospel of the second mile' again (Matthew 5:39-44).

These ideals are not easy to fulfil, and they are irksome to the flesh. They are part of that denial of self which is the chief constituent of the cross-bearing experience of all true disciples. "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me . . . For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Matthew 16:24-26). One thing stands out very clearly: the disciple may not participate in any action designed to force an increase in pay or an improvement in conditions. Strike action on the part of the disciple is precluded, and is out of the question. Indeed, Paul, writing to both his "sons in the faith", says that a bishop, whom he holds to be an example to the rest of the flock, should be "no striker" nor greedy for money (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7); and although Paul was referring to physical violence and could not have had modern trade union practices and terminology in mind when he wrote the words, the principle can be extended to include strike action and the language is surprisingly apt. Although a strike, and the picketing which accompanies it, may be peacefully conducted without personal or physical violence, it is nevertheless itself a violent act when it seeks to violate agreements previously entered into, as it sometimes does. Scripture teaching precludes a disciple of Christ from pursuing personal interests in an aggressive manner either as an individual or with the help of unions or associations, whether as an employee or as an employer.

The attitude of the faithful disciple to the world of work is well summarised by the apostle in the letter to the Hebrews: "Let your conversation (life-style) be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Hebrews 13:5-6).

"Wherefore come out from among them"

From the above review of scriptural principles it must be fairly evident that the aims and practices of traditional trade unionism are in most cases difficult to reconcile with those of the disciple of Christ. This section explains why membership of a trade union may well be thought to be inappropriate for those in Christ.

The principal objection to trade union membership stems from Christ's teaching in his sermon on the mount, as does also our conscientious objection to military service. The two are inseparably linked: "I say unto you, That ye resist not evil . . . and whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain" (Matthew 5:39-41). Normally a trade union seeks a negotiation of any dispute with the employer(s), and the right of collective bargaining through free negotiation is at the very heart of trade unionism. But when negotiation fails, and sometimes before it even starts, the union officials may call for a strike. This right of a union to call an official strike is protected by law, and is now generally conceded, but was hardly won. The strike is considered to be the principal and most effective weapon in the union's armoury, and it is not accidental that the language used is military. Indeed, the more vocal advocates of industrial 'action' are rightly described as 'militant'.

A Labour government's charter for trade union reform was optimistically entitled *In Place of Strife*, recognising that the unfortunate outcome of much trade union activity was, and is, confrontation and strife: "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men" (2 Timothy 2:24). In view of the fact that most strikes are called in support of wage claims, some of which are based not on need but on greed, or envy, the twin exhortations of Paul to Timothy (1 Timothy 3:3) and Titus (Titus 1:7), referred to earlier, are apposite. Both passages, having forbidden physical violence, go on to warn disciples not to be "greedy of filthy lucre" or "covetous". So that, even if the union has a just case and a righteous cause for complaint—and it often has—the disciple is precluded from resisting that evil by taking part in strike action (Matthew 5:39).

It is more than likely that anyone seeking to join a typical union who made it clear from the start that under no circumstances would he or she take part in any strike action, official or otherwise, or in any other action designed to bring force to bear on an employer, would not be admitted; or if admitted as a member, would be expelled ignominiously from the union for not supporting it in its hour of need, and for failing to observe the rule-book. Admittedly, were this to happen, current legislation protects such an one from dismissal and the situation then would revert to one very similar to that of the conscientious objector to trade union membership on any grounds, except that personal relationships with trade union colleagues would have become strained, if not permanently soured. Most trade unionists are usually willing to

cooperate with fellow-workers who have a clearly stated and consistently held conscience in regard to union membership: but they do, quite rightly, expect an attitude to work and to themselves which is consistent with that conscience. They have a right to expect the disciple of the Lord to act toward them as he or she would wish to be treated by them, with tolerance and good will.

“Working to Rule”

Another device often employed by trade unions in times of dispute and designed to bring pressure to bear is what is euphemistically called ‘working to rule’ or ‘ca’canny’ as it used to be termed. Basically, there can be nothing wrong in obeying the rules, and if ‘working to rule’ inhibits efficient working, there is something wrong with the rules, and they should be changed. But usually, during a dispute, ‘working to rule’ means interpreting the rules in such a way as to make things difficult for the employer, or his customers, or the public at large. Such an attitude is in direct conflict with the scriptural instruction about doing service with good will (Ephesians 6:7) and doing all things heartily, as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23). The non-unionist disciple of Christ might well find himself the object of his colleagues’ displeasure, or even hostility, in such a situation; but at least they would not expect him, as one not party to their decision or action, to do otherwise than attempt to work normally and diligently. As a member of the union, however, the disciple would experience a conflict of loyalties, to his union ‘brothers’ on the one hand and to Christ and his brethren on the other.

It has long been a feature of industrial trade union practice, engrained almost as a first principle doctrine of the movement, that no worker is expected to do anything for his employer ‘beyond the call of duty’. Indeed one is expected not to. ‘Firm’s work only in firm’s time’ is the rule and nobody works after the bell, except for overtime pay. The conscientious worker who is serving his master ‘as unto the Lord’ finds these constraints irksome, and the whole philosophy out of tune with his own. It is often very difficult in modern working conditions to go even a few yards into the ‘second mile’.

Political Issues

There is yet another reason which may well make it inappropriate for the servant of Christ to be a fully paid-up member of a trade union. Reference has already been made to the political aims of many trade unions, and of their federal organisation, the Trades Union Congress.

Briefly stated, their aim is to secure a sympathetic government over which they can exert some influence and to temper the capitalist system with policies more socialist in character. Similarly, associations of employers use their political influence in the opposite direction.

Moral Issues

The trade union movement embraces quite a broad spectrum of interest, often supporting social and humanistic policies and movements which the disciple of Christ can neither support nor actively resist. For example, financial and moral support has been given in the past to liberation movements fostering or condoning terrorist acts, including the Palestine Liberation Organisation, as well as to movements supporting homosexual practices and abortion. Although financial help may be given from the union's political fund, to which a member is not bound to contribute, the moral encouragement is given on behalf of all the membership. Trade union solidarity becomes a feature of any dispute, and although a union may not itself call its members out on strike in sympathy with another union's cause, it may well offer financial help and encouragement, sometimes despite extreme violence on picket lines. This is foreign to the teaching of the Master, and his followers would make uncomfortable bed-fellows in such organisations.

Separation

All of the foregoing highlights an important scriptural and fundamental principle of the Christian life, that of separation. The separation required is not of the monastic kind; the disciple needs to be in the world, but must not be of it. "I pray", said Jesus, "not that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil. They are not of the world, even as I am not" (John 17:15-16). In baptism believers are "crucified with Christ" (Romans 6:6) and as such are "crucified . . . unto the world" and "the world unto" them (Galatians 6:14-16). And Paul adds that as many as walk according to *this* rule enjoy peace of mind and mercy as the Israel of God (verse 16). This is because they look beyond the present order to the return of their Master and the establishment of his rule and authority. They therefore cannot ally themselves with movements and organisations of this world whose aims and methods are inconsistent with his teaching and with that of his apostles. And just as they, as part of their conscientious effort to follow Christ's teaching, do not vote or take part in politics, or serve in the armed forces of the Crown, so they cannot participate in

the political and militant activities of trade unions or of employers' associations, or be party to those aims.

“Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you” (2 Corinthians 6:17-18). It is in this promise that the disciples rest: “I will be a Father unto you”. It is by taking God at His word and acting accordingly that we give glory and honour to Him. “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” is His promise to each, so that again we may boldly say, “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me” (Hebrews 13:5-6). For if God be for us, who or what ultimately can succeed against us (Romans 8:31)?

What Should a Disciple Do?

What should be the disciple's reaction to an invitation or demand to join a trade union? In the light of all that has gone before, he may well decide that membership of a trade union, or of an association of employers or of a professional association which resorts to trade union type practices, is incompatible with membership of the body of Christ, and that any invitation to join should be courteously declined, or firmly resisted. This was certainly the advice given to the brotherhood in earlier times. In 1874 Brother Robert Roberts wrote in *The Christadelphian* (page 382): “To be a trade unionist is to be yoked with unbelievers in an enterprise conducted on the principles of unbelievers. This is a dangerous position for a son of God; and a wise man keeps out of danger. The true brethren of Christ are strangers and pilgrims, as sheep in the midst of wolves. They behave kindly to the wolves, but do not unite with them in wolves' business. True sheep cannot pretend to act as a wolf for the sake of getting along.” Even in the more confused situation of recent times similar advice has been given, pin-pointing what is often the dominant feature of union activity: “Voluntary membership of a union devoted to doing battle against the employers, or the government, should be rejected absolutely, and this remains as true now as it ever was” (A. D. Norris, *The Christadelphian*, 1979, page 207). “The militant activities of trade unions must be repudiated by believers desiring to live consistently with their faith . . . the believer cannot really feel comfortable in voluntarily assuming membership, and is far better outside than inside” (A. D. Norris, *The Gospel and Strife*, page 34). Such advice is typical of that which has been given over the years.

This is not to say that the disciple may not take steps to improve his lot, either by requesting a wage increase or gratefully accepting one offered to him; or, if he cannot get satisfaction, by changing his employment, if he can. But if he cannot in this way improve his lot, he is to be content with such things as he has, and be thankful. Self-advancement by trade union membership is not for him.

Practical Issues

“If thou mayest be made free, use it rather” (1 Corinthians 7:21). But what does the disciple do when faced with a closed shop, in which the whole group of workers are expected to be in the union? Does he join in order to retain or obtain his job, perhaps making it clear to his employer and colleagues that he cannot take part in any trade union activities, but will pay his dues to the union, regarding them as tribute, and remain a passive ‘sleeping’ member? The simple answer to this question, quite apart from the moral considerations involved, is that, under present U.K. legislation, it is not necessary to join the union, even where there is a closed-shop agreement, in order to preserve one’s job. Trade union membership nowadays is intended to be voluntary, and the threat of loss of livelihood by not joining a union has been greatly curtailed.

It might be more difficult for a non-unionist to obtain a job in a closed shop than it would be if he were a member, especially if the employer wished to avoid complications with his work-force, or if the union membership itself were militant and unwilling to tolerate a non-member amongst them. But this is part of the price the conscientious believer pays for his faith. In this case the best course is to seek work elsewhere, either in a non-unionised work-place or one where the prejudice is not so strong. As U.K. law stands at present, no-one may be compelled to join a union under threat of loss of employment, and the scriptural advice that heads this section is applicable: *“If thou mayest be free”* (and we may), *“use it”*.

‘Sleeping’ Membership

In harsher times than ours many faithful brethren, under great pressure to join a union, were content to be passive sleeping members, paying their dues, but opting out of the political levy, refusing active involvement of any kind and making their position clearly known to all concerned. But the notion of passive, sleeping membership of a union is not one that will appeal to many disciples, not least because of the undertaking given on joining to support the aims of the union. To be

a passive, inactive member simply to obtain or retain a job is something that is contrary to the scriptural principle of doing all things heartily, whatever the task or responsibility may be (Colossians 3:23), and is better avoided. Although the unions themselves might go along with the idea of sleeping membership until the 'crunch' came, they would then expect all members, half-hearted and hearty alike, to toe the official line in times of dispute. Merely staying at home during a strike or expecting to be sent home by one's employer, thus shifting the onus on to somebody else's shoulders, is unsatisfactory, because it will appear to the disciple's unionist colleagues that they have his support as well as his subscription, when they have only the latter. Even if he has previously tried to make his position clear, all that is liable to be forgotten in the heat of the moment.

Instead of opting for passive membership, the present author would argue that it is a far better thing to make the stand for Christ at the beginning by refusing to join the union and to "let your moderation be known unto all men" (Philippians 4:5) from the start, so that your colleagues have no doubt where you stand, and know to whom your allegiance belongs. And if this stand should bring a degree of ostracism, and a despatch to 'Coventry', the servant will then only be as his Lord was. "This is thankworthy (acceptable to God), if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully . . . because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps . . . who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Peter 2:19-23). "And who is he that will harm you", Peter further asks, "if ye be followers of that which is good? But, and if ye suffer for righteousness' sake, happy are ye; and be not afraid of their terror, neither be troubled" (1 Peter 3:13,14). This is not written to make 'martyrs of us all', but rather that we should do that which is right in the eyes of our Father, and thank Him for the provision for our conscience in the current legislation. A future government of a different political hue might not be so accommodating to our position, and we should take this golden opportunity to make our position known.

A Disciple's Influence for Good?

Against all that has gone before, some might have argued that since most unions are governed democratically, and that, under present U.K. law, strikes may only be called after a democratic ballot of all the

members of the union concerned, it would be a good thing for the union to have in its midst people of integrity, moderate in view, who could, by the exercise of their votes, influence decisions on such things as strike action and the election of branch officials. "Let your moderation be known to, and felt by, your fellow trade unionists" would summarise this argument. Such a view is not consistent with scripture teaching on the need to maintain a separation from the political and social institutions of this world. It is an argument which might be applied with even greater force to justify active participation in politics. But, as has been pointed out more than once, a political party basing its manifesto on the teaching of Christ would win few votes in the polls. The case against participation in trade union affairs is consistent with the attitude of the Christadelphian brotherhood to involvement in politics.

Our real allegiance, our true conversation (citizenship) is in heaven, "from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Philippians 3:20). Christ's kingdom, he told Pilate, is not of this world; if it were, he said, then his servants would fight to deliver him from danger. But that was not his way. His kingdom is not of this kind (John 18:36), a statement echoed later in the letter to the Hebrews: "Here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come" (Hebrews 13:14). Our place is with Christ "outside the camp" (see A. D. Norris, *The Gospel and Politics*).

In the light of this advice, the question may well arise as to whether the believer should ever exercise his judgement in a ballot, and, in particular, in a ballot of the work-force when deciding whether or not to introduce a closed shop agreement. As the law now stands, before a closed shop agreement can be concluded, the consent of a substantial majority of the whole class of employees concerned, whether members of the union or not, has to be obtained in a secret ballot. In these circumstances, the opportunity is provided for the worker, as an individual, to declare his preference; and the vote of a believer against the proposed introduction of the closed shop would be no more than a statement of his wish not to join any of the unions involved, something he will be expected to do later if the closed shop comes into being. There might be thought to be only a fine line dividing this from voting in a parliamentary election, but the issues at stake are quite different. However, to vote on the question of introducing a closed shop might well be construed as an attempt to influence the outcome affecting other

colleagues and if any should have any doubt on the matter, it would be better to abstain and let things take their course.

Can we Partake of the Benefits?

There can be no doubt that many of the benefits and privileges enjoyed by work-people today, and the greatly improved environment in which they work, are due in no small measure to trade union action in the past; and in many areas of work, wage rates and salary levels are determined nationally through statutory negotiating panels on which unions and employers are represented. The question then arises as to whether it is right for the disciple to take all the benefits, and to give nothing in return. This has exercised the consciences of many who have felt it to be only right to pay the union's membership dues, even if they are precluded by conscience from taking an active part in union affairs. One should not accept the benefits, it is argued, without making some sacrifice in return. And this is recognised.

The current code of practice relating to closed shop agreements leaves it open to the parties concerned to agree that a payment to an appropriate charity of an amount equal to the union's membership subscription might be an acceptable alternative to union membership, although such an arrangement cannot be legally enforced. This is voluntary, and there can be no scriptural objection whatsoever to a believer making such a free-will offering. And this 'thank offering' need not be limited to those working in closed shops, but could well be extended to the whole area of work where salaries and working conditions are, or have been, regulated by trade union agreements. Ideally, the charity concerned should be one nominated by the trade union, and most would react favourably to the suggestion that it be the union's own benevolent fund, such a fund being of direct help to the union's members and their dependants, and one from which, clearly, the Christadelphian donor could not hope to benefit. To suggest a Christadelphian charity for this purpose smacks a little of sharp practice, and should be avoided.

Conclusion

The question of trade union membership is one which has exercised the mind and the conscience of the brotherhood over many years, and in recent years there has been a quickening of interest in the matter, particularly in view of the political overtones of much of the industrial unrest which has occurred, resulting in a more definite attitude to union membership and all that it implies. In an attempt to curb the power, and

possibly to thwart the political aims, of the trade union movement, the U.K. government introduced legislation in the 1980s which safeguards the individual conscience of the worker, so that today, in U.K. law, no-one is forced to join a trade union in order to obtain, or remain in, work. For this we can give God thanks.

But governments rise and fall, they come and go; and it may be that, before long, the law will change, when it will not be so easy for those with a conscience to earn their living. Those with Abraham's faith will find, as he did, that "the LORD will provide". In this matter of providing for those in need, it may well be that the brotherhood at large could find itself an instrument under God's hand, helping those who may suffer some hardship for conscience sake. But in the meantime, let all involved in the world of work consider their own position very carefully, and, if necessary, make their stand for Christ on the basis of the scriptural principles set out in this booklet. Now is a good time to do so. We may be free; let us use it (1 Corinthians 7:21).