

## Lesson 6

# Benevolence vs. The Social Gospel

## *Activism and Impact: The Social Gospel's Mark on American Churches*

### Understanding the Roots of the Social Gospel

Looking back into American religious history, we come across the term “social gospel”. Predominantly emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (roughly 1880-1930), the social gospel was an intellectual movement within many denominational churches. Its proponents sought to apply Christian ethics to societal problems - poverty, destitution, poor health and education, the vice of alcohol, and the looming shadows of crime and war. In this effort, the foundational teachings of sin, salvation, the eternal realms of heaven and hell, and his spiritual kingdom were often understated. Many believed that the return of Christ could only be ushered in once humanity, through its own endeavors, purged society of its prevailing evils. For example, it was argued that Christ would not return until mankind rid itself of social evils through human effort.

The "Social Gospel" as it became to be known has roots in philosophy, going back to Rousseau, who believed moral perfection is possible if we will just do what comes naturally. Many in the late 19th century were enamored with Charles Darwin's recently published book on evolution. Embedded in evolutionary theory is the thought that everything is evolving into something better... that things are headed upward and ahead and humans can simply help things along. This time was also dominated by the politics of Karl Marx who stressed a new economic order would be the answer to society's problems. And finally, religionists like Columbus, Ohio's Washington Gladden and Charles M Sheldon (of New York) wrote a series of books stressing the church's role in addressing social issues with books like *The Social Law of Service* (1896), *In His Steps: What Would Jesus Do?* (1896) and *Social Aspects of Christianity* (1889).

In his writing, Gladden seemed to downplay the idea of heaven and spoke much more of a coming utopian earthly social order. He saw the kingdom of God as including:

the whole of life—business, politics, art, education, philanthropy, society in the narrow sense, the family; when all these shall be pervaded and controlled by the law of love, then the kingdom of heaven will have fully come. And the business of the church in the world is to bring all these departments of life under Christ's law of love.<sup>6</sup>

His was a secular view of the church and kingdom.

Yet within the context of his definitions, he believed that “the complete Christianization of all life is what we pray for and work for, when we work and pray for the coming of the kingdom of heaven” (104), and “that is the way the kingdom of God is coming, by the mighty contagion of social justice” (138). Hence, [he] saw the church as a tool to achieve his goals of social reform, not to reward the faithful with “pie in the sky, by and by.”<sup>7</sup>

Out of the more conservative, evangelical side of this movement came the rescue missions, The Salvation Army and the Volunteers of America. These organizations helped the needy and also heavily criticized the social order of the day, pleading for justice among those who had been displaced by society. However, by the dawn of the 20th century, the "Social Gospel" had become more firmly attached to the more liberal aspects of Protestantism, having been influenced greatly by liberal theology and progressive social thought. In the pre-war years it became a highly visible, controversial movement that gained considerable influence, especially in Congregational, Episcopal, Baptist, Methodist and Presbyterian churches—notably north of the Ohio River with the latter three, though it also had advocates in the South, especially among Methodists. The Social Gospel called for cooperation among the churches so that the work of Christians could be more effectively done, and its influence was strong in the formation of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America in 1908.<sup>8</sup>

On a practical front, the movement prompted churches to engage more in social initiatives, particularly those benefiting inadequately compensated industrial employees. By the early 20th century, it resonated with the primary goals of political progressivism. This aimed to involve a greater number of citizens in the democratic process, advocating for measures like the direct primary, direct senatorial elections, as well as the initiative, referendum, and recall.

After WW1 and especially after the beginning of the Great Depression in 1929, the optimism that had fueled the movement began to fade. Its liberal theology over the end times was greatly challenged by conservatives. People also began to look at its teachings as "overly optimistic and naive."<sup>9</sup>

## What is Jesus' Gospel?

### Jesus' Purpose for Coming

To truly understand the Christian perspective on the social gospel, we ought to reflect upon what Jesus taught. Born into a world riddled with corruption and injustice, Jesus, however, never campaigned for political reforms, even through peaceful means. He was not the Messiah to restructure political or societal norms. The gospel he shared was not rooted in social reform or the call for political upheaval.

“My kingdom is not of this world,” said Jesus. “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight, so that I wouldn’t be handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not from here,” John 18.36.

Rather than influencing the structures of governments and institutions, Jesus sought to touch and transform individual hearts, guiding them towards God's kingdom. His gospel was of salvation, of a transformative relationship with God through faith in Him,

For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost, Luke 19.10.

People are lost because they have sinned, Romans 3.23, and the consequence for this is death, Romans 6.23. The greatest need any person has is to be saved from sin, not from poverty. The

work of the gospel when properly focused, addressed the needs of the soul, not the social ills we cope with.

To put it quite plainly: Christianity was not the product of a class struggle of any kind; it was not shaped, when it did arise, in order to fit into any such situation; indeed, at no point was it directly concerned with the social upheavals of the ancient world ... the central problem is always purely religious, dealing with such questions as the salvation of the soul, monotheism, life after death, purity of worship, the right kind of congregational organization, the application of Christian ideals to daily life, and the need for severe self-discipline in the interest of personal holiness.<sup>10</sup>

Despite His omnipotence, Jesus left the world with many societal challenges, such as leprosy, hunger, poverty, homelessness, and social injustices like greed, hatred, and racism. We still fight these issues today. If Jesus had the power and compassion, why didn't He eradicate all social wrongs during His time on earth? It's because His primary mission was not social restructuring! Similarly, while the church today can and should offer assistance in various areas, its foremost purpose remains spiritual: **to share the gospel of Christ with the lost**, Matthew 28:18–20.

Consider the event of Lazarus' death. Jesus chose to remain distant for two days after Lazarus had passed, even stating He was "glad for your sakes that I was not there," John 11:1–44. Was He indifferent to the grief of Lazarus' sisters? Why express gladness for not preventing Lazarus' death? The reason is evident in His words: "to the intent you may believe," v. 15. Even amid skepticism, while praying at Lazarus' tomb, Jesus expressed gratitude to the Father for always listening to Him and highlighted the intent behind His actions: to bolster faith, not merely to perform good deeds. As John 20:31 says, *But these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye may have life in his name.*

### **Jesus Did not Ignore Those in Need**

Certainly, our Lord Jesus exhibited profound compassion. As Peter said, Jesus went about *doing good*, Acts 10:38. He reached out to the marginalized, the ill, and the forsaken, Luke 15:1–2. Yet, before addressing their physical and emotional ailments, He prioritized their spiritual well-being. For Him, the state of a person's soul and his relationship with God were paramount.

Social justice, anchored in the principles of human rights and equality, finds its resonance in the Scriptures. The Bible vocally advocates for the underprivileged, the orphaned, and the widowed. God Himself instructed Israel to nurture the vulnerable within its midst. Jesus' teachings in Matthew 25:34–40 compel us to serve the needy, the sick, and the societal outcasts.

Christians are biblically enjoined to *love our neighbor as ourselves*, Matthew 22:39, and *to do good unto all, especially those in the household of faith*, Galatians 6:10. Every blessing, including wealth, is divinely bestowed and, hence, we are to steward it with wisdom. Our approach to social justice must be God-centered rather than man-centered, always reflecting Christ's love and grace.

## **Benevolence and the Church**

For a good plan on how to proceed today, it is important to examine the spirit of the early

Christians. The first century church, as described in Acts 2:42-47, placed a significant emphasis on benevolence. This early Christian community was characterized by their shared belongings, with members selling their possessions to support those in need. They were deeply influenced by Jesus' teachings, which encouraged compassion and care for the less fortunate. In Acts 2:45 and Acts 4:32, there are accounts of the believers relinquishing personal ownership over their possessions and distributing resources to those in need.

There were several reasons why the first century church emphasized benevolence:

### **Jesus' Command:**

Jesus had explicitly instructed His followers to help the needy. Verses in Matthew and Luke emphasize the importance of giving, underlining the expectation that believers would provide for the less fortunate.

### **Stewardship:**

The early church viewed themselves as stewards of God's resources. Rather than claiming ownership, they believed they were managing the resources given to them by God. This mindset aligns with the teachings found in the Parable of the Talents and Jesus' words about giving to God what belongs to Him.

### **Temporary Nature of Earthly Treasures:**

The first century church recognized the fleeting nature of worldly treasures. As noted in Hebrews, the early Christians were not dismayed by material losses, understanding that greater heavenly rewards awaited them.

### **Benevolence as a Kingdom Value:**

Jesus linked benevolence directly to the Kingdom of God. The contrasting tales of the Rich Ruler, who was reluctant to part with his wealth, and Zacchaeus, who willingly gave half of his possessions to the poor, underscore this connection. Furthermore, the Parable of the Sheep and Goats exemplifies how acts of benevolence are crucial for eternal salvation.

The devotion of the first century church to benevolence teaches us of the importance of stewardship and compassion. All our resources are ultimately entrusted to us by God, and we will be accountable for how we use them. To align with God's desires, our approach to wealth should be grounded in generosity and care for others.

## For Discussion

1. What were the primary motivations behind the emergence of the "Social Gospel" in American religious history?
2. How did key historical figures and philosophies of the late 19th century influence the development and popularization of the Social Gospel?
3. In what ways did the Social Gospel movement differ from the teachings of Jesus as presented in the New Testament?
4. Considering Washington Gladden's vision of the church's role, how might one critique or support his secular view of the church and kingdom?
5. How did the Social Gospel influence the practical efforts of churches and social initiatives in the early 20th century?
6. What criticisms emerged against the Social Gospel, especially after World War I and the Great Depression?
7. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world." How does this statement contrast with the goals of the Social Gospel movement?
8. How do Jesus' teachings on the importance of individual spiritual transformation differ

from the broader societal changes sought by proponents of the Social Gospel?

9. Discuss the significance of benevolence in the early Christian church. How did their approach to stewardship and compassion compare with the ideals of the Social Gospel movement?

10. In what ways can modern Christian communities draw from both the teachings of Jesus and the Social Gospel to address societal issues while maintaining a focus on individual spiritual transformation?

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<sup>6</sup> Roberts, Tom M. "The Power of the Gospel to Save." Reemphasizing Bible Basics in Current Controversies. Edited by Melvin D. Curry. Florida College Annual Lectures. Temple Terrace, FL: Florida College Bookstore, 1990.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Reid, Daniel G., Robert Dean Linder, Bruce L. Shelley, and Harry S. Stout. Dictionary of Christianity in America. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Troeltsch, Ernst. As quoted by Tom Roberts in The Power of the Gospel to Save.