

Lutherans and the Social Gospel

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“The church’s mission is not to save souls out of the world, but to save the world.” Say, that sounds good! Who wouldn’t love a utopian existence here in this world? “Ascetic Christianity called the world evil and left it. Humanity is waiting for a revolutionary Christianity which will call the world evil, and change it.” That may sound even better! Christ is a pretty popular figure, after all. If we can find in His teachings the impetus to change the world, perhaps enough people will join the crusade, and we can establish the kingdom of God here on earth in the essence of true happiness, justice, and prosperity for all people.

The above quotes were the sentiments of two early social gospel advocates. Their views helped plant the seeds from which the social gospel emphasis today has sprouted and grown. I have added my opinion of what tantalizes people, what appeals to their human compassion and concern, and what draws those who are in name Christian, to advocate a social gospel. The intent of this paper is to explore the topic, “Lutherans and the Social Gospel.” We will follow this train of thought in the course of this paper: 1. Social Gospel-background; 2. Social Gospel-theology; 3. Social Gospel-current Lutheran activity; 4. Social Gospel-Scriptural critique.

Social Gospel-Background

Some refer to the rise, spread, and influence of the social gospel as one of the most distinctive and fascinating chapters in the history of Protestant social concern. At the turn of the century, the national mood was one of expectancy. The United States will prosper. Its people will enjoy the best this material world can offer. The Christian community had the same sense of expectancy. Christianity will conquer the world. But on the bright horizon loomed a dark cloud, a cloud that would overshadow much of Christianity and change its emphasis from the spiritual to the material. And it sounded so good!

Towards the turn of the century an influential group of Protestant leaders regarded problems arising from the struggle between capital and labor and from the spreading blight of urban slums as a serious threat to humanity. They led a Protestant crusade for the kingdom of God and against social evil. The term, “social gospel,” wasn’t heard at first. “Social Christianity” was the phrase these men first used. The impact of the industrial revolution had led to the formation of a Christian social movement, concerned with the human problems arising from industrial strife, from the unequal distribution of wealth, and from the worsening of urban conditions for the poor. Protestantism in the United States wasn’t the first to feel the concern. It first developed in Great Britain, with the work and writings of British Protestant leaders providing some stimulus for the rise of Christian, social movement in the United States. Alas, dear reader, the “Beatles” were not the first British influence to sweep over American thought and life.

On the one hand, some exponents of “Social Christianity” sought to deal with social problems without challenging the structures of society. On the other hand, some tended to reject existing social and economic institutions in favor of sweeping reconstruction. James Huntington, an Episcopalian, founded the influential Church Association for the Advancement of the Interests of Labor in 1887. W.D.P. Bliss formed the Society of Christian Socialists in Boston two years later. Occupying a position between the conservative and radical political extremes were

the advocates of what we call today, the “social gospel.” They pressed for social improvement, drawing upon the currents of thought flowing freely in the last decade of the nineteenth century and in the early years of the twentieth. They called for social action with an emphasis on the importance of the individual, and on his rights and responsibilities. They sought to mediate between the Christianity inherited from their predecessors and modern thought. They strove to center a renovated theological system of social change around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Washington Gladden, who is often described as the father of the social gospel, and his friend, Theodore Munger, a Congregational pastor, did not part with the historic faith. They did not reject specific doctrines, such as the Trinity, the Incarnation, the Atonement. They wanted to make a larger and broader case of reason and to interpret the Scriptures in a way that would replace an emphasis on the individual and his relationship with God to an emphasis on the solidarity of the human race. They strove to demonstrate that loyalty to Jesus and the historic faith meant moral and social compassion and dedication. The labor strife that erupted in the last quarter of the nineteenth century was a springboard for their ideas. The expanding cities, breeding grounds of poverty, misery, vice, and crime, were to them a mirror, reflecting the ills of human experience and the need to change. Books such as William Stead’s, *If Christ Came to Chicago!*, sold well, exposing in lurid detail the poverty, suffering, and ignorance of the slum. Convinced they were right, troubled by what they could only see as stubborn conservatism within the Church and society, the early social gospel advocates assailed those who resisted change in church and society.

In some congregations the social gospel became especially conspicuous. The Congregational, the Episcopal, and the northern branches of the Baptist, the Methodist, and the Presbyterian churches espoused this new, supposedly more relevant brand of emphasis. The Southern branches of these denominations were also “affected, though they were slower and more cautious in giving a place to the social gospel trend. Interdenominational agencies gave a greater emphasis to the social gospel than the denominations themselves. The Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America, founded in 1908, was a channel for the social gospel, as well as for the movement for cooperative Christianity. One cannot but sense the ecumenical emphasis in our century grew alongside the social gospel emphasis.

Social Gospel-Theology

What was the essence of social gospel theology? Dr. Walter Rauschenbusch, a Northern Baptist, wrote a book in 1918 entitled, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. In it he espouses the belief that the systematic theology handed down was from an individualistic age. It gave no adequate support to the power of religion in teaching social righteousness, he felt. Theology needed readjustment, and the social gospel advocates were the on-going prophets who could give voice to the readjustment needed. He reinterprets the doctrines of the Christian faith, such as Original Sin and the Atonement from a modern social point of view. He expanded their scope to make room for the salvation of society as well as for the salvation of individuals. He summarized the theology of the social gospel movement. Central to its teachings is a stress on the immanence of God, the goodness and worth of man, and the coming kingdom of God on earth. The very heart of the gospel is the message of the kingdom, which he interprets as a possibility within history. Though the church had long ago lost the true key to the kingdom, the spokesmen for the social gospel had recovered it, they claimed. These latter day prophets expected that through the efforts of men of good will, the kingdom of God would soon become a reality, bringing with it social harmony and the elimination of social injustice. The whole movement has this utopian

ideal, and the leaders of the movement saw progress as conditional upon man's response to divine leading. This progress hinged on the inherent goodness of the human heart, which with proper education can choose the good and contribute directly to the building of the kingdom. Sin is selfishness, in the social gospel viewpoint. Sin is not so much a violation of the unchanging will of God as the lack of proper relationship between men. The realization of sin comes in the contrast of our lives and the nature of our society with the ideals of social righteousness contained in the person of Christ and the kingdom of God. Original sin refers to the universality of sin and evil in the world, not to any biological inheritance. Because man has an inherent good will, through education men could be led to prefer social good over private advantage. Through determined moral effort, the law of love could build up the kingdom of God. The ethics of the social gospel thus stress Christ's way of love, which could lead men toward the glorious reign of love. In this coming kingdom socialized and enlightened men would work for the good of all. Indeed, it all sounds so good!

Thus we find in the social gospel theological viewpoint the emphasis on the kingdom of God on earth as constituting the core of Jesus' message, that this kingdom would be realized by good people allied in a society of goodness, that the Church is the chief agency for building this divine society upon earth and that it must fulfil this mission or perish, that religion must penetrate every phase of individual and collective life, that if the Church would seriously undertake the task of establishing on earth the kingdom of God, it would become the spiritual instrument of a new world order, and that when Jesus prayed, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," He was not uttering idle words but outlining a program for His disciples, a mandate to establish a kingdom of earthly prosperity for all.

Rauschenbusch gives this summary of the work of Christ in his chapter, "The Social Gospel and the Atonement." He outlines that Jesus bore the sins, not of individual people, but of public evil. "Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in B.C. 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A.D. 1917. But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins." (*A Theology for Social Gospel*, p. 247.) Jesus bore the weight of religious bigotry, graft and political power, the corruption of justice, mob spirit and mob action, militarism, and class pride and class contempt. These epitomize the ills of society. Jesus' atonement of the human race thus came about by Him demonstrating the power of sin in humanity. He furthermore demonstrated the supreme revelation of love. If Jesus had died a natural death, posterity would still treasure his teaching as the most beautiful exposition of love. But its effectiveness was greatly increased by the way he died. The death of Christ thus furnished the chief guarantee of God's love and the main incentive to self-sacrificing love in man. The social gospel is based on the belief that love is the only true working principle of human society. "The death of Jesus has taken personal hold on countless religious souls. It has set them free from the fear of pain and the fear of men, and given them a certain finishing quality of strength. It has inspired courage and defiance of evil, and sent men on lost hopes. The cross of Christ put God's approval on the sacrificial impulse in the hearts of the brave, and dignified it by connecting it with one of the central dogmas of our faith. The cross has become the motive and the method of noble personalities...The death of Jesus was the clearest and most conspicuous case of prophetic suffering. It shed its own clarity across all other, less perfect cases, and interpreted their moral dignity and religious significance. His death comforted and supported all who bore prophetic suffering by the consciousness that they were bearing the marks of the Lord Jesus' and were carrying on what He had borne...Thus the cross of Christ contributes to

strengthen the power of prophetic religion, and therewith the redemptive forces of the Kingdom of God.” (*A Theology For the Social Gospel*, pp. 278-279)

Social Gospel—Within Lutheranism Today

The Lutheran Church has not failed to jump on the bandwagon of social gospel emphasis. In fact, Lutherans who espouse the social gospel may point to Martin Luther, his Reformation of the ills of the Church of his day, his suffering for what is right, good, and just, as a heritage that compels them to work for the rectitude of society today. We share examples of this social gospel emphasis within the Lutheran church. In the spring of 1986 the Boulder Lutheran Parish hosted the Rev. Edward C. May, former director of the Office on World Community of Lutheran World Ministries for a weekend of presentations on “Justice and Mercy in Today’s World.” His lectures focused on apartheid in South Africa. Consider the following schedule of talks: “1986 World Hot Spots: A Cry for Christian Encounter,” “Apartheid: A Spiritual Challenge,” “Influencing Participatory Government, What Role for the Church?,” and “The U.S. in the World Community: The Justice/Mercy Dilemma.” Trinity Lutheran (LCA), Atonement Lutheran (ALC), and Grace Lutheran (AELC—the original LCMS congregation in Boulder) hosted the lectures.

A young camper at Camp Michluca (Michigan Synod, LCA) encountered the following incident: The counselors asked the campers questions, and the campers were to move to one side of the room if they agreed and to the other side of the room if they disagreed. One question was, “I believe that a world without hunger is more important than a world without Christianity.” The majority of the campers agreed, only few disagreed.

We cite further examples. The LCA has supported sanctions against Dow Chemical and General Motors for doing business with South Africa. (To date, I believe GM has pulled its operations out of South Africa.) National Council of Churches supports activity that would overthrow governments in an effort to establish Marxist leaders in the governments. One brochure pictures El Salvador as being crucified, while Nicaragua has been resurrected under the Marxist leadership of Ortega. It overlooks the fact that El Salvador had had free elections, while Nicaragua has had sham elections. Ortega has increased his standing army by a factor of 10, to 80,000 men. He has received vast supplies of war equipment from Russia. But the LCA and in particular the Michigan Synod of the LCA has given thousands of dollars for a group that does public relations for Ortega. The LCA is fond of Marxist causes, whether it is Ortega in Nicaragua, or the African National Congress in South Africa. The synods “Peacemaking” Committee brought a resolution at its 1986 convention against the U.S. strike on Libya. One LCA pastor writes, “When I was ordained in 1973, I did not think that I would have to defend Lutheranism to Lutherans, oppose the bishop on abortion, Marxism, and homosexuality, or avoid synod activities and LCA materials...One person really opened my eyes. He was the featured speaker at the Michigan Synod pastors’ conference, very popular. He was a parish pastor with a doctorate from Harvard, a former seminary professor. He said, ‘Gregg, I refuse to use anything from the LCA. I won’t even use their bulletin covers. The best thing you can do for your congregation is get rid of all LCA Christian education material...Our synod conventions are so bad that a group of our lay leaders could not believe it. They were not babes in the wood, but school board members, professional people. They were shocked by the radical Leftist and homosexual activists who had taken over...’” (*The Christian News*, December 8, 1986, p. 13)

Lutherans Concerned is a homosexual lobby started with a \$2,000 grant from the ALC in 1974. The National Lutheran Campus Ministry is an agency of the LCA, the ALC, and the

AELC, providing ultra-Left radical campus ministers at university campuses all across America. It is a leader in providing support for the homosexual movement, the abortion industry, and Marxist revolution. One NLCM executive is reported to have used every letter word possible in a sermon in Minneapolis, showing how good it is to be free and open. We might also note that the new Lutheran Book of Worship includes a special day for Martin Luther King, Jr., placing him side by side with other great "Christian Saints." Apparently the fact that King was a liberal Protestant who rejected the Christ of the Bible and promoted universalism, the notion that all men are saved whether they believe in Christ or not, is of no consequence to the worship life this book promotes. King further refused to affirm the teachings fundamental to Christian faith such as justification by faith alone in the merits of Christ, the virgin birth, and the physical resurrection of Christ. One can't help but further wonder why the FBI's files on King aren't exposed, as the media so insists regarding any conservative politician who gets caught up in questionable activity. Regardless of King's spiritual values, his social gospel orientation have made him a hero in some Lutheran circles.

This writer can share the following personal reports. One member of Peace, Boulder, while visiting an ALC, congregation with his grandmother, heard only a social gospel emphasis that morning regarding the plight of the midwestern farmer. A visitor at Peace reported visiting an LCA church in Boulder and hearing the pastor comment on the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall disarm the world." The LCMS university chapel proudly noted in a bulletin last summer, "The Chapel Council designated mission, offerings for Bread for the World; Habitat for Humanity; the Contact and Resource Center in Beirut, Lebanon; and the work of a former member, Nurse Alice Brauer at Bethesda Hospital in Tamil Nadu, India." Almost as an afterthought the bulletin continued, "Also, the mission of our District and Synod."

We may cite examples from material published by Concordia Publishing House. The emphasis in Concordia Publishing Houses' *Variety for Worship, Resources for Festival Worship Liturgies* (1977) may be subtle, but stands out clearly in light of social gospel theology. The confession for Christmas Day Liturgy states, "Eternal God, our Judge and Redeemer; we confess that we have tried to hide from You, for we have done wrong. We have lived for ourselves. We have refused to shoulder the troubles of others and have turned from our neighbors. We have ignored the pain of others, and passed by the hungry, the poor, and the cold. O God, in Your great mercy, forgive our sin and free us from our selfishness, that we may choose your will and obey your commandments." (p. 29) The sins listed are sins. But was the emphasis on our accountability to God, or our failures to change the world? Was the emphasis on selfishness and God giving us the freedom from selfishness that we may choose His will a reflection of the social gospel theology outlined earlier? A Concordia Publishing House study of the Book of Romans (*The Unexpected Way*, 1971) offers these applications. Regarding Romans 4 and 5 and the topic of justification, the manual notes: "Faith means not only believing that something is true, but deciding to act on it as true. Men are saved by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus has acquitted all men, according to 5:18. So we are saved *to the extent that we believe that all men are acquitted, reckoned righteous. How do we go about acting on that conviction?*" (p. 11, emphasis, mine) In commenting on Romans 13, the manual suggests, "The government deals with right and wrong. We deal in love. What's the difference between deciding what the right act is and deciding what the loving act is? Where does the Gospel of grace and freedom fit into your decision?" (p. 22) Page 24 brings up this viewpoint, regarding application of Romans 16. "Considering the whole Gospel concept of the Letter to the Romans, why is it foolish for us to use 16:17 to condemn those who disagree with our doctrine?" These applications suggest an

emphasis on social gospel, subverting the Scriptural concept of faith, making saving faith contingent on action, confusing the Christian's concept of government, and embracing an ecumenical emphasis on church unity, so inherent in the social gospel movement.

It would be well for us to comment on the attitude the ELCA, the new Lutheran church forming by the merger of LCA, ALC, and AELC, will take regarding the social gospel. No doubt it will be difficult to determine how this new church will perceive its mission. Will it be interested in saving souls, or in saving society? In 1983 William Lazareth commended "the church's recent struggle for an inclusive mission that encompasses both evangelism and social justice, both eternal salvation and historical liberation." He further urged upon the merging churches, "an inclusive mission of salvation and liberation." (*The New Church Debate*, pp. 22 and 24) The April 5, 1985 *Lutheran Standard* quotes the Commission on the New Lutheran Church approvingly by stating, "We seek to respond as stewards of God's gifts, seeking to work together effectively in this church in the service of the gospel of justification *and for causes of justice in the world.*" (Emphasis, mine.) Carl Braaten, who authorized a book entitled, *The New Church Debate*, in which he made available the theological lectures studied and debated at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, writes, "The mission of the church is to proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God in Jesus Christ to the whole world until the end of time. This mission has universal scope; today it is commonly called holistic. The mission is God's bridge to a world that has not reached its fulfillment, and it proceeds from the nature of the church as an all-inclusive fellowship. Jesus' ministry of the kingdom showed signs of breaking into every dimension of life—healing physical illness, exorcising spirits, feeding the hungry, speaking out against corrupt public officials and religious authorities, and caring for poor and neglected people. So also correspondingly the church is to be a Christ-like medium of the power and effects of the kingdom of God in this world, bringing its mission into the openness of world history placing it on the front lines of struggle for the hearts of people, including everything going on in the political, social, and economic realms of human life. This means that the goals and aims of the church for the outside world must begin to be modeled in its own interior life."

Lowell Almen in the November 1, 1985, *Lutheran Standard* editorial opinion writes, "But what is emerging is staffing that inevitably will shift attention from global mission and new congregations in the U.S.—as well as education, social services, and congregational life—to issues of society. Rather than calling the new church either the *ELC in the U.S.A.* or *Lutheran Church in the U.S.A.*, perhaps we should name it what it might become: Lutheran Church of the Latest Social Issue or Lutheran Church of the Present Movement." In the May 3, 1985 issue of the *Standard* Almen calls attention to the current laundry list of social issues the merging Lutheran churches are striving to promote. It includes justice for women, gay and lesbian issues, urban issues, pension concerns, economic issues, and peace-war probing issues. He concludes by saying, "These will reinforce the impression that the ALC and its partners in the prospect of a new church are moving farther down the road to becoming little more than the ecclesiastical wing of the Democratic party."

Is it any wonder that Scriptural teachings regarding God's truth are not a topic in the merger? Is it any wonder that the ELCA will continue to work for fellowship with other Christian denominations without insisting on full doctrinal agreement? Following the decision of the three churches to merge, Bishop Will Herzfeld (AELC) was quoted in the August 30, 1986 *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* as saying, "This is the first critical step in uniting Lutherans with the entire Christian community." Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong in a sermon preached on October 31, 1982, at the inauguration service of interim shared eucharistic fellowship between

Lutherans and Episcopalians in New Jersey, said, “Every doctrine of infallibility...whether of the papacy, or of the Scriptures, or of any sacred tradition, or of any individual experience...will, inevitably have to be forgotten...Christianity for the first time in its 2,000 year history is floating free in a sea of relativity...The church of the future will have to learn to embrace relativity as a virtue and to dismiss certainty as a vice...The ecumenical journey will carry modern Christians to a fearful, anxious future, where all will be forced to lay down narrow claims and to embrace the openness of this new day. When the Christians of the world can do this, then perhaps in that larger community of faith, worshipers and believers will include the Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists, the Hindus. They will come, I trust, with equal claims to being children of the one God equally created in that God’s image, equally loved and sought in that God’s plan for salvation...This is the vision to which the ecumenical movement ultimately points the church.” This sermon was printed in the June, 1983 issue of *The Christian Century* and in the Christmas 1983 issue of *Affirm*. No doubt exists in this writer’s mind that the ecumenical concerns of the new Lutheran church reflect its underlying social gospel ideas of theology. In fact, when representatives to the third round of the Lutheran Episcopal dialogue met on January 11-14, they made progress in the completion of a 40 page document on “The Gospel and its Implications.” The paper approaches the topic of the gospel from the point of view of a vision for the future, rather than from the focus on sin and justification, according to various dialogue participants.

It all sounds so good! Why can’t people of every faith recognize each others’ beliefs as valid? Why can’t Christians give up their religious “one-wayism,” as one ALC author suggests? When we lay aside anything that divides us, recognize we are all equally children of god (lower-case “g” intentional), work together for social justice and prosperity for everyone, then god’s intentions for the human race will come to pass, won’t they? It all sounds so good, because the human nature, sinful since conception, wants to have paradise here on earth. It overlooks its own sinfulness. It proudly seeks lasting happiness in this material world, and it assumes man can make it happen because man has the power and ability to discern god and god’s will. Yes, to the unconverted mind, it all sounds so good!

Social Gospel—Scriptural Critique

How shall we react to the social gospel? How shall we respond, warn, or rebuke if need be? The Lord bids us not to judge hypocritically or self-righteously, and He also urges us to carefully evaluate and judge between false and true prophets, between false and true fruits of faith. “Test everything. Hold on to the good,” we hear the Apostle Paul urge in I Thessalonians 5:21. Scriptures, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are the standard. Let’s compare the social gospel with the inspired Word of God.

First of all, did the miracles of Christ lay down for the disciples an on-going social ministry? Is that the commission Jesus gave the Church? The miracles, rather than institute a social gospel, confirmed Jesus’ teaching. The miracles He performed through the apostles had the same purpose. “Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed His Word by the signs that accompanied it.” (Mark 16:20) The miracles attest to Jesus’ deity. They demonstrate He is the Messiah of God, the very Son of God, true God in nature from all eternity. Jesus’ power as God, His love and compassion as God, shine through His miracles. The miracles the apostles’ performed in His Name show these men are the Spirit-inspired apostles. Their word is God’s Word. Their teachings are the foundation upon which Jesus builds His Church. During Jesus’ ministry, those who came to Him only for the miracles’ sake, only for their social concerns, wearied the Savior. They detracted from His

earthly mission. He withdrew from them. His Kingdom is not of this world. We sense immediately that the social gospel advocates, as with millennialists, the evangelicals whose mission seems to be, making the U.S. an outwardly righteous nation because “righteousness exalts a nation,” and faith healers, are going to Jesus for the wrong thing. It’s interesting to note that the social gospel promoters, turn to Jesus’ miracles to support their social emphasis, but they very often deny the deity of Jesus Christ, the very thing to which Jesus’ miracles attest!

Consider the mission Jesus gave His Church. Before He visibly departed, He gave these marching orders to the Church Militant: “Repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:47) “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:19-20) “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.” (Mark 16:15-16) From the prophecy of the Seed of the woman who would crush Satan’s head, undoing the guilt, death, and eternal separation between God and man because of sin, through the prophetic utterances of Isaiah 53, through mission of the Messiah’s forerunner, to “give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins,” (Luke 1:77), through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to be the Ransom as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, through the New Testament Gospel promises that in Jesus we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, through the closing revelation of the only Lord to the human race, the beautiful vision of heaven in Revelation 21 and 22, the Gospel is the news of forgiveness of sins and eternal life, in fellowship with God now, in His presence in heaven forever, because of the merits of Jesus, who laid down His holy, righteous life, and offered His innocent death in our place, as our righteousness, as the payment for our guilt, which we receive by faith in Him alone. Those who believe the Gospel of Jesus know they are strangers and aliens here on earth. They live in love for the Savior. They spread the true Gospel of forgiveness of sins through Him alone. They reflect His love for them by their loving action towards others’ and by how they love one another. They are longing for a better country, a heavenly one. They look forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. They bear the abuse of the unconverted world, knowing full well the “world is not worthy of them,” (Hebrews 11:38) They look to the Lord’s holy Law as a guide to their life of faith. In the end, they receive the eternal salvation God has prepared for them through Jesus. They live by the faith; “How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know Him. Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies Himself, just as He is pure.” (I John 3:1-3)

The social gospel is no gospel. It is Law. It confuses Law and Gospel of Scriptures, and it makes all who follow law the children of God. Its mistake is common, common to all who refuse to take the Law of God seriously, despair of any of their own efforts to earn God’s favor, and as repentant sinners run to Him as their only hope and rescue. It is common to all who refuse to take seriously Jesus Christ, who He is, and what He has done to rescue us from our sins curse. Its mistake is fatal, damning. Its mistake is self-righteousness, and all who follow the social gospel will find their condemnation unending in hell. They choose their own righteousness rather than humbling themselves before God and accepting the righteousness He offers through Jesus. They

assume that keeping a set of rules brings you into the kingdom of God and makes you one of His children.

The social gospel denies the truths of Scripture, for even as a system of law, it minimizes and even denies the origin and cause of all social evils, sin, personal sin and guilt before God. Rather than hold up the Law of God as a mirror, it considers the Law as a motivator. It denies the unique power of the Gospel of Christ to rescue the sinner and bring him to faith in Jesus. It denies this true Gospel as the only motivation for sanctified living. It ridicules the Gospel promises of heaven. It caricatures heavenly hopes as “other-worldliness.” It despiritualizes and materializes the Kingdom of God. The social gospel mixes Church and State. It ignores the divinely ordained purpose of tribulation in God’s plan for nations and individuals. It sees earthly suffering as evil while God uses it to punish unbelievers for sin, to chasten believers, to direct man to the knowledge that paradise will not be found on earth. It denies the end of the world as Jesus had prophesied and His promise that only believers will triumph in the end.

The atheist would have no problem with the social gospel, for they too consider Christians too caught up with the heavenly, and they take pride in working for the material good of humanity. The social gospel overlooks the dark spiritual beings, under whose sway all people are enslaved by nature. It in the end denies the Lord alone as the One who can rescue us from Satan’s dominion. The social gospel fails to take the truth seriously.

“The prayers were to the point, directing the attention of the Almighty to certain, weaknesses and undivine tendencies I know to be mine and could only suppose were shared by others gathered there. The service did my heart and I hope my soul some good. It had been long since I had heard such an approach. It is our practice now, at least in the large cities, to find from our psychiatric priesthood that our sins aren’t really sins at all but accidents that are set in motion by forces beyond our control. There was no such nonsense in this church. The minister, a man of iron with tool-steel eyes and a delivery like a pneumatic drill, opened up with prayer and reassured us that we were a pretty sorry lot. And he was right. We didn’t amount to much to start with, and due to our own tawdry efforts we had been slipping ever since. Then, having softened us up, he went into a glorious sermon, a fire and brimstone sermon. Having proved that we, or perhaps only I, were no (deleted) good, he painted with cool certainty what was likely to happen to us if we didn’t make some basic reorganizations for which he didn’t hold out much hope. He spoke of hell as an expert, not the mush-mush hell of these soft days, but a well-stoked, white-hot hell served by technicians of the first order. This reverend brought it to a point where we could understand it, a good hard coal fire, plenty of draft, and a squad of open-hearth devils who put their hearts into their work, and their work was me. I began to feel good all over. For some years now God has been a pal to us, practicing togetherness, and that causes the same emptiness a father does playing softball with his son. But this Vermont God cared enough about me to go to a lot of trouble kicking the hell out of me. He put my sins in a new perspective. Whereas they had been small and mean and nasty and best forgotten, this minister gave them some size and bloom and dignity. I hadn’t been thinking very well of myself for some years, but if my sins had this dimension there was some pride left. I wasn’t a naughty child, but a first rate sinner, and I was going to catch it.

I felt so revived ire spirit that I put five dollars in the plate...All across the country I went to church on Sundays, a different denominations every week, but nowhere did I find the quality of that Vermont preacher. He forged a religion designed to last, not predigested obsolescence.” (John Steinbeck, *Travels with Charlie*, pp. 77-79)

I include the above quote to evidence a stark failure of the social gospel movement. Steinbeck picked it up in this 1962 novel. Although his theology leaves much to be desired, although his character seems to exude a strange delight in being labeled a sinner, and although we don't hear any Gospel forgiveness giving joy to his soul, the character, which is Steinbeck himself on a jaunt across America at 60 years old with his faithful hound Charlie, found nothing but mush in the psychological redefinition of sin he heard in most preaching. The proclamation of sin and the sinner's need for repentance struck his soul. He felt relieved, one would think, at hearing the truth and being led to confess his sin.

A secular author sensed the pointlessness of mushy religion. The Scriptural criticism of the social gospel reflects what Steinbeck sensed. The Scriptures indeed are right on target. The social gospel neglects the deeper spiritual needs of man, namely, to be reconciled to God by faith in Jesus Christ. It forgets that before the outward life of man will amend, his heart must be renewed. The Law of God leads us to confess our sinfulness and our many sins. The Gospel builds up our faith, in the forgiving grace of God. Through the Law and Gospel the Holy Spirit does His work in our hearts. The social gospel points to the general social improvement and hopes to use it as the motive for human effort in that direction. The Scriptures say faith, faith in the redeeming grace of God, is our motive. Thus we summarize again. The advocates of the social gospel wish to accomplish by the Law what can be done only by the proper use of the Law and the Gospel. "Men who advocate the social gospel for the improvement of the social relations of man simply do not understand the functions and the effects of God's Law and Gospel on the human heart, they do not know the difference between the two, and do not rightly divide the word of truth. An error in the understanding of the true nature, purpose, and effect of the law and the Gospel will lead to many aberrations." (E.W.A. Koehler, *Concordia Theological Monthly*, Vol. 14 No. 10, October, 1943, p. 707)

Do the social gospel advocates have a point? Have Christians neglected to be the lights of the world, doing good deeds that others might see them and glorify the Father? Have Christians waged wars, cheated, oppressed, and harmed others, all in the name of Jesus, but really in the name of selfishness and worldliness? Our chief aim as a Christian Church is to preach the Gospel, and while we emphasize the Church's fundamental duty, dare not overlook the Lord's words, "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." This includes Jesus' statements regarding helping others, washing the feet of others, doing to others as you would have them do unto you. Jesus' love for us compels us to evidence the faith in our hearts. We know from Paul in Galatians 5:6 and from James in chapter two of his letter that the fruits of faith evidence the faith in our hearts. The Christian message and all the orthodoxy in the world has no value in itself as a mere head knowledge. But when Jesus' Word touches our hearts, we will be only too eager to set aside the world and love for it and carry out the Lord's will in our lives. "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10)

Salvation isn't contingent upon good works, but good works come as the inevitable consequence of a living faith. The Christians of the first congregation at Jerusalem cared for the physical needs of their brothers. They supported the widows in their bodily needs. They appointed men, filled with God's Spirit, to carry on this important work of deaconing, serving. The mission stations among the Gentile world gathered a massive collection for the saints of Jerusalem. They sent their delegates along with the offering to Jerusalem. In keeping with Jesus' lesson of the Good Samaritan, the Christians didn't confine their charitable endeavors to their

own members alone. “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” (Galatians 6:10)

No, not one statement in Scriptures supports the social gospel’s endeavor to build the kingdom of God here on earth by elevating the living conditions of the poor, adjusting difficulties between labor and capital, reducing delinquency among the youth, assisting in famine and drought stricken areas of the world, and fomenting rebellion within the domain of tyrants. But Christian people, who sincerely believe in life after death, the blessed life of heaven through Jesus, will reflect the Savior’s love. They will weep over the present day Jerusalem, that is, over all who reject Jesus. They will take His true Word throughout the world. They will also have compassion as did Jesus. In their faith-born love they will use their gifts from God to help with the needs of others. It seems to this author that the hospitals, children’s homes, homes for the elderly, etc. that bear a Christian name such as Lutheran, Methodist, or Presbyterian, were no doubt founded by well-meaning, Gospel motivated Christians. It seems to this author that the greater the emphasis on social gospel in this century, the fewer ready hearts and helping hands. Social gospel’s failure even to meet its objective stems from the fact that Christian churches abandoned the real Gospel in exchange for the social gospel, and their hearers left because their spiritual needs were not met and because guilt had become the motive to try to change society.

But we know the truth. We live with our eyes fixed on heaven. Surely we who believe in the real Jesus, the real Savior, will want to let our lights shine. P.E. Kretzmann notes, “Every pastor should seek to familiarize himself with the needs for Christian social work existing in his parish. Every congregation has its socially inadequate, its widows, its needy, its underprivileged, its unemployed, its handicapped, its mentally deficient, its delinquents, its alcoholics, its domestic maladjusted, etc. The house-going pastor soon discovers who these people are and what their problems are...Give your congregation opportunity to express its love in the field of Christian social work.” (*Concordia Theological Monthly*, Volume 8, Number 90, September, 1937, “The Church and Social Problems.”)

We shall close our paper with a brief section entitled, “WELS and the social gospel.” By that, I intend to raise several questions. Perhaps we cannot answer them. Perhaps the answers are better left for oral discussion. I shall raise several issues, intending to use this paper as the Lord would have it, namely, that we look at ourselves again in light of His Law, and rejoice again in light of the Gospel. Do dangers lurk that we embrace in part a social gospel emphasis? Beware lest the Law of God become for us a quick fix to problems within the congregation, within the classroom, to stewardship difficulties, to the motivation for Gospel outreach. Beware lest we substitute Christian love in our work as congregations and as a synod, for an effort to build an external kingdom to the glory of someone other than God. Beware lest feelings of pride and self-satisfaction pour over us when at the end of the year we can say, “We met our budget!” “We accomplished this or that...!” Beware lest our computation of statistics and filling of reports cause us to think of success in external terms, rather than, to look at the souls of people. When we counsel, do we get to the root of the problem, namely, our sin and guilt before God? Do we let our counselees know our real interest is in their spiritual welfare? Do we discuss how the break-up of marriage hinders God’s kingdom from coming to future generations because a man and woman become too self-oriented in seeking marital happiness? Do we just seek outward reform of family and person when we show our slides or videos on family life? Are we tempted to tone down or at best abbreviate our confession of sin in the Hymnal Sampler liturgy, in the interest of picking up the pace of the service?

On the other end of the spectrum, are we living the life to which the Savior has called us? Are we leading our people in those topics that no one likes to discuss? Why are we so selfish? Why does it often look as though we have forgotten this world and everything in it is perishing? Do we soft-pedal the dangers of materialism? Do we challenge God's people to remember that things do not bring happiness, and we as a whole seem to be offering unto the Lord so little of our material wealth and to be so stingy when it comes to caring for the needs of our neighbor? Have we somehow parroted the Gospel without appearing as though we believe those promises of heaven? Do our congregations actively minister to the physical needs of their members? I don't have the answers to these questions. I only raise them that we all keep our thoughts, our ministries, our congregation's mission, yes, our very lives Scripturally centered. May we never lose sight of the mission to which the Lord our Savior has called us. He created us. He redeemed us. He gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit. He has made us heirs of a life beyond our grandest imagining. He bids us to live a life worthy of the Lord and please Him in every way bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to His glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and joyfully giving thanks to the Father who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light." (Colossians 1:10-12)

Resources

Most of the proceeding was begged, borrowed. and stolen from the following:

Books

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