

# The New Evangelical Social Gospel

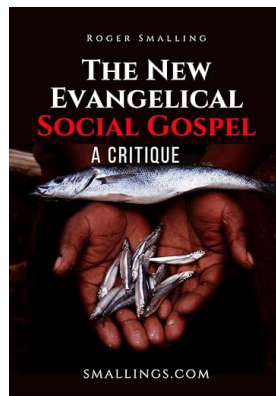
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*A Critique*

by

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*Making the world around us a better place is a good thing and is ordinarily to be expected when people are coming to Christ and serving in their vocations as salt and light (Matt 5:13-16). But that is not the mission of the church. The mission given to us in Matthew 28:18-20 is very specific: to make disciples of all nations through baptizing and teaching.*

*If it is not baptizing and teaching, it might be lawful; it might even be commanded, but it is not obedience to the Great Commission. <sup>1</sup>*

*—William Schweitzer, Ph.D., Church planter, Presbyterian Church in America*

## Preface

A brush fire is sweeping through evangelical circles, scorching the fine edges of the words “gospel” and “gospel ministry.”

Couched in appealing language and ambiguous slogans, it finds kindling in a new generation steeped in a popular liberal mindset, ungrounded in sound New Testament theology. It is gathering droves of Christians who see it as a balanced approach to ministry.

In past years, it was called the Social Gospel. Today, those who label this wildfire by that term risk being viewed as unprogressive, compassionless, or throwbacks to an epoch of fundamentalist isolationism.

In this book, we will show that a version of the social gospel is being revived under the guise of a new emphasis on mercy ministry and social justice. This is a new form that far transcends a call to more involvement with the needs of society.

It is a theological system of its own, a worldview that redefines the mission of the church, the kingdom of God, Christian living, and even the content of the word “gospel” itself. It is almost a religion of its own.

Mercy ministry is plainly taught in the Bible as a gift of the Spirit and a necessary outworking of local church life. Zealous efforts to help the poor are wonderful. When such enthusiasm impinges on the meaning of the gospel or the mission of the church, we have a mandate to become alarmed.<sup>2</sup>

## About the Authors

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The Smallings travel extensively throughout Latin America, holding seminars and conferences in churches of various denominations and overseeing the training centers.

Their books, study guides and essays are available on in both Spanish and English at:  
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## Chapter 1: A Biblical Mandate?

Have you noticed a fad racing through our churches? It is a mindset and worldview that redefines the mission of the church as poverty alleviation and working for social justice to bring about the kingdom of God as a just and equitable society, here and now. At points, this trend even appears to redefine the gospel message itself.

You have doubtlessly heard one of its premises pop up here and there and thought, “This sounds a bit strange,” and let it pass. Then you heard something similar and considered, “That sounds good, but something about it bothers me,” and let it pass also. Without realizing it, you may be hearing an entire theology dangerous to the spiritual health of the church.

In this book, we will look at what this fad really is, where it came from, and why it is one of the most serious threats to the life of Bible-believing churches today. It is a leaven damaging the whole lump by diverting the church from its purpose and calling. We will also show what the Bible teaches about being true leaven.

This is not really a new fad. It is an old one that failed, dressed in conservative language but destined for the same fate.

A *biblical mandate* for the church to alleviate poverty is an indisputable truth according to this fad. We are told it is incumbent on all Christians. Genuine believers authenticate their witness by devoting themselves to the service of the poor.

This is all part of God’s plan, so we hear, to bring social justice to the earth, renew fallen creation, and make the kingdom of God visible to mankind. This is supposed to bring revival.

The proponents of this movement are so adamant on this point; the term "mandate" is scarcely strong enough.

In their book, **WHEN HELPING HURTS**, authors Corbett & Fikkert of the Chalmers Institute state,<sup>3</sup>

*... each of us is responsible to participate at some level in helping our congregation to be everything Scripture calls it to be, including fulfilling its biblical mandate to care for the poor.*<sup>4</sup>

In the context, they mean the poor of the community and the world, not those of the church only. They think it a moral duty to serve the poor anywhere. The only thing that could vary in this *mandate* is the manner in which we go about it.

*...each Christian has a unique set of gifts...that influence the scope and manner in which to fulfill the biblical mandate to help the poor.*<sup>5</sup>

These authors even define the apostolic ministry of reconciliation of mankind to God as poverty alleviation.

First, they quote 2 Corinthians 5:20— *We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* Then they interpret it as, "*Poverty alleviation is the ministry of reconciliation.*"<sup>6</sup>

The way to reconcile mankind to God, according to Corbett & Fikkert, is by alleviating world poverty. We would ignore such an interpretation were it not in large bold letters in the middle of a page, making it a central theme.

### *Why Israel was punished*

We are told in **WHEN HELPING HURTS**, the reason why Israel was sent into captivity was because they failed to feed the poor.

*Why was Israel sent into captivity? ...Indeed, numerous passages in the Old Testament indicate that idolatry was a problem in Israel. These passages [from Isaiah] give a broader picture... Why was God so displeased? Both passages emphasize that God was furious over Israel's failure to care for the poor and the oppressed.*<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Israel was negligent to its poor. That is, its own poor, along with foreigners within their borders. There was never a *mandate* to feed the Philistines.

What this has to do with the Great Commission is unclear. The implication may be that unless the church gets busy with its mission of reconciling mankind to God through poverty alleviation, we may end up in captivity also.

What irony! The church will indeed go into captivity if we follow the new social gospel assumptions. Spiritual captivity, that is, just as in the early Middle Ages when the church decided to bring about the kingdom of God by invading political and social structures, along with adding works to the definition of the gospel. Result: the "dark ages."

### **Measuring Spirituality**

Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York says,

*A life poured out in doing justice for the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true gospel faith.*<sup>8</sup>

*...when the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us, the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor.*<sup>9</sup>

*... true experience of the grace of Jesus Christ inevitably motivates a man or woman to seek justice in the world.*<sup>10</sup>

According to Keller, Jesus was clear about how caring for the poor works out in practice.

*Indeed, Jesus often ate meals in homes with his friends and peers. Rather—to put this in a more modern context—he is saying that we should spend far more of our money and wealth on the poor than we do on our own entertainment, or on vacations, or on eating out and socializing with important peers.<sup>11</sup>*

In **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, Dobson & Buckley tell us helping the poor is evidence of salvation.<sup>12</sup> The authors assert that Christians are *dead wrong* who do not believe they are called to serve and invest in those *suffering under sickness, poverty, disease and injustice...*<sup>13</sup>

Actually, this is a half-truth. Such is indeed a calling of the entire Body of Christ in the world, though not necessarily every individual Christian or church nor by the means these authors suggest.

Here's how we see it:

From an evangelist friend we heard a life poured out in evangelism is the inevitable sign of real, true gospel faith.

From others we heard a life poured out in seeking spiritual gifts was the inevitable sign of real, true gospel faith.

Now from this current fad, we hear that a life poured out in doing justice for the poor is the inevitable sign of real, true gospel faith.

Just enough truth exists in all of these to be dangerous. A life poured out in following our own gifts, calling, and conscience before God is the inevitable sign of a healthy mind.

### **A debt to the poor**

*It's biblical that we owe the poor as much of our money as we can possibly give away.*

<sup>14</sup> —Tim Keller

It is becoming increasingly popular to view service to the poor as transcending mere charity. It is a debt we must pay. We are unjust if we do not give it because it is theirs. The poor have a moral right to our assistance.

In **GENEROUS JUSTICE**, Keller appeals to an Old Testament law to illustrate the debt-to-the-poor idea. The law proscribed that a landowner during harvest must leave some of the grain for the poor to glean. (Deut. 24)

*If we read this text closely, we see that part of the landowner's harvest was "for" the immigrant and the poor. That means that in God's eyes, it was actually "theirs"... If the owner did not limit his profits and provide the poor with an opportunity to work for their own benefit in the fields, he did not simply deprive the poor of charity but of justice, of their right.<sup>15</sup>*

In context, Keller correctly points out we are mere stewards before God of our possessions. He also shows how the society has been unfair to inner-city residents. However, from this he

concludes, “Therefore, if you have been assigned the goods of this world by God and you don’t share them with others, it isn’t just stinginess; it is injustice.”<sup>16</sup>

Other evangelicals of a more liberal stance, such as Jim Wallis, Ron Sider, and Tony Campolo, have been advocating the same for twenty years or more. None of it is original. It is an entitlement concept straight out of Rauschenbusch.

In **CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL CRISIS**, 1907, liberal theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, a leader in the United States of the old social gospel movement, elaborated on the idea that a wealthy man is “...not only a steward of God but a steward of the people. He derives it from the people, and he holds it in trust for the people.”<sup>17</sup>

Rauschenbusch says that if the law has erroneously granted to the wealthy “*absolute title*” to their property and has “*neglected to insist*” on the rights of the common people to that wealth, then “*that does not settle the moral title in the least.*”<sup>18</sup>

In that case, it becomes the duty of the church to play the role of conscience and remind the affluent of what they owe to the less fortunate. In this way, “*The Christian church could make a splendid contribution to the new social justice in pointing out the latent public rights...*”<sup>19</sup>

Notice how Rauschenbusch’s use of the term “social justice” embodies the idea of debt owed to the poor. When social gospel teachers, old or new, use this term “social justice,” they do **not** mean charity. The word “justice” is not synonymous with “charity” and can only refer to the rectification of an immoral act. In their minds, we owe the poor.

These teachers are claiming it is our duty to rectify the injustice we committed. It is not, therefore, a generous charity but a generous justice.

If this is not what these teachers mean by *social justice*, then the term has no meaning.

### **Total fiction**

It is significant that the word “gospel” occurs some one hundred times in the New Testament. Not once is it associated with a mandate to alleviate poverty. This so-called *biblical mandate* is sheer fiction, a conjecture based on erroneous premises. Nothing in the New Testament teaches we are in debt to the poor.

**The notion of a biblical mandate on the church to alleviate poverty is sheer fiction.**

In Ecuador, during our evangelistic ministry, we helped the destitute at various opportunities, not because we needed to do so or because they were poor, but because they were people. Likewise, we taught wealthy people when we ran across those, not because they were rich but

because they were people.

This entire teaching is a reprehensible distortion of the Great Commission, gospel ministry, individual gifts, and callings. If left unchecked, it will eventually forfeit the power of the gospel itself.

Gospel ministry is fully accomplished when the word of God is preached and taught, plus nothing.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- There exists a current fad claiming a biblical mandate on the church to alleviate poverty in the community or the world. This is nonsense.
- This fad confuses the difference between Christian charity and social justice. The former is incumbent on Christians. The latter is not.
- Some feel that generosity to the poor is a debt owed to them as justice. The New Testament never says this.
- This current emphasis concerning the relationship of Christians to the poor is really old liberalism repackaged for conservatives. Nothing about it is original.

## Chapter 2: Flirting With Fallacy

According to the movement, the gospel message itself embodies not only a call to personal salvation but also a commitment to the physical needs of humanity at large, the poor in particular, and not just within the church. They see rectifying social injustice as an inseparable part of the mission of the church and a key factor in defining the spirituality of its members.

Without these endeavors, they say, the gospel itself is truncated, incomplete, and unbalanced. To their thinking, this alone is the *authentic* gospel.

Such teaching is actually a reiterated version of the failed social gospel of the early part of the twentieth century, dressed up to appeal to conservatives.

### How the new differs from the old

*The Social Gospel movement is a Protestant Christian intellectual movement that was most prominent in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The movement applied Christian ethics to social problems, especially social justice, inequality, etc. Social Gospel leaders were predominantly associated with the liberal wing [of politics] ...and most were theologically liberal...<sup>20</sup>*

The difference between the two is simply liberal versus conservative. This new version is, in fact, the old, presented to Christians as a wake-up call for social justice.

### How the new views the old

The current movement has its own historical perspective of the old. It goes something like this:

When the original social gospel movement began, liberalism was its bedfellow. Conservatives reacted by concentrating solely on evangelism. Apart from liberalism, nothing was particularly wrong with the movement. If evangelicals today restore their pursuit of social justice, it will result in a powerhouse movement the world will notice and appreciate. (This is not a quote but a summary of the insinuations typical in their writings.)

This historical scenario sounds perfectly reasonable. It is also dead wrong.

### Liberalism was not really the problem

Liberalism or no, it was still wrong for these reasons:

- A false definition of the *gospel* or of *gospel ministry*.
- An unbiblical *mission* of the church.
- It taught that Christians *owe* support to the poor.
- It defined the *kingdom of God* as a just and equitable society *before Jesus comes*.

The same is wrong with today's version, falsely defining the gospel as two indispensable halves, preaching plus service to the poor. This includes creating a just and equitable society through Christianizing governmental institutions, along with environmental concerns.

Current social gospel conservatives have embraced such definitions while considering themselves distinct from the old movement, solely because they reject liberalism. This is self-deceptive. The definitions themselves are blatantly liberal and woefully unbiblical.

For both the old and new, meeting the material needs of mankind is just as much a part of the mission of the church as meeting the spiritual needs. All we need is to *balance* our current emphasis on evangelism with social justice, and we will have a *holistic gospel* that will advance the kingdom of God and stun the world.

This is why we say, as kindly and firmly as we can, that the new social gospel is merely the old, repackaged for conservatives.

The new social gospel is merely the old, repackaged for conservatives.

Imagine a hill with a church on top. A liberal theologian drives a bulldozer up a path he created and shoves the church off the hill. He replaces it with one to his liking.

Later, a conservative theologian drives his own bulldozer up the hill but by another route. He bulldozes the liberal building and replaces it with another...*identical to the liberal one he just destroyed!* He says, “Oh, but mine is different because I came by a different route.”

That is how the new social gospel proponents think. They insist their message is fine because they are otherwise conservative.

Though liberalism was certainly a problem, this was not the reason for the movement. When liberal Baptist pastor Walter Rauschenbusch launched the social gospel movement in the U.S. in 1907 with his book **CHRISTIANITY AND THE SOCIAL CRISIS**, he was not addressing his fellow liberals. He was speaking to Christians in general, liberal and conservative, Protestant and Catholic.

His motivation, as he made clear, was concern for the deplorable conditions resulting in the abuse of workers through unregulated capitalism. A cursory perusal of his writing shows Rauschenbusch cared little about theological precision unless it supported his presuppositions.

His social concerns were legitimate. Sadly, he unwittingly steered many down a wrong path by completely redefining the church’s role in the world.

Conservative teachers today believe adding this social emphasis back to evangelism is vital for success. It is, however, spiritually disastrous. Lack of evangelism was not the problem inherent in the old social gospel movement in the first place. The problem was in adding something to the mission of the church that Christ did not put there, thus poisoning the church itself.

Someone may argue, “But social justice is a good thing! How can it be poison?” It matters not whether the element added is a good thing. Neither are the altruistic intentions of those adding them relevant. What matters is that anything is added at all.

The issue to God is not the moral value of the addition, but obedience pure and simple. This means doing God’s work God’s way.

The distorted historical perspective shines through nearly every bit of new social gospel writing. Some even extol Rauschenbusch as a great forerunner of a wonderful idea.<sup>21</sup>

**THE NEW EVANGELICAL DICTIONARY OF THEOLOGY** notes that this liberal theologian “admitted that his conception of the kingdom represented an effort to Christianize Darwinist evolution...”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, Rauschenbusch had “no room in his theology for the substitutionary atonement, a literal hell, or a literal second coming.”<sup>23</sup> He was a bit weak in his doctrine of human corruption also, for he held to a “nearly utopian sense of human potential.”<sup>24</sup>

It is true the old social gospel lacked evangelism simply because liberals have no gospel with which to evangelize. If Rauschenbusch were wrong only at this basic level, is it unfair to ask if today’s social gospel adherents see nothing wrong with...

- defining the kingdom of God as a just and equitable society before Jesus comes?
- viewing Christ as a social reformer who intended to establish a utopian society on earth but failed?
- considering the early church, especially Paul, as having misunderstood the full content of the gospel and the mission of the church?

All these are views expounded thoroughly by Rauschenbusch. While the new advocates do not necessarily hold to these, we will see in the coming chapters how they skirt the edges of them.

### **Is it really that dangerous?**

Yes. The new social gospel, like the old, is far more than a mere corrective to an imbalance. It embodies misapplied premises and wrong hermeneutics. It contains just enough truth to seem credible and enough error to be deadly. The danger lies in its system of logically coherent and plausible-sounding errors.

These teachers do not conspire. They have a passion for people and for the gospel. While endeavoring to exhort the church to love and good works, they have unwittingly adopted half-truths leading to serious error. Result:

- It deviates the church from its biblical calling
- It distorts the gospel
- It redefines gospel ministry
- It teaches a false concept of the kingdom of God
- It is a subtle form of legalism
- It distorts New Testament teaching about church life as well as individual gifts and callings

### **Diluting the power**

The health of the church is at stake. If not kept in check, this movement will dilute the power of the gospel and lead to spiritual weakness.

Some scholars have attributed the spiritual and moral decline of older denominations to the social gospel. This makes sense. If the gospel is distorted and the mission of the church deviated, the Holy Spirit is grieved and withdraws, leaving an empty shell, Christian in name only.

Once a person has adopted the new social gospel mindset, he wears a lens that colors things in ways different than what the apostles taught. It leads to a subtle legalism with the attendant judgmentalism. A sense of guilt threatens our liberty of conscience.

### **The new lingo**

The phrase "social gospel" is anathema to most evangelicals because of its past association with liberal theology. Promoters of the new version steer clear of the term, even though the content is similar. Today's version often attaches its views to the coattails of words, perfectly appropriate if rightly used. These include *holistic ministry, word and deed, the whole gospel, cultural mandate, missional, authenticating the gospel, contextualization, incarnational ministry, etc.*

This makes it confusing. We need to be alert when a speaker uses such terms to see if he is disguising social gospel theology with otherwise benign elements.

In theology, we call this *semantic manipulation*: switching definitions without notice.

If it were merely a smattering of questionable presuppositions, we would not bother. Nor would we bother were it a call for more mercy ministry. It is far more than that. The new social gospel is a theological *system*.

Some promoters of this current wave are outstanding men of God with large ministries. We greatly respect the accomplishments of such teachers and appreciate their evident anointing and valuable contribution to Christian literature. We would not hesitate to sit under their preaching on any biblical topic, except this one.

We intend nothing in this book to diminish the worth or dignity of other duly ordained ministers. Nor do we wish them to endure unnecessary theological potshots on secondary issues. We are not pointing a small-caliber rifle at weak spots in an otherwise good movement in the hopes that some of the annoyances will disappear. We are pointing a howitzer at an entire *system*.

### **Are they heretics?**

None of the writers we quote in this book, apart from Rauschenbusch, are heretics. They affirm all the fundamentals of biblical theology: the deity of Christ, the Trinity, salvation by grace, the inerrancy of scripture, and final judgment. Nothing here is intended to question their orthodoxy on any essential doctrine.

Some of those quoted in this book may not agree with every premise of the movement and may disagree with statements from other teachers in their own camp. It is a *system* nevertheless and must be addressed as one.

### **Two camps**

We can divide the movement's leaders into two camps: those who project the idea that mercy ministry is a *part* of the gospel versus those who see it as a *consequence* of the gospel. Richard Stearns of World Vision would represent the former, while Steve Corbett of the Chalmers Institute and Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York would likely fit the latter.

Both camps nevertheless converge at the same point: an indispensable part of the church's mission is to alleviate poverty in the world and bring about a more just and equitable society as a manifestation of the kingdom of God. This is a moral duty for all Christians, according to both camps.

### **What shall we call them?**

The new social gospel adherents would strongly protest being called “new social gospel adherents” on the sole grounds that they are otherwise conservative.

This puts us in a dilemma. On one hand, we wish to be fair and kind to fellow conservatives attempting to work for God. On the other hand, we must call them something in this book, so we are sticking with “new social gospel teachers” because that label fits better than any we can find. There is no attempt on our part to be derisive.

From our observation of the American evangelical scene, the new social gospel is rampant. Some see it as a fresh view of orthodoxy, a recovery of lost truths scarcely to be questioned.

We’re questioning it. This does not mean we question the integrity, sincerity, or worth of its proponents.

Most Christians who are gifted for mercy ministry appear oblivious to theological questions. Few adhere to new social gospel thinking. If they sound similar at times, it is usually because they view their ministry as extremely important. They are right. Nothing in this book is intended to discourage such zeal in particular gifts with ensuing ministries within the Body of Christ.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- A rebirth of the old social gospel is taking place under the guise of a new emphasis on mercy ministry.
- The new social gospel is the old, repackaged to appeal to conservatives.
- The new social gospel is far more than a fresh call for involvement in mercy ministry. It is a theological system of its own.
- The new social gospel views the old as defective only in its lack of evangelism and liberal theology, not in its view of *what the gospel* and *the mission of the church are*.
- The new is just as spiritually dangerous as the old.

## **Chapter 3: What's It All About?**

The new social gospel says evangelism and service to the poor must be kept in balance. This is deemed the correct definition of gospel ministry.

The peculiar thing about this is that some of its foundation premises may be valid when rightly applied. Misapplied, they become half-truths leading to a quasi-Christian worldview, harder to deal with than outright heresy. It's the gestalt phenomenon in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. In this case, when the whole is assembled, it becomes unholy.

The movement depends on the following premises:

### **A mandate to alleviate poverty**

A divine mandate exists, according to the proponents, upon churches and individual Christians to serve the poor. This is God's strategy for world evangelism. Alleviation of world poverty is a central reason for the Body of Christ to exist in this dispensation. Those who fail to understand this are spiritually lacking, supposedly. (See Chapter Four.)

### **The mission of the church**

The church exists as God's partner to establish a just and equitable society throughout the earth, according to this teaching. Therefore the church has a mandate to fight for social justice, economic equality, and environmental improvements. Evangelism is a mere subset of this process. (See Chapter Seven.)

Most new social gospel teachers agree this will be completed at the second coming. All assume it can and must be accomplished in part, here and now.

### **Jesus our model**

According to this theology, Jesus committed himself to the poor. Since he was our model, we should exhibit the same compassion by feeding the poor, not just preaching the gospel. (See Chapter Six.)

### **The kingdom of God**

Christ came to establish the kingdom of God on earth as a visible reality through a renovated social order before his second coming. The church, they say, exists for this purpose.

The old social gospel defined the kingdom of God as the renovated human society to be brought about by Christian activism. Though the new version correctly associates the church with the kingdom of God, both link it with the renovated social order to some degree.

Most agree this social revolution will be completed only when Christ returns. All assert it must be accomplished in part, now. (See Chapter Five.)

### The whole gospel

For the message of justification by faith alone to be *whole*, it must include the message of a new social order through meeting the physical needs of humanity. Without this, the new social gospel teachers consider the gospel to be truncated or incomplete. (See Chapter Eleven.)

### Creation and Cultural mandate

Some believe God's goal is to restore the whole of fallen creation to its state before the fall, not just the people in it. The church has a mandate to work toward this as God's partner, here and now.

Foremost in this plan is *redeeming the culture*. Since Christians are in a creation-restoration mission with God, it is imperative they also *engage the culture* with the arts, but in a godly manner. This also is a part of the mission of the church, according to the movement. (See Chapters 7 & 8)

### Economic inequality

Financial inequality between classes of people and nations is an injustice, according to some of the social gospel literature. American Christians should feel guilty about their affluence and therefore be at the forefront of efforts to rectify inequality in the world.

Alleviation of poverty is central to the mission of the church and part of the ministry of reconciliation of man to God. (See Chapter Nine.)

### Where did it come from?

Part of the driving force behind today's new evangelical social gospel is a revival of Kuyperianism, sometimes labeled "neo-Calvinism."

In 1898 a Dutch theologian named Abraham Kuyper delivered a series of lectures at Princeton Seminary known today as the Stone Lectures. In these, Kuyper elaborated on the *common grace* doctrine, a perfectly biblical idea that refers to God's providential preservation of the human race, with material blessings upon believers and unbelievers alike.

Kuyper rightly insisted the Lordship of Christ must be brought to bear on every aspect of life. We need to avoid separatism and engage the world around us. We must see Jesus as Lord of all, not just of our "spiritual" life. This is the good half of Kuyper's teaching.

The *common grace* doctrine is perfectly innocuous until someone decides to exaggerate it, run it down a rabbit trail, and impose it on others with his own criteria about what the mission of the church should be. Therein lies the rub.

From the *common grace* idea, Kuyper evolved the notion of a *cultural mandate*. This idea suggests there exists a mandate for the church, from Genesis One, to overcome the world's cultures and transform society. This includes social justice causes, transforming political and social institutions, alleviating suffering, participating in the arts, and so forth.

The bad part is the way he said we are to go about it. Kuyper put it on the foundation of this minor doctrine, *common grace*. Since we are all the image of God, believers and unbelievers alike, he claimed we can embrace unbelievers as our co-workers toward bringing in the kingdom of God by cooperative efforts in all the above-mentioned causes.

Why was this the bad part of his thinking? The Bible says nothing about relating the gospel to the world on the basis of common grace. The church must indeed engage the culture, but on other grounds: the faithful preaching and teaching of the word of God. This includes the uncompromising prophetic voice of the church in reproof, rebuking, and exhorting sinful cultures.

We find no cultural mandate elaborated by the apostles as the means to victory. What we find is the Great Commission as taught by Jesus, exemplified in the Book of Acts and explained in the epistles.

It is significant that the Stone Lectures, which Kuyper delivered over a period of six days, contain few quotes from scripture. Theological speculation replaced sound scriptural exegesis.

Reformed and Presbyterian theologians grabbed Kuyper's thinking and elaborated it thoroughly. This is not surprising because within reformed circles there can exist an annoying tendency to interpret the New Testament by the Old, contrary to common sense. This may be how the cultural mandate idea, as defined above, became unquestioned orthodoxy in some camps.

Kuyper was a product of his time. He was born toward the end of the so-called "Enlightenment." The industrial age had started with amazing new inventions: steam engines, telegraphs, and railroads. Things were beginning to look up for mankind. Who knows? Maybe with the church's help, "thy kingdom come" might be a prayer about to be answered.

World War I popped that bubble. Kuyper died in 1920, before the other wars and horrors of the last century. But the theological platform he built still exists, with entire denominations standing on it.

If circles could represent doctrines, some would be larger than others. Salvation by grace alone would be a really big one, and Christians would have a right to require professing believers to stand within that circle. We could rightly question the authenticity of their commitment to Christ were they to refuse to do so.

The circle representing *common grace* would be very small by comparison. Since Kuyper, some have taken this doctrine, stretched it to the size of a platform, and expect all believers to stand on it to show that their commitment to Christ is authentic.

Moreover, they have added a wide variety of elements to the platform: environmental causes, social justice issues, alleviating poverty, trade imbalances, cultural advancements, and environmental causes. We also find unbelievers on the platform with whom it is assumed we may cooperate to bring about God's kingdom through whatever cultural issues we may have in common.<sup>25</sup>

Things get lost on that platform: the gospel itself, for example, along with the Great Commission and the real mission of the church.

## What does the Bible say about common grace?

Overemphasis on a right doctrine can sometimes be as damaging as a false one. The Bible says,

- God has a benevolent attitude toward the human race in general. *But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared...* Titus 3:4. The term “love of God” is actually one Greek word, *filanthropia*, and implies *benevolence*.
- God preserves the human race from extinction... *the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.* 1 Timothy 4:10
- God provides sustenance for the human race. *He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.* Mt. 5:45
- God provides good times, like harvest festivals. God’s benevolence even provides fun. *Yet he has not left himself without testimony: he has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.* Acts 14:17

From these, we see the purpose of God’s common grace is twofold: preservation of the race and revelation of God’s existence. That’s it. Nothing about social justice, feeding the poor, or any *cultural mandate* on the church.

Overemphasis on a right doctrine can sometimes be as damaging as a false one.

Does the *common grace* concept have any evangelistic use? Yes, if we use it rightly. Paul used it with the Thessalonians when he said,

*In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.* Acts 17:30-31

Paul’s diplomatic message, put another way, really meant, “Time’s up, guys! God has had enough of your idolatrous and pagan culture, and his patience has run out. Now it is time to repent because he’s about to hold you to account for your ways.”

This is how Paul engaged the culture.

## The old version of the social gospel

Around the same time as Kuyper, along came Rauschenbusch, whom we mentioned before as the leader of the old social gospel in the U.S.

Rauschenbusch had legitimate concerns. He lived at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in the last half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and saw the abuses of unregulated capitalism. This led him to adopt socialism as a socio-political philosophy and combine its fundamental premises with what was left of Christianity in his liberal theology.

The result was a series of false premises nearly identical to those mentioned above. Rauschenbusch felt that economic inequality is an *ipso facto* evil, proof that injustice has taken place. Since it is the role of the church to deal with ethical issues, then Christians must be at the forefront of social justice causes. Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God as a just and equitable society and left it to the church to complete that. The church exists for this purpose.

As we shall see in the following chapters, all these premises are half-truths and therefore misleading.

Fast forward to the present day. The recipe is simple. Add an overdose of common grace to the old social gospel premises, sprinkle with passionate rhetoric, stir briskly, and bake in the heat of current political and social frustrations among Christians. Out pops the new social gospel. Package with pretty labels and serve freely.

The problem is that the new recipe is just as poisonous as the old.

### **Junk theology**

In the next chapters, we will see why the above premises are junk theology bordering on heresy and will launch the church on a trajectory that is ultimately fruitless.

To see this better, we need to review a principle of hermeneutics, the science of scripture interpretation. One key aspect will expose the door through which these errors have entered.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- The new social gospel depends on a series of half-truths as foundational premises.
- These premises, when assembled together, form a dangerously convincing system of wrong theology.

## Chapter 4: Bizarre Interpretations

During our acquaintance with some Pentecostal believers, we were told about the “full gospel.” They said divine healing is included in the definition of the gospel message. Christ died to save bodies as well as souls.

To preach the gospel means telling people they can be saved spiritually and healed physically through Christ, they said. Both are guaranteed through the same faith in Jesus, according to their interpretation of certain verses.

This appeared to make sense at first because it was an obvious balance between the physical and spiritual.

Like social gospel adherents, they referred to texts showing Christ’s sacrifice included the physical creation. For them, it followed logically that healing was guaranteed if only we were faithful and obedient.

It sounded supremely positive and hopeful. Why it didn’t work all the time was explained as unbelief. This struck us as simplistic and unrealistic.

What does this have to do with the new social gospel? Similar hermeneutical errors are involved. Instead of adding healing to the gospel, the new social gospel adds mercy ministry. Instead of “full gospel,” they say “holistic.”

A more solid reason why we rejected the Pentecostal definitions of "gospel" and "gospel ministry" is because of the way the apostles defined these terms. In Paul’s thorough dissertation on the gospel in Romans and Galatians, he makes no mention of physical healing as a part of the definition.

This would be a drastic oversight if physical healing were included in the meaning of these terms.

We concluded, therefore, that Paul’s definitions lack nothing. From the book of Acts we see divine healing as one of those *signs* that may accompany the preaching of the gospel as God grants them. Likewise with mercy ministry.

As do our *full gospel* friends, the new social gospel adherents view those who differ through their own special lens. It is insinuated that those who disagree,

- Are spiritually shallow.
- Lack a full understanding of God’s redemptive plan.
- Lack compassion for the poor and social justice issues.
- Are stuck in traditional thinking.
- Are not progressive.

### **The whole gospel**

Justification by faith alone, in Christ alone, is the *whole gospel*. Nothing else is. Whatever gets added, however innocuous or marvelous, results in legalism. Another form of legalism is exactly what the new social gospel is.

### **The rule of progressive revelation**

The Bible is a chronological book, an unfolding revelation, starting with the Pentateuch and ending with the Epistles and Revelation. Since it is progressive, it follows logically that the latter must interpret the former.

This means the New Testament interprets the Old, not vice versa. The Old Testament means what the New says it does and no more. We are free to bring into the Christian life teachings from the Old Testament that the New authorizes.

Likewise, within the New Testament itself, the epistles are the gospels and Acts explained and applied. They are the final word on what Christian living is like and what the church is to do. This is called the *progressive revelation principle*.

The New Testament leans heavily toward a new freedom within broad parameters. So it is with mercy ministry, social justice, and the relationship of the church to the world. Looking back to the Old Testament rather than forward to the epistles can get us into trouble when coming to conclusions about our duties within the Great Commission.

From the gospels we learn what it means to be Christ-like. Then the epistles explain how to work it out in practice. The gospels are the theory, the epistles the practice. If we stayed in the gospels alone, we might lack discipline in the church and finesse in our theology.

Suppose a sinning Christian in the church refuses to repent. Without teaching from the epistles on discipline, immature members might cavil that we are judgmental, using Christ's acceptance of sinners to avoid applying discipline. They might fall into the Corinthian error of doing nothing on the grounds of tolerance.

### **The filter effect**

The progressive nature of the Bible has a filter effect. It's obvious the New Testament filters out a lot in the Old. Complications enter when parts of a principle are filtered out but not all.

Sometimes what gets filtered is the emphasis. A principle in the Old Testament might be valid in the New for different reasons and without the same emphasis. The most dangerous errors are often simply a matter of emphasis.

An example might be dietary laws. In the New Testament we are free to eat anything, though not anywhere in front of just anybody. Some restrictions apply having to do with personal discipline and the conscience of others.

In the following chapters, we will see how the new social gospel violates the progressive revelation principle at every turn. This leads to errors of emphasis at best and downright false doctrine at worst.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- Justification by faith is the whole gospel, and nothing else is.
- Any addition to this definition of the gospel leads inevitably to legalism with the attendant judgmentalism.
- The new social gospel violates an important principle of biblical interpretation, the *progressive revelation principle*.
- The movement views detractors as spiritually weak and lacking in vision and compassion for humanity.

## Chapter 5: The Mission of Jesus

*The fundamental purpose of Jesus was the establishment of the kingdom of God, which involved a thorough regeneration and reconstitution of social life.<sup>26</sup>*

So declares Rauschenbusch, the leading exponent of the old social gospel. By *regeneration* he does not mean born again. He means a social revolution that gradually transforms human existence into a just and equitable society, here and now, in visible form.

For Rauschenbusch, this alone was the mission of Christ.<sup>27</sup> He continues,

*The kingdom of God is still a collective conception, involving the whole social life of man.<sup>28</sup>*

All branches of Christianity agree Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God. Christ talked about it as a central theme of his parables.

The question is, what does the term "kingdom of God" mean? How is it to be established? What is the church's role in bringing it about, and when will it become visible?

### **New social gospel view of the kingdom of God**

From the President of World Vision, Richard Stearns,

*Christ's proclamation of the "kingdom of heaven" was a call for a redeemed world order populated by redeemed people—**now**.<sup>29</sup>*

*God established the institution of the Church as a key strategy for building His kingdom and for leading the social revolution required by the gospel....<sup>30</sup>*

*His gospel encompassed not only the forgiveness of sins and the saving of our souls but also the fullness of the coming kingdom of God through a society transformed by His followers.<sup>31</sup>*

Harvey Conn, Professor, Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia,

*Let people know that by giving their allegiance to Christ they will be embarking on a great campaign to banish war and poverty and injustice... Let people know that the church that sends out this manifesto plans to be an advance copy of the new world order it preaches.<sup>32</sup> p. 56*

*Through Jesus' compassion they [the oppressed] begin to taste the power of the new day that has come, the restoration of society that God their only kinsman has begun to give. From the lower brackets of society, they are lifted up by Jesus' regal power to the edge of the kingdom and God's new just order for the Creation.<sup>33</sup>p. 46*

Tim Keller, Pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York,

*The kingdom is the renewal of the whole world through the entrance of supernatural forces. As things are brought back under Christ's rule and authority, they are restored to health, beauty and freedom.*<sup>34</sup>

The purpose of the church on earth, according to the above, is to create a just and equitable new world order.

Do you see the difference on this point between the old liberal social gospel and the new? Neither do we.

The only notable difference is that the old defines the kingdom as the worldwide social order itself. The new avoids this error and agrees the kingdom of God is the church, although both converge at the same point. They assume the church is the means by which Christ intends to create the society envisioned.

The new differs little from the old in its view of Christ's mission. Buckley & Dobson assert Christ came ... *to conquer the issues of global poverty, hunger, sickness, injustice, and oppression.*<sup>35</sup>

The new social gospel view of Christ's mission can be summarized in these points:

- The mission of Christ was to establish the kingdom of God.
- The kingdom of God consists not only of the church but also of a new social order.
- The church's purpose is to complete the mission of Christ by establishing a just and equitable society, at least in part, before Jesus comes.

### **What does Jesus say about it?**

Jesus threw a monkey wrench into the culture of his day when he said,

*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, 21 nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you.*  
*Luke 17:20-21*

This declaration must have stunned the Pharisees. They assumed national Israel was God's kingdom, with themselves as the pinnacle through their devotion to the Law. The general population were ignorant rabble in their thinking and hardly counted. When the Messiah came, Israel would become a military power and therefore make the kingdom fully visible.

Jesus contradicted the entire Jewish expectation. In the eyes of the Pharisees, Jesus had disqualified himself from the office of Messiah.

Notice how Jesus did not actually forbid anyone to say, "Look! I found the kingdom! Here it is!" He simply predicts no one will be able to say that for the simple reason it will not be *visible enough* to say it. So, anyone who makes such declarations is mistaken.

Yet it is a kingdom and does exist here and now. ... *The kingdom of God is within you.*

The Greek text for “within you” is wonderfully ambiguous because it could mean “among you” or also “in you,” in the sense of inside a person. The kingdom is first an internal individual relationship with God, then the sum of all such individuals scattered throughout society.

Another quote of Jesus reveals the error of assuming a visible kingdom in this dispensation.

*My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my kingdom is from another place. John 18:36*

To Pilate, Jesus exposed three vital aspects of God’s kingdom. The headquarters is not on earth. It consists of his disciples. Those disciples are not allowed to fight to make it visible.

Although it is not visible, Jesus commanded us to pray it would become so. ...*your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Mt. 6:10*

The time will come when these prayers will be answered. This will occur at his second coming.

The apostles understood this very well. We see nothing from the pen of Paul about the kingdom as a social order at large, nor the church existing to create one. He would surely have tacked on an amendment to his commendation to the Thessalonians were that the case.

*The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. 1 Thess. 1:8*

We would have expected Paul to say, “Now that you have done the first stage, the second is to bring society into line.”

Notice Paul says, ...*who calls you into his kingdom and glory. 2 Thess. 2:12*

Then in 2 Thessalonians 1:5, he adds the future tense, ... *you will be counted worthy of the kingdom of God.* This does not fit well with the *kingdom now* thinking of the new social gospel.

A balance indeed existed in Paul’s ministry but not between evangelism and the establishment of social justice. The balance was between evangelism and the perfecting of those brought into Christ through the gospel.

No teaching from any apostle shows him identifying the kingdom of God with a new social order before Jesus comes, whether in whole or in part. In this sense, it matters little whether the church or the society is the kingdom, nor to what degree society will be renovated. The whole idea is blatantly false.

### **The kingdom goal**

The Apostle John shows us that the kingdom is not a tool for another purpose. It is an end in itself.

*“Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. Revelation 21:9, 10 Then the angel said to me,*

*“Write: ‘Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’”  
Revelation 19:9*

A bride for Christ, the church, is the goal. This bride exists in two parts for the moment: one part on earth and the other in heaven in the form of believers who have gone before us.<sup>36</sup> When Jesus comes he will bring the saints with him and the two parts will be united.

*... and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. 1 Thess. 4:14*

The purpose of the gospel is to complete the bride of Christ, not create a new social order for the rest of humanity.

### *A subtle assumption*

Benefiting society is a natural byproduct of the gospel. Assuming this is the *reason* behind it is a big mistake.

Such talk deeply offends the humanistic mindset of our time. Humanism assumes “man is the measure of all things”<sup>37</sup> and therefore the value of any movement is measurable by the benefits it brings to mankind.

All new social gospel advocates would adamantly repudiate the notion that man is the measure of all things. Would they be willing to repudiate with equal vehemence the liberal view that the gospel takes its value from its benefits to mankind?

Some have bought into the popular cultural mindset without its fundamental premise. This is why, in one of the quotes above, the writer encourages Christians to let people know that with allegiance to Christ they will be embarking on a campaign for a new world order.<sup>38</sup> Is this an evangelistic device the apostles used?

Our *blessed hope* is no longer only the *glorious appearing of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*,<sup>39</sup> but also a *society transformed by his followers*,<sup>40</sup> a world restored to *health, beauty and freedom*.<sup>41</sup>

### *We are not kingdom builders*

A quote from Kevin DeYoung in his book **WHY WE LOVE THE CHURCH**, puts it so well, no further comment is necessary:

*Similarly, there is no language in Scripture about Christians building the kingdom. The New Testament, in talking about the kingdom, uses words like "enter," "seek," "announce," "see," "receive," "look," "come into," and "inherit." We testify about it, pray for it to come, and by faith, it belongs to us. But in the New Testament, we are never the ones who bring the kingdom. We receive it, enter it, and are given it as a gift. It is our inheritance.*

*The kingdom grows to be sure, and no doubt God causes it to grow by employing means (like Christians), but we are never told to create, expand, or usher in the kingdom just*

*as the Israelites were not commanded to establish Canaan. Pray for the kingdom, yes, but do not build it.* <sup>42</sup>

In the context, DeYoung is referring to popular kingdom-now theology and is not excluding our role in making disciples and building up the church.

### **Consequences**

Misidentifying the kingdom of God has serious consequences. The most obvious is deviating resources into endeavors for which the church is neither called nor equipped.

Some believers may be called to fight for social justice or alleviate poverty, since mercy ministry is one of the gifts of the Spirit. Yet these are not the reason why the invisible church is here.

It has a mission and a powerful tool to accomplish it. Making disciples of all nations is the goal, and the tool is the word of God, plus nothing.

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- All Christians agree the mission of Jesus was to establish the kingdom of God on earth.
- The old social gospel defined the kingdom of God as a just and equitable society.
- The new social gospel correctly defines the kingdom of God as the church but considers its mission to establish an equitable society, at least in part, before Jesus returns.
- The teaching of Jesus and the apostles shows such a definition to be incorrect.

## Chapter 6: Jesus and the Poor

Was Jesus our model in feeding the poor? Social gospel teachers past and present answer an emphatic yes.

According to Buckley & Dobson, Jesus...*came to conquer the issues of global poverty, hunger, sickness, and injustice...*<sup>43</sup>

A central theme of the new social gospel is that Jesus was our model in ministering to the poor, and so the church has a duty to devote itself to the alleviation of poverty.<sup>44</sup> The assumption is that Jesus fed them and therefore we should also.

The argument goes like this:

Jesus showed compassion on the poor.

He was our model.

Therefore, we have a mandate to show compassion on the poor by alleviating their poverty by feeding them.

The Chalmers Institute<sup>45</sup> projects this reasoning throughout the first two chapters of their book as a given and persistently calls it a “mandate.”<sup>46</sup>

This syllogism is fine until we add the part about feeding the poor. That is called a *non sequitur*... the conclusion does not follow.

### **Did Jesus feed the poor?**

Maybe. If he did, we have no record of it. Knowing his character, we would expect him to give food to the poor if he had any. Since Jesus was poor himself, we would need to ask what he would feed them.

What about the feeding of the five thousand? Is this proof Jesus fed the poor?

No. Those people were not poor. Jesus said, "Send *the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.*"<sup>47</sup> They were ordinary people from the surrounding towns on a singular excursion. Jesus knew they had means to buy food.

Neither this nor any other New Testament text is proof of a biblical mandate to alleviate world poverty.

### **How Jesus showed compassion**

How did Jesus show compassion on the poor? By healing them of their diseases. But then, he healed them because they were sick, not because they were poor.

The economic question is never an issue in the healing stories. Sick people are often poor because they cannot work. So in a crowd of common people, one would find individuals who are both sick and poor.

Not so in the case of the centurion's servant<sup>48</sup> or Jairus' daughter.<sup>49</sup> These were not poor.

This leads us to a stunning conclusion: Jesus did not commit himself to serving the poor in particular.

Jesus met the needs of people as he encountered them in the ordinary course of life, with apparent disregard of social status, economic condition, religious or non-religious status. Sometimes crowds, sometimes individuals.

**Jesus did not commit himself to serving the poor in particular.**

If they were sick, he healed them. If they were legalists, he rebuked them. If they were confused, he taught them. If they were lost, he led them.

When it comes to categories, it is difficult to pinpoint Jesus' focus to any one human condition.

### **What about alms?**

Did Jesus give alms to the poor as a regular practice? Not personally. We have no record of him carrying money himself. There was a common purse, and we know he directed his disciples to practice alms giving because it was a part of Jewish law.<sup>50</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made it clear he did not come to remove anything from the Law but to fulfill it. Since he fulfilled the Law during his life, taking nothing away from it, we would assume he kept that one as well.

Why this particular law must be transferred to the church as a mandate, without transferring over the rest of the law, is a bit hard to square with Paul's epistles. Making it into a *biblical mandate* as *the* strategy for world evangelism is even harder to prove.

### **Was Jesus our model?**

Sort of and sort of not.

His ministry was miraculous. He healed people. Even if we were to take the 5000 as feeding poor folk, he fed them by multiplying bread supernaturally. He did this at will.

Are we able to do this? Miracles may certainly occur, but not at our own discretion.

In following Jesus as our model of compassion for humanity, it would seem to make more sense to hold large healing outreaches than mass poverty alleviation programs.

We have no clear record of any intentionality on the part of Jesus to commit himself to the poor. Rather, he seemed committed to mankind as a whole, of which the poor are a part.

It would be interesting to compare how much time he spent in the temple and how much with the rich, religious or non-religious. We already know what he spent most of his time doing. It was preaching and teaching. This is what humanity needs.

*So, was Jesus our model or not?*

In some things, yes; in others, no. He was truly our model in his compassion, not our model in the way we go about it.

At the end of his ministry, Jesus gave us his mandate on how to carry out his mission and show compassion on humanity.

*He said to them, Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Mark 16:15*

This is the Great Commission, and nothing else is. Though we would not let a destitute person starve when we encounter one, neither would we call feeding that person *the Great Commission*.

The notion that Jesus is our model in feeding the poor is sheer fiction.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The new social gospel claims Jesus was our model in focusing his ministry on the poor. This assumes we have a mandate to alleviate poverty in the community and in the world.
- No record exists of Jesus feeding the poor nor commanding his disciples to do so as a mandate.
- Jesus showed compassion on people in general as he met them. The question of poverty is a non-issue.

## Chapter 7: The Creation Mandate

What about Planet Earth itself? According to some new social gospel advocates, not only the redemption of people is in view, but the redemption of creation is part of our mission.

The new social gospel frequently uses the terms “redemption” and “restoration” interchangeably.

*God is redeeming people, but he is also redeeming creation, which is outright groaning for its restoration. When the Christian enacts social justice for the glory of God, he is engaging in acts ... pointing to the Christ-shaped path back to the Garden. (Jared Wilson, Gospel Driven Church)<sup>51</sup>*

From the Cardus Institute,

*The Word became flesh, not to save our souls from this fallen world, but in order to restore us as lovers of this world—to (re)enable us to carry out that creative commission. Indeed, God saves us so that—once again, in a kind of divine madness—we can save the world, can (re)make the world aright. And God’s redemptive love spills over in its cosmic effects, giving hope to this groaning creation. (James K. Smith, Cardus Institute)<sup>52</sup>*

The new social gospel teachers justify this thinking by a mandate given to Adam in the garden.

*God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” Genesis 1:28*

According to this verse, God gave Adam two things: an identity and a job.

His identity was the image of God. His job was caretaker of the earth.

*27 So God created man in his own image; in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*

In theology, this is called the *creation mandate* or sometimes, the *dominion mandate*.

When the fall took place, Adam did not lose his identity. Neither did he get a new job description. The fall simply made his job harder.

*Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. 18 It will produce thorns and thistles for you, and you will eat the plants of the field. 19 By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken... Genesis 3:17-19*

This made it hard on his descendants also. We inherited not only his corruption but also his job description. Though the physical creation fell under a curse at that time, we are still obliged to do something about it.

Right here enters another social gospel half-truth. It is true we are still the image of God and caretakers of the earth. The question is, what has God commanded us to do in this dispensation about the *caretaker* part? The new social gospel asserts,

*The Bible teaches us that God is not only redeeming his people but is also restoring the whole creation. (From An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility)<sup>53</sup>*

The new social gospel view is that Christ came as God's emissary to restore the original creation. The salvation of souls and the formation of the church are only a subset of this plan.<sup>54</sup> We are to be as actively involved in restoring the physical creation as in saving souls, according to this theology.

Nothing is wrong with most of the above interpretations of Genesis 1:28. It's the last step that does not follow from the premise.

### **Are we in partnership with God?**

Indeed we are. The error resides in confusing the different ways a partnership works.

One way is like two guys moving a log. Since the log is too heavy for one man, they both pick up their end and move it. Both are doing the same job at the same time and in the same way.

Another is like landscaping. One agrees to mow the lawn, and the other plants the flowers. Both are working on the same project but in totally different ways.

So it is with God's plan for his creation. Our part is to preach the gospel and make disciples of all nations. This is the Great Commission, which is our job plus nothing. If there were more, it would be included in the Great Commission or in the instructions of the apostles.

Here again is another leap. New social gospel teachers take an Old Testament text, insert their own theology, leap over the New Testament filter, and impose it on the church as a mandate. Big mistake!

We will see in the next chapter how God will do his part.

### **Environmentalism?**

The creation mandate supposedly includes environmental activism as part of the church's mission. From Rusty Prichard, Flourish Ministries, we read,

*It goes back to the Great Commission. ...We're to teach people to observe everything God has commanded...showing the world that we are actually serious about the commandments of God.<sup>55</sup>*

He adds,

*We need to more clearly connect evangelism with environmental care. We do this because Jesus is Lord, because Jesus in His work on the cross has reconciled all things to Himself (Colossians 1).<sup>56</sup>*

When these teachers try to justify their thinking from the New Testament, they usually quote from Colossians 1:20. This verse supposedly associates the redemption of the creation with the atonement of Christ.

*...And through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Col. 1:20*

The new social gospel teachers invariably interpret this to mean Christ died to redeem not only fallen people but also the physical creation. This interpretation has some weight because the term "all things" is used four times in the previous verses and refers to the lordship of Christ over all creation.

Let us assume their interpretation is correct and Christ's death indeed *redeems* all of creation. Why does it follow that it is a part of the mission of the church to produce that in this present age?

The resurrection of the dead is also included in the restoration of creation. (Rom. 8:20, 21)

Some new social gospel advocates seem to understand this part of Christ's redemption will take place at the end of the age when God establishes a new heaven and a new earth. This keeps them within the bounds of traditional theology.

This, however, is not the intent in Colossians.

In this context, Gentile believers are now part of God's kingdom along with the Jewish saints who went before. ... *[God] has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light. Col. 1:12* As full members of the Body of Christ, not mere gentiles, these Colossians share in the same kingdom and same Body of Christ as their Jewish predecessors.

This was a controversial issue in New Testament times. The apostles clarified constantly that Gentile believers are members of God's kingdom, equal in status to Jewish believers. In no sense of the word are gentile converts second-class citizens.

There was indeed a separation caused by the fall that must be reconciled, though it is not really the fallen creation in view here. Even less is Paul implying that evangelism is a mere subset of the total picture. It is no subset.<sup>57</sup>

This text is similar to Hebrews 11:40: *God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.*

The key division in the context is between the saved who have gone before and those of us still on earth.

Christ is going to join these two bodies into one, the living and the dead, Jew and Gentile. He will do this because of his supremacy over all creation. The point at issue is the unity of his body, not a creation-restoration mission.

Finally, the text contains no commands for Christians or mandates to the church. It simply describes who Jesus is and what he is able to do. Leaping from that to a creation-restoring mission is a leap indeed.

The whole creation is going to have to wait a while for its redemption. We come first.  
(Rom. 8:19-21)

It is the redemption of people in view here, not the redemption of a material creation. The creation is restored, not redeemed, because the physical planet is not a sinner. Christ is able to do this because he is Lord of all, including the world of Gentiles. This, and nothing more, is Paul's intent.

Is God currently redeeming the physical creation? No, he is not. This is for the future, and it is not a process.

The creation mandate idea is sufficient grounds for a lot of things.

- For keeping our *house* clean, that is, planet earth.
- For expressing creative gifts God gives us.
- For being nice to our pets.

It is not sufficient grounds for adding these to the gospel message, making it incumbent upon the church to lead the world in environmental causes or establishing a just and equitable society. If it were, the apostles would have said so.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The notion of the redemption of the material creation for the present is unbiblical.
- We are in partnership with God for the whole redemption scenario, but our part is to preach the gospel.

## Chapter 8: The Cultural Mandate

The *cultural mandate* is a subset of the creation mandate having to do with the development of human cultures in their art forms, languages, and customs. This supposedly means God commanded mankind to develop cultures...as though we would fail to do that without a command.

More importantly, the new social gospel tells us it is part of the mission of the church to Christianize all cultures in this dispensation through non-violent means. Thus, the *biblical mandate* has two parts: the creation mandate, which is domination of the physical planet, and the cultural mandate, overcoming for Christ the cultures mankind creates. Sometimes the whole package is called the *dominion mandate*.

Doing all that will supposedly manifest the kingdom of God on earth, in large part, before Christ comes.

The *cultural mandate* is a centerpiece of all new social gospel theology because of its supposed link to the *creation mandate* and its association with the kingdom of God.

*Redemption is the reorientation and redirection of our culture-making capacities.*  
(James K. Smith, Cardus Institute) <sup>58</sup>

*We must engage with the entire creation, including culture, for our Creator is deeply engaged with it.* (Corbett & Fikkert, Chalmers Institute)<sup>59</sup>

Quotes like these typify the mindset of this movement. It contains two false premises:

- God is in the process of redeeming the physical creation, which logically must include human cultures.
- It is part of Christian duty to help God in this process by engaging in social justice enterprises and cultural activities.

These affirmations are serious since no such thing is taught in the New Testament.

We could write off such theology as a bit weird and ignore it, were it not so loudly affirmed by key players today. It gets stranger still when we are told that Christ is sustaining and supporting all human cultures and working in them.

*Christ is the Creator and Sustainer of more than just the material world. ... Christ is actively engaged in sustaining the economic, social, political, and religious systems in which humans live.* (Corbett & Fikkert, Chalmers Institute)<sup>60</sup>

This idea is like catching smoke and is not much clearer in the liberal theologians from whom it was derived.<sup>61</sup> It may be due to confusing the difference between divine providence and divine approval.

The Cardus Institute,<sup>62</sup> a self-styled think tank of Christians committed to changing the culture, says,

*While the church is that people who have been regenerated and empowered by the Spirit to do the good work of culture-making, foretastes of the coming kingdom are not confined to the church. The Spirit is profligate in spreading seeds of hope. So we gobble up foretastes of the kingdom wherever we can find them. The creating, redeeming God of Scripture takes delight in Jewish literature that taps the deep recesses of language's potential, in Muslim commerce that runs with the grain of the universe, and in the well-ordered marriages of agnostics and atheists. We, too, can follow God's lead and celebrate the same.<sup>63</sup>*

Christ is indeed sustaining non-Christian cultures, though perhaps for another reason.

*...the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from trials and to hold the unrighteous for the day of judgment, while continuing their punishment. 2 Pet. 2:9*

God's common grace keeps these cultures in existence for other reasons than for us to rejoice in what they are.

Sustaining, yes. For their benefit? Not necessarily. God's common grace keeps these cultures in existence for other reasons than for us to rejoice in what they are.

Does this mean Christians can ignore cultural issues? Are we more spiritual if we disregard the arts?

We live in a house. We keep it tidy because no normal person wants to live in filth. On the wall may be art, and a Mozart minuet playing in the background. None of these elements are part of our mission in life nor constitute a balance in our calling. Neither will we hear a reproach from God if we fail to incorporate them.

So it is with the church. Christians are free to engage in the arts and culture as they wish and may be gifted in these areas. They are also free to disengage from such if they so choose. Those things are gifts from God, not mandates. Christians are not free, however, to ignore evangelism as their mission.

Keeping this in mind helps us see why the so-called cultural or creation mandate is not part of the gospel or of gospel ministry, and attempting to make it a *mandate* is an affront to our liberty of conscience.

### Reading backwards

When it comes to the cultural mandate concept, it is hard to find a better example of reading into the scriptures what is not there. This is eisegesis at its best, reading into the text something from one's own fertile imagination. This is the opposite of *exegesis*, which is the correct way of extracting the evident meaning of a biblical text.

Social gospel teachers of all stamps take Genesis 1:28, load it with their own made-up theology, and stuff it into the Great Commission. Is this really warranted?

Again the principle of progressive revelation comes in handy. If the cultural mandate, as defined by these teachers, were a central part of the church's mission, an equal balance in gospel ministry, then why do the apostles seem to be unaware of it? Their cultural concern seemed to be limited to making sure the gentiles were included in God's kingdom.

The new social gospel has taken this cultural mandate idea and run with it. Some of the ways they have done so sound like a good plot for a sci-fi film. Fun to think about but not reality.

Kevin DeYoung summarizes it beautifully:

*We need to be careful about our language. I think I know what people mean when they talk about redeeming the culture or partnering with God in His redemption of the world, but we should really pick another word. Redemption has already been accomplished on the cross. We are not co-redeemers of anything. We are called to serve, bear witness, proclaim, love, do good to everyone, and adorn the gospel with good deeds, but we are not partners in God's work of redemption.* <sup>64</sup>

In context, DeYoung means we are not God's partners in redeeming the material creation.

*Up to a point, it is okay.*

There indeed exists in the Great Commission a certain cultural mandate, though not to the extent the new social gospel proposes. When Jesus said, *Make disciples of all nations*, he did not mean win a few souls in every country and plant some churches. He meant Christianize all ethnic groups. In this sense we can agree with the cultural mandate.

The problem is in the means to the end. The only means Christ ever authorized for the spread of his kingdom was to preach and teach the gospel. There is nothing about taking over the culture in general via mercy ministry, art forms, socio-political agitation, or anything else.

Preaching and teaching are the means, the only means, and the apostles showed they understood this by the way they modeled it in the book of Acts and discussed it in the epistles. This is gospel ministry. Nothing else is.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The cultural mandate idea, as elaborated by the new social gospel movement, is fantasy.
- The cultural mandate concept supposedly claims there exists in the church a mandate to engage society in cultural issues.
- The cultural mandate concept seems to have its roots in a Dutch theologian who elaborated it out of the common grace idea.

## Chapter 9: Redeeming the Creation

*But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare... and the elements will melt in the heat. 2 Pet. 3:10*

*In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. 11 They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment. 12 You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. Hebrews 1:10-12*

It's called a scorched earth policy. Jesus is going to look at the universe and say, Ok, that garment has served its purpose. It's time for a new set of clothes.

This includes every culture and all its contents. Bye-bye, Beethoven. Sayonara, Madam Butterfly. The bell will toll for thee, Hemingway.

We love the arts. A twinge of pain grips us when thinking the sound of *poof* will be the final note of the Ninth Symphony.

Even more annoying is the realization that our own paltry contributions will go up in smoke. This is emotive only, for we know these will be replaced with a glory that will make every culture seem juvenile in comparison.

Our current cultures are a child's first scribbling. Does this mean they have no value? They are of great value, indeed. Some parents preserve a child's drawings long after the youngster loses interest in them. For that is what our cultures are, compared with the glory to come.

So, we're not entirely sure the Father will throw them all away. It is not our current mission, however, to preserve them.

Redeeming the culture is certainly not part of any balance in the New Testament. It is barely in the ballpark. Though it is indeed in the ballpark, it is not in balance with the gospel.

It's like polishing our shoes. It's something we must do. We're not out to show off our shoes, however, nor prove ours are as good as others. We're on a mission.

Redeem the culture? That's fine. Let's remember, though, that our *mission* is the redemption of the elect.

### **Postmillennialism**

The *creation-redemption* idea is logically linked to a particular view of end-time prophecy. That view is called postmillennialism. The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says, ...

*...postmillennialists emphasize the present aspects of God's kingdom, which will reach fruition in the future. They believe that the millennium will come through Christian preaching and teaching. Such activity will result in a more godly, peaceful, and prosperous world. ... During the new age the church will assume greater importance, and many economic, social, and educational problems can be solved. ... The period is not necessarily limited to a thousand years because the number can be used symbolically. The millennium closes with the second coming of Christ... <sup>65</sup>*

The entire *kingdom perspective* of the new social gospel is, at its root, postmillennial. This puts the adherents in a dilemma. They cannot in one breath tell us we have liberty of conscience in our eschatology and then declare us truncated, weak, or failing in our vision of God's purposes in history.

By imposing the one, they imply the other. If social restoration is the mission of the church today, then postmillennialism is the only logical option. If we cannot accept postmillennialism, there is no need for the new social gospel.

We have no quarrel with anyone holding a postmillennial view. End-time prophecy is a tough subject. If a person can read the book of Revelation and declare the world is going to get better

**The new social gospel advocates are not free to tell us our conscience must be bound to their *kingdom perspective* and not bound to the eschatology to which it leads.**

before Jesus comes, we will not argue with him. We will only encourage him to be consistent and become an advocate of the social gospel. Though we may disagree with him on both counts, at least we respect his consistency.

Likewise, we would encourage him to be open about both and not use the one to disguise the other. Either we accept the whole package or none of it. If the new social gospel is correct, so is postmillennialism.

Let's not kid ourselves nor let others kid us. Postmillennialism is an unspoken driving force behind the theology of the new social gospel. Once postmillennialism is accepted, the social gospel follows. The two are codependent.

The new social gospel advocates are not free, therefore, to tell the church its conscience must be bound to their *kingdom perspective* and not bound to the eschatology to which it leads. They may indeed say this, or even believe it themselves, but do so irrationally and unfairly.

#### **From this chapter we learn...**

- God will not restore this current creation. He will destroy it entirely and replace it with a new heaven and a new earth.
- The creation-restoration theology of the new social gospel movement, as they define it, is absurd.
- Postmillennial eschatology is logically linked to the new social gospel theory.

## Chapter 10: Cash and Conscience

A young lady, professing faith in Christ although still living in fornication, was applying for church membership.

“Can you imagine?” the pastor exclaimed. “One of our church elders was passing judgment on that girl although he himself has two Lexuses in his driveway!” He paused for effect, evidently expecting the large audience to respond aghast. Most of us did not respond at all, so he repeated the illustration with greater detail, having assumed we misunderstood.

We were waiting for a punch line. We saw nothing wrong with an elder suggesting the church board postpone receiving into membership a young lady living in fornication. What the two Lexuses had to do with it was lost on us.

Not lost on the pastor, though. For him, wealth mitigated the right to evaluate others, even when the need to do so is inherent in the ordained office.

Few social gospel advocates would endorse such an illustration, though all would understand the mindset that provoked it. In the thinking of this movement, economic inequality is an *ipso facto* evil. Affluence is therefore a sin. Without this assumption, the pastor’s two Lexus illustration is meaningless.

This presupposition made no sense to most of us in the audience, so we did not respond to it. Knowing it is also a fundamental assumption in most new social gospel thinking, we will not respond to it in that context either.

### **Is "inequality" a bad word?**

The supposition that inequality is a *de facto* evil permeates liberalism. It is the old saw: *profit is a dirty word*. Socialism itself is based on this assumption.

No new social gospel teacher labels himself a socialist, and few are socio-politically liberal. Yet the mindset has filtered down from Rauschenbusch, who was an avowed socialist. Much of his thinking had roots in socialist theory, and the last chapter of his book extolls the wonderful potential of communism. This was written in 1907, well before the horrors of socialism in its Nazi and communist forms and its subsequent failures today.

The idea within the new social gospel movement of a fight for social justice is really an odd syncretism between a liberal socio-political mindset and evangelical Christianity. Some call themselves “progressives,” a term borrowed from liberal politics.

### **American Christians**

The new social gospel message is clear. American Christians must bear the brunt of responsibility for poverty alleviation in the world.

*If you are a North American Christian, the reality of our society’s vast wealth presents you with an enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God’s people are*

*commanded to show compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of Jesus Christ (Mt. 25:31-46). (WHEN HELPING HURTS, P. 13)*

In context, the writers are referring to disparity between America and other nations, not just within the United States.

*The bottom line is that the commitment of American Christians, the wealthiest Christians in all history, are making to the world is just about 2 percent of 2 percent—actually about five ten-thousandths of our income. (THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL, P.217)*

Why American Christians owe more than that to the world remains unclear. In fact, why they owe anything at all is equally unclear. For some new social gospel teachers, the mere fact of economic disparity is sufficient justification for attributing guilt or responsibility.

*We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services.<sup>66</sup> (CHICAGO DECLARATION, EVANGELICALS FOR SOCIAL ACTION)*

### **The importance of inequality**

Inequality is not necessarily a bad thing, nor is equality good. The Bible itself makes this emphatically clear.

In the parable of the talents, Matthew 25, Jesus describes how a master put money into the hands of servants to invest for gain. It is the one who did not make a profit who was punished.

While this parable is a lesson in faithfulness, not economics, it nevertheless shows that prospering through investment is not inherently evil.

If we wanted to stretch this a bit, we could say it indicates a Christian who fails to become unequal when he has the opportunity to do so is unfaithful to his master. In such a case, economic equality would deserve reproach.

A talent was a lot of money in those days. For the servant who earned five talents, it was a lot of profit. Not getting rich would have been a sin for him. So inequality is not, in and of itself, an issue.

### **A sound of freedom**

A new sound of freedom rings through the New Testament that challenges the new social gospel mindset regarding the Christian and his money. We see this in Peter's encounter with Ananias and Sapphira.

*Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? Acts 5:3*

By the words “*belong to you,*” Peter acknowledged the right of Ananias and Sapphira to own property and do with it as they pleased. They could contribute or not. God would have said nothing if they had kept it for themselves. Liberty of conscience in personal belongings was a given in the mind of Peter.

We underestimate how truly free we are in Christ. We have the freedom to give or not give according to our conscience and without reproach from God or man.

Paul makes this point very clear in his teaching on the law of sowing and reaping. In the context, he is talking about the Christian and money.

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2 Cor. 9:6-8*

Paul never commands anybody to give anything. Nor does he suggest God will punish them if they give nothing. He merely elaborates a godly principle. If we sow money for God’s work, we will be a blessing to believers in need and be blessed ourselves.

We are free to refrain from sowing if we wish. We are free to not reap a harvest, either. That is our choice, and God will honor it. We are truly that free.

The new social gospel movement seems to want to impose moral laws from the Old Testament, though the New Testament makes them matters of personal conscience.

### **The right to enjoy it**

Paul’s instructions to the wealthy merit a series of sermons of their own. An often-overlooked principle is found here.

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 1 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. 1 Tim. 6:17-19*

Besides his warnings to the rich to avoid arrogance and be generous, he also tells them this: Enjoy your abundance! ... *God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

### **Entitlement**

The concept of entitlement is central to the mindset of the prevailing liberal culture today. We see it in politics all the time. We resent a person poorer than us suggesting he is entitled to part of what

we have on the sole grounds that we have more. We resent it even further when a politician tells us he is right.

The ultimate comes when a preacher declares the poor and the politician are both right because as Christians we owe it. The cherry is put on the top when the preacher says we owe double because we are Americans.

This is a pervasive spirit in our age, seeping into the church from the surrounding culture. Ironically, some absorb this influence and then say Christians must influence the culture. Who is influencing whom?

Are you prosperous and want to take a nice vacation? Go right ahead. God does not require you to add up the cost and make sure you have spent an equivalent amount on the poor. You are free to make such a calculation if you wish, or not. Let no one say you must.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The new social gospel assumes economic inequality is the product of social injustice, and America must bear a large part of the burden of guilt for this disparity. Christians are duty bound to work toward rectifying this inequality.
- The above assumptions are unbiblical. The Bible shows legitimate ways to prosper.
- Wealthy Christians have a right to enjoy their prosperity within certain limits proscribed by the Apostle Paul.

# Chapter 11: Biblical Mercy Ministry

God's compassion for the whole man is in every book of the Bible. This truth must never be minimized. Social gospel teachers are good at not minimizing it, and this is praiseworthy.

Compassion for suffering humanity is natural for genuine Christians, though not natural to the merely religious. The parable of the Good Samaritan is an example of this.

Mercy ministry is plainly taught in the epistles as a normal part of church life. It is, in fact, a ministry gift of the Spirit.

*...If it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; ...if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. Rom. 12:7, 8*

In Romans 12, the apostle encourages Christians to be specialists. Those with the gift of teaching must focus on that. Leaders must concentrate on leadership. So those with a ministry gift of mercy must be specialists in that also.

Overlapping may occur. A person with a gift of mercy may need to preach once in a while. A Bible teacher may find himself helping in a soup kitchen from time to time.

## **God's social justice program**

As a rule, though, ministers of the gospel are not to be involved in mercy ministry. This statement may stun some people, but it is true.

In Acts 6, the apostles appointed deacons to avoid being distracted from their own calling by mercy ministry issues.

This created a separate office from the ordained minister or elder. Since then, the church has clearly understood the diaconate exists to focus on the physical needs of the church and its people.

People with mercy gifts often end up in the office of deacon. The diaconate of the local church, therefore, is God's social justice program.

Mercy ministry is something every church should do; otherwise, the gift would not exist, nor would the ordained office established to express it. This is different from saying every believer must be involved in it, or else they are failing their Christian duty. In this sense, the new social gospel typically confuses the difference between Christians as individuals and Christians as a body of local believers.

The Protestant reformers understood the principle very well. The Westminster Confession,<sup>67</sup> written in 1648 by 151 theologians, puts it like this about Christians:

As a rule, ministers of the gospel are not to be involved in mercy ministry.

*It is their duty also to come to the aid of one another in material things according to their various abilities and necessities. As God affords opportunity, this communion is to be extended to all those in every place who call on the name of the Lord Jesus.*

*Nor does their fellowship with one another as saints take away or infringe upon any person's title to, or right to, his own goods and possessions. (WCF 26-2, 3)*

Key points:

- It is a duty of Christians to care for one another in material things.
- This duty is limited to Christians only.
- The Christian nevertheless retains the rights to his personal property, and this is not a debt owed.

If this is so, where do we put this balance idea taught by the new social gospel? What do we do with the claim that the gospel has two halves? Or is gospel ministry not holistic without feeding the poor? A good place for it is out the window.

The problem in some churches is not so much a wrong philosophy of ministry but an unbiblical and inefficient church structure. Some elders function as deacons, with deacons functioning as janitors and church members not functioning at all. Members are often not trained in how to minister to others.

In church planting, everything depends on how you start. A Dutch missionary friend working on the coast of Ecuador had an outstanding church-planting ministry in a poor area of Guayaquil. We visited his church one Sunday and were impressed he did nothing but preach the sermon.

Someone had unlocked the church doors, and Sunday school classes were already in process. A man directed the service. The music was well played. Announcements, offerings, and all other elements of service took place properly. Laymen did all this, and nobody was paid a cent.

The missionary explained he required every member to have a ministry of some kind, a job to do. It might be merely arranging the chairs, but it was something. Those who did not contribute in some sort of service could attend, but they were not members.

True, on the mission field we often have the luxury of starting churches with people free from erroneous notions as to what a church is supposed to be like.

The biblical solution to the question of social justice is to raise the offices to biblical standards, not lower the gospel to the social gospel.

It would be tempting to say right here that not a scrap of a verse in the epistles commands Christians to minister to the physical needs of those outside the church. This would be wrong because a scrap indeed exists. We will leave it to theologians to belabor the question as to whether a scrap equals half of the whole.

*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Gal. 6:10*

The new social gospel teachers do indeed belabor it. Long articles have been written on this point.<sup>68</sup> Precisely what that good may be, Paul leaves to our own thinking. Whether it excludes a friendly greeting to a neighbor or includes an orphanage is beyond the scope of the book of Galatians. The ambiguity is probably deliberate.

Most Christians would not exclude any good work from this verse. Nor is it likely any would assume such a work makes Christian ministry incomplete without it. Neither would a sensible Christian read into it a command to alleviate world poverty or straighten out America's trade policies or that it represents the mission of the church.

### **What are church funds for?**

The New Testament indicates church funds may be used for relief of poor members. No policy exists for alleviating poverty in the community.

A church may be led by God to help poor unbelievers, but it is not commanded as a policy. Even among believers some restrictions apply.

Widows, yes. Not all widows, mind you. Only some. (1 Tim. 5:9-10)

Lazy people in the church? Absolutely not. *For even when we were with you, we gave you this rule: "If a man will not work, he shall not eat." 2 Th. 3:10*

In either case, it is charity dispensed, not justice. Even this is tempered with a great deal of caution.

During a famine, the Apostle Paul took an offering from the Corinthians for "*the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.*" No mention of meeting the needs of those outside the church.

Christian funds devoted to relief issues must be administered with caution. This may require an apparent lack of generosity at times. We are accountable to God, not to human perceptions, for how much compassion we may show. This avoids being deviated from our true mission.

### **The gift of mercy**

Shall we ignore mercy ministry? No, it is one of the ministry gifts given to the church for its own benefit and that of others. We shall not put it higher on the list of gifts than it merits.

This gift exists for a variety of reasons. Simple necessity is an obvious one. (Titus 3:4) Compassion, we agree, is certainly central because it reflects God's nature. Another is to shut the mouths of critics because they see our good deeds. (1 Pet. 2:12)

At all times, we must be careful to make clear this central point: the church must never be perceived as a public welfare institution. That is not its mission. Its calling is gospel ministry, biblically defined as preaching the word of God and making disciples, plus nothing.

On a website we found an excellent statement on this point, expressed so eloquently it is well worth repeating here, although we know nothing about the writer. (The following was expressed in light of James 1:27: *Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.*)

The church must never be perceived as a public welfare institution.

The writer's observations are:

“The Christian is to fulfill these responsibilities in his various roles in society: family, business, social, civil, and fraternal. But **the church is not the family** and is not charged by God to raise children.

**The church is not a business**, and is not charged with supplying services or making profits.

**The church is not a social organization** such as the Lion's Club or the Shriners, charged with effecting social change and good.

**The church is not a physical sovereignty** charged with establishing and enforcing civil law.

And **the church is not a fraternal organization**, charged with supplying recreational and avocational activities.

Those who seek to involve the church in any of these serve to dissuade her in her primary work of saving souls! This is a shameful and wasteful use of the institution God chose to deliver His precious gospel.”<sup>69</sup>

We would like to add one more point to this list to discuss in the next chapter: the church is not a failure either.

#### **From this chapter we learn...**

- The church is God's social justice program.
- Ministers of the gospel are not to be involved in mercy ministry except to see it is accomplished within the local church.
- Church funds are for the relief of the poor of the church, with discretion. No mandate from God exists to alleviate poverty in the community or the world.
- The church is not a public welfare institution and must never be perceived as such, since that is not its mission.

## Chapter 12: The Church Is a Success

Let's peek inside the average Bible-preaching church. We find transformed sinners of all stamps: ex-drunks, ex-addicts, families restored, formerly wayward youth, and the worst sinners of all, former arrogant rebels who thought they did not need Jesus.

This makes the church the most outstanding social success the world has ever seen. Is there any other institution that can boast such achievements with people? The church is God's social justice program, and it accomplishes its job when it does what God tells it to do...preach the word.

The church is far from being a failure. One pastor put it well.

*How much stronger are the people of God now than at any point in the history of Israel or the early church! The church should respect herself for her wondrous past, present, and future, realizing that she bestrides history and our narrow world like a colossus.*

*She is at much greater risk from her power than from her weakness. It is a failure of faith of the first order to lash out on her behalf, as if she needed defending; it only reflects the narrowness of our own experience.<sup>70</sup>*

### **Is the church a failure?**

Rauschenbusch thought so, for he referred to *...the failure of Christianity to undertake its reconstructive social mission.*<sup>71</sup> To him, it is a given that reconstructing society is the mission of the church.

The new brand of social gospel also takes it for granted Christianity in the Western world has failed by neglecting to meet the material needs of impoverished humanity.

The problem is a failure to see the church itself as a society. It is the *ekklesia*, as the Greek puts it, those "called out" from the surrounding community to form a new kind of humanity, representing God's kingdom. If we want to know if the church is successful, the place to look is inside, not judging from the outside as to how many poor it is feeding.

### **The bridge between spiritual and material**

It was testimony time during Sunday service in a peasant village in Latin America, where we were helping to plant a church. Dirt floor. Thatched roof. The smells and sounds of farm life. We had just finished singing.

José, about three years old in the Lord, stood to speak. "I have been singing that song for a long time, wondering if it was really true. I have found out it is. Since I've been doing what it says, our family has lacked for nothing. I don't know exactly how it has worked out, but it has." His eyes got misty. "It really does work."

He was referring to a song in Spanish based on Matthew 6:33, *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

On the basis of this promise, along with a few others from scripture, we had taught them biblical priorities. The principles of giving to God's work the first fruits and the pursuit of righteousness will result in God meeting our needs. No, he does not promise riches. He promises enough. The seed of the righteous do not beg for bread.

In another church in the capital among upper-middle-class businessmen, a man stood and shared how his business had been in trouble. He remembered Matthew 6:33 because we sang the same chorus in that church also. He had been a faithful giver and was involved in the leadership-training program as a candidate for elder.

His testimony? Exactly the same as the villager's. Different culture, different society. He was unclear on exactly how it worked, but his business was out of the hole. He was learning to stand on the promises of God.

**What is the bridge for bringing the spiritual into the material? Answer: The promises of God.**

Both of those churches, the village and the city, are successes if that is how they are teaching people to live.

What is the bridge for bringing the spiritual into the material? Answer: The promises of God. This is

exactly what the word of God has said all along.

*But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Mt. 6:33*

*And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. Phil. 4:19*

*Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Luke 6:38*

They really work. Really, really.

### **Village enterprise**

We were sitting around the dinner table in another village, about to enjoy a very fresh chicken stew. The chicken had been alive an hour before. My missionary partner was conversing with the host, Enrique, who was about eighteen months old in the Lord.

"You know," Enrique said, "earning a living here is hard. The only work in our village is in the cane fields, cutting sugarcane for the whiskey business. It doesn't pay well either. I wish God would provide some other kind of work to do."

My missionary friend replied, "Let's pray about it."

A few minutes later, the missionary said, "Enrique, who made this table we are sitting around?"

“I did,” he replied.

“I thought so. You said earlier you made all the furniture in your house. Why not make furniture for the village?”

Enrique thought for a moment and said, “If I give up my job in the fields and it does not work out, we’ll starve. Besides, my tools are old and worn out.”

The missionary said, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll loan you my tools. You can make one piece of furniture and see if you sell it. If it starts to work out, you can go into business until you have money for your own tools.”

Result: Enrique no longer works in the cane fields. He is the village carpenter and doing well financially. Another man in the church, inspired by Enrique’s success, also went into the carpentry business.

Though some church members still work in the cane fields, the church is its own community, and they help each other. They also take turns visiting outlying villages to reach them with the gospel. This is success in biblical terms.

We would like to say the village population reached a tipping point in its understanding and came into the church in droves as they saw the kingdom of God manifest in word and deed. That would be a lie.

The reality is that persecution continues. Some villagers feel the Christians have betrayed the local religion, and rocks occasionally bounce off the building during services. That is the real world of gospel ministry.

### **The bridge**

The promises of God are the bridge between the spiritual and the physical.

Mercy ministry is not that bridge. Some may not see this as “practical.” But then, we don’t see leaven working either.

The best that mercy ministry can do is show that Christians are sincere in their message. This may indeed gain a hearing among some for the gospel but is not the gospel itself nor the norm for gospel ministry.

So the issue is what it has always been: believing God. The problem of the world is not a failure of the church to supply the physical needs of humanity to prove the gospel. The problem is unbelief, plain and simple.

### **Dualism?**

The social gospel has always criticized conservatives for falling into the old Platonic dualism, which separates the spiritual and material into distinct realms, ignoring the practical realities of suffering around them.

This may be true in some cases. Such is deplorable. What is even more deplorable is the new social gospel answer to the problem.

The solution is to do what Jesus said in the Great Commission and what the apostles modeled and proscribed. Go preach the gospel to the community. Teach those who want to hear. If you run into someone starving, give him food, NOT spend half the resources on creating social justice programs in the hopes the world will be impressed and take notice. It won't be and will do its best not to notice.

Enough hospitals, rescue missions, orphanages, counseling centers, and social works of all kinds have been done by Christians so that if mercy ministry could convince people, the world would have been converted by now. The reality is that mercy ministries often supplement gospel work, yet do not produce the wonderfully powerful results the social gospel adherents envision. At times it becomes the tail that wags the dog.

John MacArthur has a realistic approach.

*The church is not supposed to be some benevolent, nonthreatening agency whose primary goal is to achieve prestige, popularity, and intellectual acceptance. Contemporary Christians seem to think that if the world likes us, it will like our Savior. That is not the case (John 15:18).<sup>72</sup>*

We have seen in practice how the world takes notice. It doesn't.

Yet the new social gospel followers are convinced it will be different in the future if the church will only buy into the "balance" philosophy.

*Picture a different world. Imagine one in which two billion Christians embrace this gospel—the whole gospel—... and completing God's stunning vision of a reclaimed and redeemed world—the kingdom of God among us... Might the world take notice? ... [They will say,] Who is the God they serve? And most important, Can we serve Him too?<sup>73</sup> (Stearns, World Vision)*

*This whole gospel is truly good news for the poor, and it is the foundation for a social revolution that has the power to change the world.<sup>74</sup>*

### **A way to measure success**

Did God leave the church with any criteria for measuring its own success?

Here's one: persecution.

The world persecutes the church when it feels it can no longer ignore it. This proves the message is getting through. People cannot suppress what they do not perceive.

The maligning of evangelicals in the media and documentaries portraying Christians as intolerant because we insist there is one Savior are clear proof the message has been heard and despised as always. Mercy ministries and transformed sinners have not changed this fact.

In Christ's communiqué in the book of Revelation to the seven churches of Asia Minor, it is interesting to see what he does not mention as criteria for his praises or rebukes. Church growth strategy is never an issue, nor is appearing useful to the world.

His criteria seem to be two things: enduring persecution and faithfulness to His name. Social justice seems to be glaringly absent.

By these criteria, a church faithfully preaching the word of God, attempting to reach the community with the gospel, and caring for its own is a success.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The church itself is a community, and insofar as it is composed of saved sinners, it is an outstanding success.
- The bridge God has provided between the spiritual and material is his promises, which, when applied, really work.
- Persecution is a good measure of the success of a church, for people persecute only what they perceive.

## Chapter 13: Balancing a Marble

We are stunned. We are amazed. Conservative Christians are embracing the new social gospel without question, despite centuries of illustrious struggle to keep the definition of the gospel pristine.

When new social gospel teachers tell us their gospel is the authentic one, they imply two things:

- In the sense of *validation*. That is, mercy ministry added to preaching proves to the world the message is of value.
- In the sense of a *complete* gospel. That is, gospel ministry is incomplete, especially in evangelism, unless accompanied by material benefits to the world.

Both definitions are false doctrines, leading quickly away from the gospel. Paul saw this happen in his own day. To the Galatians he said,

*I am astonished that you are so quickly... turning to another gospel. Gal. 1:6*

### **What is the *whole* gospel?**

*So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law... Gal. 2:16*

Justification by faith alone in Christ alone is the *whole* gospel, and nothing else is. Full stop. Put the period there. Our sins are forgiven, and God's free gift of the righteousness of Christ is credited to our account. No balance. No second half. Add nothing. Not even good things like mercy ministry.

Any effort to add or subtract changes the essential nature of the gospel. Additions, even good things, kill it. It becomes something else. We cannot balance the gospel with anything within itself, because it has no parts. It is one simple indivisible message: justification by faith alone in Christ alone.

Adding anything grieves the Holy Spirit. Death enters. The only things left are the good works and fine intentions that, in time, fade away just like the gospel they killed.

Right here is the core of the entire new social gospel movement. Every shred of literature on the subject shouts "balance."

The point: Any attempt to balance the definition of the gospel with anything is wrong.

### **Hole, whole, or what?**

Here's how the new social gospel slipped off center:

Many Christians suppose Paul was dead set against keeping the law or applying circumcision. Not quite true. Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:8, *We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.* That

is, he recognized proper ways for Christians to use the law, although obtaining righteousness is not one of them.

Neither did Paul oppose circumcision as such, since he circumcised Timothy for reasons unrelated to justification. (Acts 16:3)

So, why was Paul so upset at Judaizers who wanted to supplement the gospel with those things and impose them on Gentiles?

As Martin Luther put it in his commentary on Galatians,

*...the false apostles had depreciated the Gospel of Paul among the Galatians on the plea that it was incomplete.*<sup>75</sup>

So then, the issue was not the moral quality of what was supplemented, since the law is good. The error was in supplementing the gospel by anything at all.

We have no discourses from Judaizers, though we can infer what they were thinking. We can hear them saying something like this: Surely if the Gentiles were to be circumcised and keep the law, this would enhance the gospel. Isn't this reasonable?

Paul's answer: No! Any supplement implies the gospel is incomplete. This is where the new social gospel is blinded by its own zeal: Serving the poor in the community seems such a wonderful thing!

If these good things would complete the gospel, then what else from the Law could be included? Circumcision? So the gospel is not authenticated by social justice issues any more than by keeping any other part of the Law.

Any attempt to balance the definition of the gospel with anything is wrong.

### What authenticates the gospel?

If Paul went to such lengths in Galatians to defend the sufficiency of his gospel, would he have something to say about how it shows in the lives of those who are justified?

He did. Here it is.

*But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Gal. 5:22-23*

The only authentication of the gospel the apostles recognize is the Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is one of three specific ways the Spirit does his work of authentication. The other two are:

- His convincing and convicting power through the gospel.

*When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: John 16:8*

- The spiritual gifts and ministries given to the church.

*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. 1 Corinthians 12:7 [There follows a list of spiritual gifts.] All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. 1 Corinthians 12:11*

Some of these gifts may be visibly supernatural, others less so. He may even on occasion grant a special sign following, as Mark put it. (Mark 16:17-18)

**The only authentication of the gospel the apostles recognized is the Holy Spirit.**

It would be, of course, a logical and interpretive error to assume the same sign must follow every believer or even that the list is complete. That would be just as silly as assuming mercy ministry must follow every

believer. This is at best a general principle that the Holy Spirit will be present in the church in supernatural ways through gifts and ministries as he grants them. After all, Paul amplified this, and we know the epistles interpret the gospels, not vice versa.

Paul describes one definition of “word and deed” in his epistle to the Thessalonians.

*For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, 5 because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. 1 Thess. 1:4,5*

This shows another take on the *word and deed* theme popularized by the new social gospel. Paul counts the convicting power of the Spirit as the *deed* that accompanies the *word*.

If mercy ministry were **the** way the gospel is authenticated by any definition of the term, the apostles would have said so. In fact, if there were even **one** way the gospel could be authenticated, they would have said so. They didn’t. They only mentioned the Holy Spirit, his convicting power, his spiritual gifts to the church, and his fruit basket of virtues. Evidently the apostles thought this was enough.

### ***Biblical spirituality***

Growth in the fruit of the Spirit will surely result in good works of some kind. Maybe even a life dedicated to the poor. It will inevitably result in *living by the Spirit*. (Gal. 5:16) This life will also result in vigilance against any who would throw Law on us as a means to prove our authenticity.

Galatians says nothing about a life dedicated to serving the poor or the pursuit of social justice as the inevitable result of justification. Yet we hear from today’s teachers, “...a life poured out in deeds of service to the poor is the inevitable sign of any real, true, justifying gospel-faith.” <sup>76</sup>

Did Paul miss that one? The Epistle to the Romans follows the same pattern as Galatians with more detail. For the first eleven chapters Paul analyzes the historical and theological mechanisms

behind justification. In the rest of the book, he discourses at length on how this works out in practice.

In Chapter 12, we see the believer free from the world's thought paradigms in favor of the one in the word of God. In Chapter 13 we see Christians obedient to civil authorities. Chapter 14, freedom of conscience in minor issues. Chapter 15, the importance of missions. Finally, in Chapter 16, salutations are given along with an exhortation to watch out for false teachers who will bring in ideas contrary to what Paul just taught them.

That's it. Full stop. That's how Paul thought his gospel of justification would authenticate itself. A life dedicated to serving the poor? To social justice? A new world order? A visible kingdom? Not a whisper.

### **Is it legalism?**

Yes. Here's why.

Anything that adds to the gospel is by definition a law. It does not matter what the law is. It does not even matter if it is something God commands. If it is added to the gospel to make it authentic, it is a wrong gospel.

If we add material benevolences to the gospel as incumbent upon all Christians to validate it or make it authentic, then we are repeating the Galatian error in another form.

Doing material benevolences for saints and sinners alike is normally to be expected of a genuine Christian. Those things do not define the gospel nor authenticate it, nor are they the mission of the church. *If it is not baptizing and teaching, it might be lawful, it might even be commanded, but it is not obedience to the Great Commission.*<sup>77</sup>

### **From this chapter we learn...**

- The notion of an equal balance between evangelism and social justice is nonsense.
- God's social program is the local church.
- The preaching of the gospel is the only social action program God ever mandated for the church.
- Distress and emergency situations may necessitate Christians emphasizing mercy ministry. These must not be permitted to cloud the real mission of the church.
- The new social gospel movement is a form of legalism because it adds to the mission of the church obligations that God has not imposed.

## Chapter 14: Evangelism and Social Justice

In a subsection of **HUMANITARIAN JESUS** titled “True Evangelism,” authors Buckley & Dobson state,

*Evangelism includes the sharing of the gospel and the meeting of needs. It includes the challenging of injustice and the championing of the oppressed.*<sup>78</sup>

Elsewhere in the book they affirm that *...evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.*<sup>79</sup> This, of course, has an ultimate purpose, which is to...transform *society into the kingdom of God by bringing its institutions and communities into accord with God's will.*<sup>80</sup>

The new social gospel is adamant that biblical evangelism is incomplete without the pursuit of social justice. Any other view is not a fully orb ed perspective of the church's mission.

In the same book, **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, Rod Sider, President of Evangelicals for Social Action is quoted,

*...biblical Christians are supposed to do both evangelism and social ministry.*<sup>81</sup>

*... when it comes to money, time, and resources, I want the church to spend roughly the same amount of time on evangelism and social action.*<sup>82</sup>

Sider assumes two things: evangelism is not a social action by itself, and social action is of equal importance to evangelism.

Keller expresses,

*I propose a different way to understand evangelism and social justice. They should exist in an asymmetrical, inseparable relationship.*<sup>83</sup>

Harvey Conn in his book on evangelism said,

*At Calvary, Jesus united evangelism with His work of restoring society.*<sup>84</sup>

### ***Hidden assumptions***

Apparently new social gospel proponents feel evangelism is insufficient as a social action. Even less would they agree that preaching the gospel is, in fact, the only social action program God has mandated for this present age. This is exactly what the Great Commission affirms.

Curiously, Tony Campolo who is otherwise known for his liberalism, seems to have gotten it right in saying,

*...to talk about any kind of declaration of the kingdom that doesn't make evangelism paramount, is a distortion of the way in which Christ would go about it.*<sup>85</sup>

He could have added that it would be a distortion of the way the apostles actually went about it in the book of Acts and commanded in their epistles. Again, the progressive revelation principle helps us. Do we have authority to appropriate verses from the Old Testament and the gospels and ignore Acts and the epistles?

There is a verse in Acts, however, that seems to contradict our assertion. We must address that:

*In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'* Acts 20:35

Here, Paul is talking about supporting the weak among the *believers*, not a balance with evangelism for challenging social injustices. We do not find him devoting equal time and resources to *social action*. He modeled ministry to the poor within the church.

In the New Testament, evangelism is always portrayed as a verbal declaration. It is easy to find texts showing this. It is harder to find anything non-verbal connected with evangelism unless it is a miraculous healing.

Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, put it eloquently.

*The New Testament is stunningly silent on any plan for governmental or social action. The apostles launched no social reform movement. Instead, they preached the Gospel of Christ and planted Gospel churches. Our task is to follow Christ's command and the example of the apostles.*

*There is more to that story, however. The church is not to adopt a social reform platform as its message, but the faithful church, wherever it is found, is itself a social reform movement precisely because it is populated by redeemed sinners who are called to faithfulness in following Christ. The Gospel is not a message of social salvation, but it does have social implications.<sup>86</sup>*

### **Confusing charity with justice**

Charity is one thing, social justice another. The new social gospel commonly confuses the difference. One blogger expressed this eloquently:

*The Good Samaritan did not stop to exercise "social justice" when he found the man wounded and robbed by thieves along the road ... He demonstrated compassion toward the victim of a crime, not because he was socially, ethnically or financially disadvantaged, but because he was simply a "neighbor" in need.*

*Furthermore, the Good Samaritan didn't go after the thieves to recover the man's belongings, avenge his abuse, have them arrested and start a traveler's protection and possessions recovery program at the local synagogue because that's not what Jesus was teaching His followers in the parable to do—nor was it the mission of His coming.*

*If you steal someone's money, it is "justice" that sees it returned to its rightful owner and/or has you punished—not "charity."*<sup>87</sup>

It is the same with feeding the poor. Helping a hungry neighbor is charity. Starting a campaign to redistribute wealth or correct America's trade policy is politics. The latter is not incumbent on Christians. Presenting biblical texts on charity to rationalize such supposed social justice as a Christian duty is a reprehensible abuse of the word of God.<sup>88</sup>

We concede there may be times when charity and justice overlap, yet we need to exercise wisdom so these never deviate us from our mission. If it is not preaching and baptizing, it may be a worthy cause, but it is not the Great Commission.

We are supposed to be generous with charity, not with justice, for justice may lead to judging or vengeance. These are God's domain, not ours.

**Christian charity is mandated in the New Testament. Social justice is not.**

Christian charity is mandated in the New Testament. Social justice is not. The church **MUST** minister to the poor in its midst. It **MAY** minister to the poor in the community if it can.

### **Justice and Justification**

Some have suggested a link between the doctrine of justification by faith and social justice. This is a semantic error. In logic, this is called *the fallacy of equivocation*, which means mixing definitions.

The words "justification" and "justice" have the word "just" as their root but with different meanings. The first refers to God's declaration that a believer is vindicated relative to the divine law because of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Justice refers to the rectification of an immoral or illegal act in social relationships. Attempting to associate these to support a Christian mandate to fight for social justice is entirely out of line.

### **Correcting the corrective**

In **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, Dobson & Buckley believe "*Evangelism is the sharing of the gospel and the meeting of needs.*"<sup>89</sup> In the context, they mean material benevolences to unbelievers. The book is intended as a corrective to an imbalance...too much gospel and too little mercy ministry. It consists largely of a series of interviews of Christian leaders involved in social work to some degree and would place them on kind of horizontal sliding scale, with the proper balance somewhere in the middle.

Social gospel literature is usually written with this kind of corrective in mind. They want us to see pure evangelism as one extreme on the scale and pure social work as the other, with the truth somewhere in the middle.

Permit a corrective to the corrective. This kind of thinking is actually predicated on a typical Western way of perceiving reality and is very American in particular.

This may be a good approach in politics or business. In theology it often leads to error, and the new social gospel conclusion is one of them.

The Bible is an Eastern book, not Western. We do not get the impression the writers viewed reality like a horizontal scale with extremes to avoid. Their framework was more like a wheel with spokes, with a core teaching in the center and other topics branching from it.

So it is with evangelism in the New Testament. Neither the Great Commission, the book of Acts, nor the epistles justify the kind of balanced scale the new social gospel would like us to adopt. Instead, we get the impression evangelism is the hub of a wheel. Mercy ministries are spokes that may or may not flow out of it. Pursuit of social justice to create an equitable society is not even one of the spokes.

Encouraging one another *to love and do good deeds* is perfectly laudable. (Heb. 10:24) Doing so from a perspective the apostles never endorsed is inappropriate.

### *What ifs...?*

While visiting an army base, we overheard one soldier say to another, “That’s not S.O.P.!” I inquired what that meant. He said, “It means Standard Operating Procedure. The army has SOPs for everything.”

“What about war conditions?” I asked. He explained that in emergencies like war, exceptions arise so often one might confuse exceptions with the rule. The rule is there precisely so the army does not get confused about its goals and purposes and can get back on track quickly when conditions allow.

The book of Acts gives us the norm. Verbal witnessing and the spoken word of God, plus nothing, is the norm for advancing the kingdom of God. This is our S.O.P. As we encounter distress situations or emergencies, here is where the “What ifs...” fit in. Nothing else is biblical, and nothing else is the mission of the church.

Unfortunately, as with war conditions, we encounter a lot of distress situations. Sectors of major cities or entire cultures may be in crisis mode. Earthquakes, famines, or war zones may warrant an emphasis on mercy ministry.

Social or religious conditions in many countries prevent missionaries from preaching the gospel openly. Mercy ministries provide a possible platform for the gospel. These are exceptions to the church’s S.O.P.

Distress situations are not the norm for most of humanity today, nor were they in the first century. Apostolic teams went to cities and people groups that were making a living and raising families like today. Those teams went to synagogues, marketplaces, and forums that ordinary people frequented.

The trend of new social gospel books is to describe cultures in distress, such as impoverished people groups, and accounts of how mercy ministry brought fruitful results for missionaries. In

their mind, this proves that evangelism, gospel ministry, and even the gospel itself are incomplete without mercy ministry.<sup>90</sup>

Franklin Graham of Samaritan's Purse has it right when he said,

*It never hurts to rehearse the Great Commission, 'go into the world and preach the gospel'... Christ did not call us to feed people. Christ did not call us to heal people. His followers are called to take His gospel to the hungry, sick, lonely, tormented and lost...for He is the only One who can quench thirst, alleviate hunger, and touch the soul with the salve of forgiveness, comfort and life."*

This is evangelism's S.O.P. Nothing else is.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The Bible does not teach a balance between evangelism and social justice. This is a fantasy invented by social gospel teachers.
- Evangelism is God's social action program.
- The movement frequently confuses charity with justice or even *justification* with commitment to social justice causes.
- The new social gospel usually confuses the difference between charity and justice.

## Chapter 15: New Testament Verses Misused

At first glance, the proof texts used to justify the movement appear imposing, almost monolithic. In this chapter and the next, we will show the interpretations offered for these texts are an abuse of scripture. Finally, we will reveal a key factor that exposes the entire system as paltry.

### **The sheep and goats, final judgment**

The all-time favorite text of the social gospel, both old and new, is the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25:31-46. This parable is invariably quoted in every social gospel book we have perused so far.

In this story of final judgment, the sheep and goats are divided before Christ, one group on the left, the other on the right. Those who showed compassion on the oppressed are received into the kingdom. Those who did not are condemned to everlasting fire.

Stearns comments,

*“...the criterion for dividing the two groups is not that the sheep confessed faith in Christ which the goats did not, but rather that the sheep had acted in tangible and loving ways toward the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, and the vulnerable, while the goats did not. ... Those who had failed to respond, whose faith found no expression in compassion for the needy, were banished into eternal fire.”<sup>91</sup>*

As an evangelical, Stearns is quick to clarify, *“This does not mean we are saved by piling up enough good works to satisfy God. No, it means that any authentic and genuine commitment to Christ will be accompanied by demonstrable evidence of a transformed life.”<sup>92</sup>*

Christians throughout history have always declared that a genuine commitment to Christ will be shown by a transformed life. Matthew 25 is a great text for exhibiting that. What this has to do with anything else is the question. These new social gospel teachers, however, make it into much more.

Jesus struggled throughout his ministry with callous religious legalists who treated the common folk as ignorant rabble.<sup>93</sup> The above parable shows the difference between genuine believers and heartless religiosity. Jesus said previously in Matthew 23:4.

*They tie up heavy loads and put them on men’s shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.*

In his discussion of the parable in **THE PRODIGAL GOD**, Keller thinks Jesus is saying,

*“...the inevitable sign that you know you are a sinner saved by sheer, costly grace is a sensitive social conscience and a life poured out in deeds of service to the poor.”<sup>94</sup>*

Jesus is simply showing how true believers are characterized by a normal compassion for suffering humanity. Religiosity tends to deaden that.

In the ordinary course of life, we encounter people we can help. Both the sheep and goats ask the question, *Lord, when did we see you hungry...?* That is, while leading everyday lives, they “saw” people in need and reacted compassionately.

This is a far cry from saying they had not been serving Jesus at all unless ...*they had been serving the hungry, the refugee, the sick, and the prisoner...*<sup>95</sup>

It is an unjustifiable leap from this parable to the assumption that service to the poor is a mission to which the church must dedicate itself, that our spirituality is measurable by it, or that it is the other half of the gospel.

It's like saying Christians must keep the Ten Commandments and manifest the fruit of the Spirit.<sup>96</sup> These characterize Christians. That is another subject than the mission of the church, individual callings, or the Great Commission. One might as well say that keeping the Ten Commandments is the other half of the gospel. Or the fruit of the Spirit is the church's mission.

In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus is speaking words of comfort, as Isaiah predicted the Messiah would do. *Comfort my people...*<sup>97</sup> He is letting them know those calloused religious leaders who oppressed them and did nothing to alleviate their misery, would receive their just reward.

In the meantime, kingdom thrones are being prepared for some of the supposedly ignorant rabble that found it perfectly natural to help a neighbor in need. This is the point of the parable and nothing else. Jesus had no intention of throwing another duty trip on his disciples.

Commentator Matthew Henry observed that “*uncharitable indifference to the poor is a sin.*”<sup>98</sup> That is clear from this parable. What is less clear is what this has to do with the mandates the new social gospel imposes on the church.

### Good Samaritan

The second most commonly quoted parable by the new social gospel is the Good Samaritan.

A scribe, an *expert in the law*, tried to trap Jesus into betraying something the law specifies. He asked, “Who is my neighbor?” Luke 10:25-37

Why did the scribe ask that? In Old Testament law, the term “neighbor” generally referred to fellow Jews, members of the covenant community only. (Lev. 19:18) Jesus popped that bubble by making the hero of the story someone considered by the Jews as being outside the covenant, a Samaritan.

On this point, Keller is quite right in pointing out how Jesus extended the term “neighbor” to include those outside the “covenant community,” which today is the church.

*The main thrust of Jesus' famous parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) is that the ministry of mercy should not be confined to the covenant community, but should also be extended to those outside.*<sup>99</sup>

In **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, the authors also show the Samaritan as demonstrating compassion for a person outside his own race. *“Love is taking one step more than you think you can, because the person you are serving can’t take steps toward you.”*<sup>100</sup>

Well said. Unfortunately, social gospel teachers in general tend to quote this parable as one of several pieces of evidence within books or articles to support premises that have nothing to do with its original intent.

The Samaritan was neither a church nor was the robbery victim the world. Nor did Jesus intend this as an example of a social justice enterprise, the mission of the church, or the Great Commission. It lends support to none of these.

Adding our own allegorical interpretations to elements of a parable, then imposing them on Christians without clear warrant, is a sure formula for confusion. The incident in this parable is a singular emergency situation, atypical of daily life. It is designed to expose the difference between a heart calloused by ungodly religion versus a normal person with a sense of compassion.

### **Galatians 2:10**

*All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.*

Occasionally new social gospel teachers mention this verse in passing to show the apostles were aware of the need for ministering to the poor. Supposedly it shows Paul declaring service to the poor as indispensable to gospel ministry.

One website article considers this verse, *...further evidence that when we are serving ‘the least of these,’ we are indeed at the heart of the gospel.*<sup>101</sup> The context shows the writer is referring to the poor outside the church.

In his attempt to prove the congregation must minister to the poor outside itself, Keller uses Gal. 2:10 to say the church should “give offerings and relief to the poor.” He adds, *“So not only individuals but the church as a body is to be involved in caring for and giving to the poor.”*<sup>102</sup>

The context of Galatians Chapter Two shows the opposite to be the case. During his visit with the other apostles in Jerusalem, Paul presented his ministry and the message he preached. He wanted assurance they were all on the same page, *“for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain.”*

Paul said, *“These men added nothing to my message.”* That is, the other apostles found Paul’s gospel to be fully complete and with no supplements needed. After that, they extended to him *the right hand of fellowship.*

Service to the poor was plainly something not included in his presentation of the content of the gospel. Otherwise the apostles would have felt no need to mention it later.

The apostles clearly understood that ministry to the poor did not form part of the gospel nor define gospel ministry at all. Neither did tacking it on at the end of the conversation make service to the poor into a “balance” with Paul’s message.

The apostles did not specify what “poor” meant, whether in the society at large or in the church. We see how Paul’s conduct defined it when he took up an offering for “*the poor saints in Jerusalem.*”<sup>103</sup>

In Acts 14 we read that Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch, “*from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled.*” Their ministry of preaching the gospel and planting churches was fulfilled. No mention of feeding the poor.

Conclusion: Service to the poor is not a part of the gospel. Attempting to use Galatians 2:10 as support that it backfires on the new social gospel proponents.

### James Chapter Two

*Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. 16 If one of you says to him, “Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed,” but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? James 2:15, 16*

*But someone will say, “You have faith; I have deeds.” Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. James 2:18*

James Chapter Two is another popular text for justifying a distorted application of the slogan “word and deed.”

All social gospel proponents, old and new, agree that preaching the gospel alone in evangelism is an inadequate manifestation of Christian faith. This is a central theme in every book we have perused so far.<sup>104</sup> James Two is a favorite text to illustrate this and, in their thinking, is unquestionable.

Let’s question it. Would James exclude evangelism from a list of good works generated by genuine faith?

This exposes a logic error called the *fallacy of exclusions*: assuming the presence of one factor necessarily excludes everything else. It is perfectly clear that Christians who refuse to respond to a fellow believer in dire need prove their faith is not faith at all. This is very different from saying they lack faith if they are not serving the poor of the world.

James is saying genuine faith produces works of some kind or other. We can hardly imagine an apostle saying evangelism does not count as a good work. James uses a physical example of a poor brother or sister in need to illustrate his point in concrete terms.

If a professing believer is involved in nothing at all—neither preaching, teaching, evangelism, nor mercy ministry—we have every reason to assume his faith is a mere pretension.

The issue with James is a faith that shows itself by works versus a false faith that shows no fruit of any kind. The contrast is not between the verbal and the physical. Reading the latter into the text and then applying it as a doctrine is an unjustifiable twisting of scripture.

Paul put it this way:

*We having the same spirit of faith, according as it is written, I believed, and therefore have I spoken; we also believe, and therefore speak (2 Cor. 4:13).*

It would seem Paul considered evangelism a product of genuine faith. He would not include physical work as a necessary component of evangelism any more than James would exclude evangelism as a good work. But then, if this is correct, the new social gospel has nothing to say to us from James Chapter Two.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- Nothing in the parables of the Sheep and the Goats nor the Good Samaritan supports the contentions of the new social gospel.
- The use of James Two and Galatians Two as support for the new social gospel claims goes beyond the intent of the writers.
- The New Testament does not validate the new social gospel claims for a balance between evangelism and the pursuit of social justice.

## Chapter 16: Old Testament Verses Misused

The most popular Old Testament text in new social gospel teaching is Isaiah 58. Here the prophet derides Israel for its negligence of the poor among them. Isaiah exposes the religious hypocrisy of the nation by showing its dedication to fasting, feast days, and external religious trappings, while disregarding God's law relative to the poor in their midst.

Some argue from this chapter that justice is defined as ministering to the poor.<sup>105</sup> Consequently, if we focus on serving the poor, then we are doing justice and being just. If we are not dedicated to that, then it is questionable if we are *just*, or even justified by faith.

This is a half-truth. It is certainly right to minister to the poor and wrong to ignore them when they are in our midst.

The wrong half has to do with the biblical definition of justice. In the entire Bible, moralistic terms always have the moral law as their reference point. These include justice, sin, righteousness, evil, good works, etc. Human efforts, however well intentioned, are neither good, just, nor righteous unless they correspond to God's standards.

At the beginning of Isaiah 58, the prophet refers to Israel as a lawbreaker.

*...they seem eager to know my ways, as if they were a nation that does what is right and has not forsaken the commands of its God... Is. 58:2*

In the rest of the chapter, Isaiah elaborates on what commandments they had forsaken...negligence of the poor.

Helping the poor in their midst was part of the Mosaic Law. Isaiah is rebuking the Jews of his time for covering up their disregard of the Law through other religious observances. Like all Old Testament prophets, Isaiah was bound to the limits of the Law.<sup>106</sup> His role was to rebuke the nation for its law-breaking, of which one command was to care for the poor in its midst.

The moral principle here is certainly valid for Christians today. We are as guilty as the Jews in the days of Isaiah if we cover up a disregard for God's commands through our Christian observances. New social gospel teachers are perfectly correct in rebuking us if they see us neglecting the poor among our fellow Christians.

Unfortunately, they go beyond that by disregarding certain points:

- Neither Isaiah's exhortation nor its antecedent in the Law contains any mandate to feed the poor outside of Israel.

- The new social gospel assumes the church in this dispensation inherits the blessings and curses of Israel. If this is not a hidden assumption, then their exhortations based on Isaiah 58 become meaningless.

Though the Bible clearly says the church is *the Israel of God*, the degree to which the church inherits Israel's blessings and curses is a delicate question among theologians.

So if the new social gospel wishes to apply Isaiah 58 to the church, then it would follow that the church is to care for poor believers in its midst only.

Therefore, ministering to the poor believers is something the church **MUST** do. Helping the poor of the community outside the church is something it **MAY** do, but it is no mandate.

Isaiah 58 lends no support to the new social gospel contentions.

### **Jeremiah 29:7**

*Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.*

This verse is used to support the new social gospel strategy for evangelism. If the church dedicates itself to blessing the city through mercy ministry, the church itself will prosper.

Jeremiah was addressing captives in Babylon. Like a typical Hebrew prophet, he was expounding what the Law already said. God warned Israel that exile would be one of the punishments inflicted for disobedience. During that exile, God would bless them and remember his covenant with them. (Lev. 26:44-45)

What this has to do with a Christian fight for social justice, a supposed balance in the gospel, or alleviation of world poverty is a bit hard to see. Even harder to see is why an exhortation from the Law of Moses, designed to rub the nose of Israel into the consequences of their disobedience, is relevant to the Christian church.

It is good to exhort churches to seek the prosperity of their city and bless it in every way. It becomes dubious when we forget how Jesus said to go about it in the Great Commission.

### **The final blow**

The coup de grace to the new social gospel theology is the concept of covenant. This is the backbone of the whole Bible. God's relationship with man in both Testaments is based on covenant, an agreement between God and his people.

The word "covenant" occurs 264 times in the Old Testament and 33 times in the New. It is linked inseparably with God's faithfulness to his promises, which explains why the terms "covenant" and "promise" occur together in the same verse fourteen times throughout the New Testament.

God is clearly a God of covenants. In the Old Testament, the God of the covenant people promised to supply their needs. He did so when they were obedient. (Deut. 28) In the New Testament, the

covenant God promises to supply all the needs of believers, spiritually and physically. He does so when they are obedient. (Phil. 4:19)

Not a lot of difference there, except a Savior shed his blood to confirm the covenant promises for his people and for those only. (Galatians Chapters Three and Four and the entire book of Hebrews.)

One glaring characteristic exists in common between the covenants in both Testaments: exclusivity.

No injunction in the Law of Moses existed for feeding Philistines. The Law was emphatic about how to care for the poor in Israel. The Pentateuch gives instructions for a year of jubilee for canceling debts among them.

The same is with the “Israel of God” today, the Church.<sup>107</sup> The promises of God in the new covenant are for the people of God, those who have placed their trust in Christ. That is why no mandate on the church is found in the New Testament to feed humanity, fight social justice causes, or create an equitable society before Jesus comes.

We are free to do these if we wish. We are not free to imply they are mandates or part of the Great Commission. Nor is our spirituality measurable by them.

The exclusivity principle renders these proof texts irrelevant as support for the new social gospel. Between this and the principle that revelation is progressive, the movement crumbles.

Understanding these errors need not lead to a compassionless spirit. The image of God in man remains, regardless of any other factor. We *must* preach the word of God to humanity. We *may* feed them if we can, as long as it does not jeopardize our own people by depleting resources necessary to complete our mission.

### **Therefore...**

It is unbiblical to teach that a balance between evangelism and social justice must exist for the gospel to be whole or authentic.

It is unbiblical to teach that the mission of the church is to alleviate poverty in the community or the world.

It is unbiblical to teach that service to the poor is an indispensable part of the gospel.

It is unbiblical to teach that genuine faith in Christ will result in a life of service to the poor.

It is unbiblical to teach that the kingdom of God consists in a just and equitable society, in whole or in part, before the return of Christ.

It is unbiblical to teach it is part of the mission of the church to participate with God in the restoration of the physical creation.

It is unbiblical to associate Christian charity with social justice.

It is unbiblical to declare it is a mandate on Christians to participate in social justice causes.

It is unbiblical to use parables of Jesus to teach that all Christians must dedicate themselves to the service of the poor.

It is unbiblical to interpret Old Testament prophecies, such as Isaiah 58, Jeremiah 29, or the Mosaic Law, to impose a mandate on the church to alleviate poverty in the community or the world.

It is unbiblical to imply that economic disparity between individuals or nations is *de facto* proof of injustice.

It is unbiblical to declare that Christians owe a debt to the poor they must pay through mercy ministry, without which they themselves are unjust.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The movement frequently misuses Old Testament texts like Isaiah 58 and Jeremiah 29.
- The proponents ignore the exclusivity principle in the scope of these texts and apply them for the pursuit of social justice in the society today.
- At first, the new social gospel theological system looms large and imposing. The exclusivity principle in the covenants exposes the entire system to be paltry to the point of silly.
- The movement abuses the word of God at important junctures in biblical theology.

## Chapter 17: Buzzwords

Pouring whiskey into a milk carton has some ethical problems connected with it, especially if one fails to notify the recipient. Slogans help communicate the message of any movement, unless it uses popular dictums differently than normally understood. Erroneous notions get passed off this way to the unwary, like the whiskey in the milk carton.

The new social gospel has picked up a few sayings that are benign in some contexts but should otherwise be avoided by Christians.

### **Word and deed**

If the popular saying, *preach the gospel in word and deed*, means our verbal profession of the gospel should be matched with godly living, it is laudable. If we profess to know the love of God and ignore a needy neighbor, the genuineness of our profession may be called into question.

If, on the other hand, it means evangelism is incomplete unless a material benevolence is granted to an unbeliever, it conveys a false gospel, and a Christian ought not to say it.

If we accept such a dictum as legitimate, we would have to exclude preaching and teaching as a “deed.” Does that make sense? If it does, we must conclude that Paul did very few deeds in his missionary journeys. A few healing miracles, sure. Apart from that, no good deeds and certainly no equal and opposite balance to the gospel.

### **Preach the gospel; use words if necessary**

This ungodly dictum is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, although no evidence exists he said it.

Why is this dictum ungodly? Something vital is missing from its definition of the gospel: the **cross**. Notice how short it falls from Paul’s definition:

*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2*

*Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. Gal. 3:1*

*Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. 1 Cor. 15:1, 3*

The only way the message of the cross can be communicated is verbally, unless in an Easter pageant or such. Since the dictum leaves out the cross, it conveys another gospel than the biblical one. No reason exists for a Christian to utter it.

### **Holistic ministry**

If *holistic ministry* means the church should minister to the material as well as the spiritual needs of its members, it is fine. If it insinuates Christian ministry is incomplete unless accompanied by mercy ministry to the world, it should not be used.

### Whole gospel

Whenever this saying means the message of salvation connects a person to Christ, who meets his physical and spiritual needs, it is excellent. If it implies the gospel itself has a “hole” or is incomplete without a material benevolence for unbelievers, it expresses a false gospel, and Christians should not use it.

### Missional

With reluctance we include this buzzword. Some churches innocently use it to mean *commitment to missions*. The term originated in liberal theology and has been associated with dubious doctrines such as kingdom now, social gospel and creation-redemption.<sup>108</sup> Its core meaning was that a church must meet the material needs of humanity equally with the spiritual. If a group uses this word, it may or may not reflect a social gospel tendency. Since the word never represented orthodoxy, we exclude it from our vocabulary.

### From this chapter we learn...

- We need to be alert when certain slogans and buzzwords are used because they may have a hidden meaning when used by social gospel teachers.

# **Chapter 18: Comparing Old, New and the Bible**

Is the new social gospel closer to the old or closer to the Bible? This chapter summarizes the important issues.

## **Service to Poor**

Old social gospel: God has given a mandate to the church to care for the poor and alleviate world poverty.

New social gospel: Christians should serve the poor as part of their mission. This is a key to world evangelism.

Bible: No such mandate is scriptural beyond caring for fellow believers. Christian compassion allows the church to help when it can. The church is not a welfare society.

## **Creation Mandate**

Old social gospel: Mankind is the caretaker of the earth. Since the fall, believers must work to restore the physical creation as part of the church's mandate.

New social gospel: Same as old social gospel except acknowledging the need for evangelism. Evangelism is only a subset of the creation restoration mandate.

Bible: Man is caretaker, but there is no mandate for the church to restore creation. God will do that at the end of time. The church's contribution is to make disciples of all nations through preaching the gospel.

## **Cultural Mandate**

Old social gospel: This subset of the so-called creation mandate was elaborated by Kuyper after Rauschenbusch.

New social gospel: As part of the creation mandate, the church should be involved in cultural activities to adorn the creation with art forms of a healthy nature. This includes changing society's institutions.

Bible: Christ is the author of gifts to mankind, not just spiritual ones. Christians with artistic gifts should use them for God's glory. The apostles never made a conscious effort to change social institutions.

## **Balancing Gospel Ministry**

Old social gospel: The gospel has two parts: preaching and mercy ministry. One without the other is truncated and incomplete.

New social gospel: Differs from the old social gospel only in giving priority to the Word. It makes mercy ministry an inseparable part of gospel ministry.

Bible: No such balance exists. Gospel ministry is fully accomplished when the Word of God is preached and taught, plus nothing. Mercy ministry should be done when circumstances call for it, to believers first and then to the world. Ministers of the gospel are not to be involved in mercy ministry except to oversee that it is done through the diaconate of the local church.

### **Kingdom of God**

Old social gospel: A just and equitable society is the kingdom of God. Christianity is the means to that end.

New social gospel: The Kingdom of God is the church, though some include the new social order the church will create.

Bible: The Kingdom of God is the totality of all saved, both in heaven and on earth. Its earthly purpose is to make disciples of all nations until Christ returns.

### **Social Justice**

Old social gospel: Conforming society to God's ethical standards through socio-political activism is the church's mission.

New social gospel: Same as old social gospel, but preaching is part of the process.

Bible: Social justice is a concern of Christians but not their mission. The gospel stands apart from social activism, though some may be called to that.

### **Economic Equality**

Old social gospel: Inequality is proof that social injustice has taken place. The United States is guilty of this. Christians should participate in efforts toward redistribution of wealth. Capitalism is inherently evil.

New social gospel: American Christians, because of affluence, have a duty to participate in alleviating world poverty.

Bible: The Bible presupposes the right to personal property, profit, and prosperity. Inequality is not necessarily injustice. Wealthy Christians should be generous and humble yet have the freedom to enjoy their blessings.

### **Mission of Jesus**

Old social gospel: Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God as a visible theocratic social order, based on ethical principles.

New social gospel: Jesus came to establish the kingdom of God in the form of the church that in turn would help establish justice on earth. Christians must participate in that process.

Bible: Jesus came to give eternal life to those the Father had given him. He accomplished this through his life, death, and resurrection. The social gospel scenario of his intent to establish God's kingdom in visible form with universal social justice before the Second Coming is pure fiction.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The new social gospel teachers consider themselves eminently biblical and conservative. Yet their teachings are far closer to the old social gospel than to the Bible.

## Conclusion

We have shown that a version of the social gospel is being revived under the guise of a new emphasis on mercy ministry and social justice. This is a new form that far transcends a call to more involvement with the needs of society.

It is a theological system of its own, a worldview that redefines the mission of the church, the kingdom of God, Christian living, and even the content of the word “gospel” itself. It is almost a religion of its own.

Mercy ministry is plainly taught in the Bible as a gift of the Spirit and a necessary outworking of local church life. Zealous efforts to help the poor are wonderful. When such enthusiasm impinges on the meaning of the gospel or the mission of the church, we have an obligation to become alarmed.<sup>109</sup>

Imposing mandates Christ never decreed that it grieves the Spirit, diverts the church from its calling, and extinguishes the power of the gospel.

The gospel message is not an *also-ran* within a wider spectrum of Christian ministry. It is sufficient in itself to advance the kingdom of God, for it alone is “*the power of God for salvation.*”<sup>110</sup>

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For free books, essays and study guides, see:

<https://espanol.visionreal.info>

For Amazon ebooks and voice books see:

<https://www.amazon.com/author/rogersmallin>

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    <sup>42</sup> DeYoung, Kevin and Kluck, Ted *Why We Love the Church* Moody Publishers, Chicago, 2009. DeYoung is senior pastor of University Reformed Church, East Lansing, MI
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87 Proctor, Paul. Social Justice is Not Christian Charity, April, 2011

<http://www.newswithviews.com/PaulProctor/proctor204.htm>

88 With reluctance, we must say that Keller's book **GENEROUS JUSTICE** is predicated largely on this semantic error. He links the words "justice" with "justification" and attempts to show that service to the poor is owed them as a justice issue, based on Old Testament law and Christians "justified" by faith will do them "justice" by providing for them. However, the New Testament teaches Christian charity not social justice. We say this "with reluctance" because Keller is otherwise an outstanding writer and teacher whom we would recommend in other contexts.

89 **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, p.52

90 Stearns book, **THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL** is based entirely on this premise. Though it is a good read, full of great testimonies, the point it makes is unscriptural.

91 Stearns, p.59

92 Ibid

93 John 9:34

94 Keller, **PRODIGAL GOD**, p.112

95 Ibid

96 Galatians 5:22

97 Isaiah 40:1

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98 Henry, Matthew, p.383

99 <http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-3/the-gospel-and-the-poor>

100 **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, p.71

101 Social Gospel BlogSpot, April 7, 2011

<http://socialgospel.blogspot.com/2005/03/surprising-significance-of-galatians.html>

102 Keller, Tim. **THE GOSPEL AND THE POOR**

<http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/publications/33-3/the-gospel-and-the-poor>

103 Rom.15:26

104 **HUMANITARIAN JESUS** is based on this premise.

105 Keller, By Faith magazine, p.30, Fall 2010 and in Generous Justice; Also Stearns, **HOLE IN THE GOSPEL** p.184; Conn, p.49,76; Corbett & Fikkert, **WHEN HELPING HURTS** p.40,56;

106 *To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.* Is. 8:20

107 Gal.6:16

108 For a history of the word, see <http://9marks.org/article/what-world-missional-church/>

109 Rom.16:17-18

110 Rom.1:16