

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

John A. Battle

The True Gospel

What is the social gospel? Before answering this question, we must compare it with the gospel declared in the New Testament. For example, the Apostle Paul said,

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, [and was seen by witnesses]" (1 Cor. 15:1-8).¹

Paul identified the gospel with the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ, for our sins. The resurrection of Jesus is the central truth of the gospel: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel" (2 Tim. 2:8). The gospel is the message that we can be saved from our sins by the grace of God through faith in Christ. This gospel is personal and individual: "And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit" (Eph. 1:13). The primary time in which we receive the benefits of this gospel is the age to come, the promised resurrection and eternal life.

The benefits received through the gospel in this life are also considerable, however. The New Testament in several places emphasizes that a person thus saved will live a changed life. Therefore, the gospel brings other benefits to the believer and to others affected by him or her. The Christian is to grow in grace, and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit seek to obey the commandments of God. These commandments have personal and social applications. Where people are Christians, there will be less crime, more humanity and compassion, more public honesty, better human relations, and more reliable public trust. As well, unjust or wicked social customs and traditions will decrease and even disappear. These social benefits result from the preaching and living out of gospel truth, but they are not the gospel itself. Attempts to improve society apart from the gospel often fall apart or are led astray by a false view of humanity or of what is right and wrong in social relations. Communism and Nazism provide examples of the terrible consequences that such attempts may cause.

The Christian Gospel and Social Gospel Contrasted

While the Christian gospel produces many social benefits, that is not its core or its *raison d'être*. We are not to become Christians in order to produce a better society, but only because that is what God desires us to do. God insists on being the goal of our worship and life. The

great sin of the Pharisees was in making disciples to their party and social program rather than to God: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are” (Mt. 23:15).

This is one point at which the social gospel differs from the traditional gospel of the New Testament. The social gospel concentrates not so much on individual salvation of one’s own soul, but rather on the “evangelization” and “conversion” of social structures and institutions to a “Christian” form, culminating in the promised kingdom of God. For example, if a businessman becomes a Christian, his main concern should not be personal piety, but rather a change in his business practices, or even better, the business practices of everyone else. These changes might include better working conditions and wages for his workers, less concern for profit, and more concern for social responsibility and the environment. The movement certainly favored a greater role for government in all aspects of the economic life of the country. Since many of the social gospel leaders were socialistic or progressive in their economic and political outlook, they considered activities that led to this type of society as being “evangelistic”—evangelizing the social structures.

At another point the social gospel diverges from the traditional gospel. One of the foundations of the social gospel was the so-called “Liberal Jesus.” This “Liberal Jesus” was not the belief that Jesus was “Liberal,” but rather was the Jesus arrived at by the process of a critical re-appraisal of the gospel accounts in the New Testament. During the nineteenth century critical scholars had adopted the position that the four gospels did not present an accurate picture of Jesus’ actual life. To find the “real Jesus,” it was necessary to strip away the miraculous elements, the Jewish teaching, and many other aspects of the Jesus of the gospels. The result was a watered-down Jesus, a merely human moral leader, who taught the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man—a theological emphasis that just happened to agree with the theology of the Liberals at the time! The social gospel leaders assumed that this was the true, historical Jesus, and that his teachings favored the progressive social programs they were fighting for.

The Social Gospel Identified

The social gospel has been perhaps most clearly defined by its most famous protagonist, Walter Rauschenbusch. Writing in 1907, he spoke of the “immense latent perfectibility in human nature.” He said that we are now at the point in history when all things can come together and produce a race of happy, prosperous, peaceful people, working together harmoniously and in love. This will be the kingdom of God, come now into fruition. All that is necessary is that we set ourselves free from the false doctrines and ideas that have held us back in the past. “Religious faith and moral strength must be directed toward these last great social tasks.”²

While the social gospel found adherents in Europe, it was primarily an American phenomenon. After the Civil War and Reconstruction in the South, American churches underwent great transformation. At the end of the Civil War, the mainline denominations were uniformly orthodox, but within forty years liberal theology and the social gospel had made

significant inroads. By the 1930s the social gospel was the predominant theme in many sections of the church. These changes were brought about by several factors, including the demoralization caused by the war, increased immigration of people with different theology and practices, increased participation and influence by laymen (especially wealthy businessmen) in church affairs, the developing progressive or socialistic movement in America, and the importation of liberal biblical criticism and theology from Germany and England. An example of this change is seen in the observance of the Christian Sabbath. After the Civil War, Americans generally attended church and closed their businesses on Sunday; twenty years later Chicago could be described as “a Berlin in the morning and a Paris in the afternoon.”³

Development of the Movement

An early leader in this liberalizing of the church in the nineteenth century was Horace Bushnell, a Congregational minister in Hartford, Connecticut, during the mid-1800s. He emphasized Christian growth from childhood over later conversion, and his books turned the attention of many to the training of youth rather than preaching as the key to a successful church. Bushnell repudiated the orthodox theory of the atonement of Christ, substituting his “moral influence” theory. While at first opposed by conservative church leaders, Bushnell’s ideas gained in popularity. The famous preachers Henry Ward Beecher and Phillips Brooks popularized his ideas.

Near the turn of the century the churches grew tremendously in wealth, especially in the large cities. Poorer Christians often left the mainline denominations to form other groups. An example of this increased wealth is seen in the transformation of the revivalistic camp-meeting sites to middle-class summer resorts; camp-meeting revivals were replaced by lectures on moral, cultural, religious subjects, and entertainments.⁴ Wealthy capitalists, including John D. Rockefeller, Cyrus H. McCormick, J. Pierpont Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie, gave large donations and other aid to the churches and their agencies. In addition countless other, less famous, businessmen brought business ideas into the inner courts of church government and authority. With this new capital, and the prestige that came with it, many churches and preachers became more entangled in the financial and social issues of the day, and based decisions and emphases in teaching on more material considerations than in the past.

The labor unrest and bloody strikes of the late 1800’s provided a most noticeable occasion of churches becoming involved in the social gospel. By 1914 two million workers had joined the American Federation of Labor, but the churches, being largely controlled by business interests, at first opposed this movement. However, in the churches there were several voices calling for the opposite stance. An early leader in this movement was Washington Gladden, a Congregational minister in Ohio in the late 1800’s and author of about forty books. These books, such as *Workingmen and Their Employers* (1876), *Applied Christianity* (1887), and *Tools and Men* (1893), urged the application of Christian ethics to business and labor concerns, with a strong liberal bent.⁵

A center for this new approach to the Christian gospel was the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, with its professors Shailer Mathews, A. W. Small, and Charles R.

Henderson. Another theological leader was Graham Taylor of the Chicago Theological Seminary. Coming from a different perspective was the famous professor of economics Richard T. Ely. He sought to combine progressive economic theory with Christian ethics, especially the command to love one's neighbor. He declared that the church, the state, and the individual must work together under the guidance of science to fulfill the kingdom of God on earth.

Among the churches the new social gospel gained in popularity along with the liberal theology and biblical criticism that was gaining control of their educational institutions. In 1908 the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America was formed. The leadership of this new church body was decidedly liberal in theology and progressive or socialistic in political philosophy. At its first meeting the Federal Council adopted its famous "Social Creed of the Churches," which was largely borrowed from the previously adopted Social Creed of the Methodists.⁶ At this time the majority of churchgoers in America were much more conservative, both theologically and politically. This caused widespread opposition to the new council's activities. "Because the council was founded through the efforts of men committed to the Social Gospel, it failed to become an authentic voice of Protestants."⁷ Later, the council tried to overcome some of this stigma by changing its name to the National Council of Churches of Christ; however, its liberal stance in theology and politics has continued basically the same.

The Social Gospel's Primary Spokesman

Probably the man most intimately associated with the social gospel is Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918). As a Baptist pastor in the West Side of New York City, in a depressed area known as Hell's Kitchen, he encountered many social problems.⁸ He sought to help alleviate some of these problems by becoming involved in local political and social activities. Later, after post-graduate studies in Germany, he became a professor of church history in Rochester Theological Seminary. Rauschenbusch completely adopted the liberal teachings of his professors in Germany, and identified himself with such men as Schleiermacher, Bushnell, Ritschl, Wellhausen, and Harnack—household names in the new liberal theology. To these he added the liberal or progressive political ideas being espoused at the time.

The young professor sought to reconcile these two chains of thought into a single concept. As he himself said, "When I had begun to apply my previous religious ideas to the conditions I found, I discovered that they didn't fit.... I had to go back to the Bible to find out whether I or my [liberal] friends were right. I had to revise my whole study of the Bible.... All my scientific studying of the Bible was undertaken to find a basis for the Christian teaching of a social gospel." Robert T. Handy goes on to explain, "He found that basis in the doctrine of the kingdom of God, which brought together his evangelical concern for individuals and his social vision of a redeemed society."⁹

Rauschenbusch produced many books related to the social gospel. His first famous one was *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), a book which more than fifty years later Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "left an indelible imprint on my thinking.... Rauschenbusch gave to American Protestantism a sense of social responsibility that it should never lose."¹⁰ Another important work was *Christianizing the Social Order* (1912), in which he detailed his

“conversion” to the social gospel and the way he discovered the importance of the kingdom of God as the controlling idea of Jesus. This book emphasized changes that he thought needed to be made in America’s capitalist system, which, seeking only one’s own welfare, was “semi-Christian.”

Rauschenbusch’s most important theological work was his *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917). In this book he notes that the social gospel is not emphasized by traditional theology; in fact, traditional theology often was used to oppose the social gospel! He then proceeds to show how there must be an adjustment; something must change. What must change? Not the social gospel, but theology! Thus his first two chapters are entitled, “The Challenge of the Social Gospel to Theology” and “The Difficulties of Theological Readjustment.” Rauschenbusch tries to show that the social gospel does not destroy what is good in theology; it only improves upon it by adding the new dimension of a true understanding of the central point of biblical theology, the kingdom of God. In the remaining chapters he shows how the social gospel changes our understanding of the traditional areas of theology. These areas include the fall of man, the consciousness, nature, and transmission of sin, the “super-personal forces of evil” (more often corporations than demons!¹¹), personal salvation, the church in society, the kingdom of God, the identity of God, revelation and inspiration, the sacraments, eschatology, and the atonement. To see how the social gospel differs from that in the Bible, one need only peruse this book.

Here is an outstanding example of what Paul would call “a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all” (Gal. 1:6-7). The true gospel is not a creation of human philosophy or political theory. As Paul said, “I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ” (Gal. 1:11-12).

The Social Gospel’s Continuing Legacy

With the coming of two world wars, largely inspired by “enlightened” Germany, confidence in German Liberal theology and in the perfectibility of man greatly declined. The new attack from the Neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and others, combined with the continuing resistance from conservative Christians, left the old social gospel with few active defenders in academia. However, the social program and religious support for it did continue in many areas in the churches.

The Federal Council of Churches, more recently named the National Council of Churches, continues pushing for the social gospel agenda. On the international level the World Council of Churches of Christ promotes the social gospel throughout the world. Along with these councils, there are many liberal-dominated denominations that still preach these ideas for social change as the Christian gospel.

The more radical Liberation Theology is avowedly Marxist, and actively seeks to introduce communist programs into many countries, especially poorer, third world nations. This theology is especially prominent among Roman Catholic missionaries and leaders in those

countries.

On the local level many cities find their churches uniting to do social works of various kinds. While these activities may be good things to do, often they are thought of as the best thing churches can do. These activities can, and often do, take the place of preaching the gospel of salvation found in Scripture. This danger is increased when other people in the community expect the churches to do social work, and the churches desire to maintain their good reputation with non-Christians in the community.

Contending for the Gospel

Any gospel other than the one given by Christ and the apostles is a false gospel. Those who believe a false gospel will not share in the salvation promised in the gospel of Christ. And they who teach and promote such a false gospel are condemned in the strongest terms in the New Testament.

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel — which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Gal. 1:6-9)

We must not only be aware of false gospels, such as the social gospel, but we must also stand for the true gospel. Paul thus instructed the Thessalonian believers:

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter. (2 Thess. 2:13-15)

May God give us grace to “stand firm and hold” the gospel which has been handed down to us!

¹ All Scripture references are from the NIV.

² Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 785-86; Ahlstrom here provides an excellent summary of the three main points of Rauschenbusch’s social gospel: its millennial thought, its optimism about the perfectibility of human nature, and its moral demand that religion become the tool to bring in social change.

³ William W. Sweet, *The Story of Religion in America* (1950; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 334.

⁴ Sweet, pp. 345-46.

⁵ For an excellent introduction to three of these leaders, Washington Gladden, Richard T. Ely, and Walter Rauschenbusch, including extensive excerpts from their writings, see Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

⁶ Ahlstrom, p. 803.

⁷ Ahlstrom, p. 804.

⁸ Handy, p. 254.

⁹ Handy, p. 255.

¹⁰ Handy, p. 259.

¹¹ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), pp. 90-91.