

The History of the Social Gospel

Generally and historically the Social Gospel can be described as a Protestant movement in the late 19th century and early 20th century with a directive to apply Christian principles to solving social problems. True Bible believers as a part of true Christianity¹ understand that the Social Gospel is rooted in a perversion of true doctrine and practice from the Bible. Sincerity among proponents and seemingly truthful tenets of the Social Gospel do not exclude it from what the Bible describes as apostasy and heresy². Building upon this important understanding and discernment, this paper will serve to examine the Social Gospel historically in its chronology and its theology.

Charles Oliver Brown, a minister and speaker, first used the term “Social Gospel” in reference to the book *Progress and Poverty* (1879) by Henry George, which dealt with economic inequality. Many other social problems, issues, and

¹ Reference: *Beloved, when I gave all diligence to write unto you of **the common salvation**, it was needful for me to write unto you, and exhort you that ye should **earnestly contend for the faith** which was once delivered unto **the saints**. (Jude 1:3).*

² Reference: *For there are **certain men crept in unawares**, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, **ungodly men**, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ. (Jude 1:4). I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ **unto another gospel: Which is not another**; but there be some that trouble you, and would **pervert the gospel of Christ**. (Galatians 1:6-7). Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times **some shall depart from the faith**, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; (I Timothy 4:1). But there were **false prophets** also among the people, even as there shall be **false teachers** among you, who privily shall bring in **damnable heresies**, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction. (II Peter 2:1).*

injustices such as; poverty, crime, alcoholism, racial issues, slums, labor unions, education, and war sought to be rectified by applying Christian principles through the movement of the Social Gospel. Consider the following quotes from Walter Rauschenbusch.

Whoever wants to hold audiences of working people must establish some connection between religion and their social feelings and experiences.

The social movement is the most important ethical and spiritual movement in the modern world, and the social gospel is the response of the Christian consciousness to it. Therefore it had to be. The social gospel registers the fact that for the first time in history the spirit of Christianity has had a chance to form a working partnership with real social and psychological science. It is the religious reaction on the historical advent of democracy.³

Again, this was predominantly a Protestant movement that was most active during the early 20th century. This was a result of a steady decline in quality of living and a steady increase in poverty in the United States during the late 19th century. The Social Gospel sought to manifest itself in the physical (mundane) by being based on the spiritual (theological). So, theologically it set out to functionalize what is called the “Lord’s Prayer.” *Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.* (Matthew 6:10). The world needed to rid itself of social problems by a human / Christian effort before the Second Coming (post-millennial in this case) of the Lord could happen. Adherents to the Social Gospel saw this as a return to the message that Jesus proclaimed during His earthly ministry, at the beginning of Christianity. As well, Modernism was growing

³ Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1922), pp.3-5.

during the early 20th century, and the Social Gospel was kin to it while having great emphasis on social problems. However, the Social Gospel was seen as a competitor to Fundamentalism during this time as well. Most scholars concur that the early 20th century was the peak of the Social Gospel, but the impact of World War I creates disagreement about the movements decline. Some maintain that the destruction of World War I discouraged followers, while others maintain the impact strengthened followers. Consider the following quote from Rauchsbusch.

The Great War has dwarfed and submerged all other issues, including our social problems. But in fact the war is the most acute and tremendous social problem of all. All whose Christianity has not been ditched by the catastrophe are demanding a Christianizing of international relations. The demand for disarmament and permanent peace, for the rights of small nations against the imperialistic and colonizing powers, for the freedom of seas and trade routes, for orderly settlement of grievances, - these are demands for social righteousness and fraternity on the largest scale. Before the war the social gospel dealt with social classes; today it is being translated into international terms. The ultimate cause of the war was the same lust for easy and unearned gain which has created the internal social evils under which every nation has suffered. The social problem and the war problem are fundamentally one problem, and the social gospel faces both. After the War the social gospel will "come back" with pent-up energy and clearer knowledge.⁴

The Social Gospel movement embodied the religious principles / rationale to take action against most social problems, including war.

The Social Gospel seemed to be appreciated greater by "clergy" than "laity." Predominant leaders and figures of the Social Gospel were mostly liberal

⁴ Rauschenbusch, p.4.

in their ideology and theology. However, some were conservative with their look on social issues and problems.

Washington Gladden (1836-1918) was an American clergyman who accepted the pastorate of the Congregational Church in Springfield, MA in 1875. It was during this time that he would be dubbed as a “pioneer” of the Social Gospel even before the term came into use. Gladden would overstep the “normal” bounds of the pastorate and would speak up for the rights of workers to organize unions. This economic time in the country was vastly different from pre-Civil War. The industrialization of America brought millions of factory workers into the cities to earn wages. For Gladden, the “Christian law covers every relation of life” including the relationship between employers and their employees.⁵ His book, *The Christian Way: Whither it Leads and How to Go On* (1877) conveyed this principle, and brought about his leadership in the Social Gospel movement. History regards Gladden as a “founding father” of the Social Gospel movement.

Jacob Riis (1849-1914) was Danish-American and was known for his social reform, documentary photography, and “muckracking” journalism.⁶ As previously mentioned, the urban population was on the rise due to the need for

⁵ _____. “Social Gospel.” Wikipedia Online.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Gospel> (Online: October 2016).

⁶ The term “muckraker” was used in the Progressive Era to characterize reform-minded American journalists who attacked the established institutions and leaders as corrupt. _____. “Muckraker.” Wikipedia Online.
<<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/muckraker>> (Online: October 2016).

workers during this time. This in turn was matched by poverty and squalor in the cities. Jacob Riis made a name for himself by publishing photographs of the urban living conditions of these poor factory workers. His contributions fueled the Social Gospel movement in a real and visual way. Riis is probably best known for his book, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890) that displayed degrading photographs.

The Second Great Awakening during the early 19th century focused not only on the souls of individuals, but also on the social problems of the day such as drinking, prostitution, and slavery. The Second Great Awakening became a seedbed for social reform, and in turn opened the door for the Social Gospel. Another result of the Second Great Awakening that help shape the Social Gospel movement was home mission societies. These efforts were interdenominational and sent people to the southern and western regions of the United States to start churches and address social problems of the day.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) was a Baptist pastor, theologian and taught at the Rochester Theological Seminary in New York; and became a very important figure of the Social Gospel. He is called the theologian of the Social Gospel.⁷ The movement itself was not unified and there were different conclusions among its member. Rauschenbusch voiced the need for a theology

⁷ Bradley W. Bateman. "The Social Gospel and the Progressive Era." *Divining America*, TeacherServe, National Humanities Center. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/tkeyinfo/socgospel.htm> (Online: October 2016), p.3.

comprehensive enough to match the Social Gospel in order for the movement to be effective. His book, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917) met this need by giving definition and practice to the movement. Consider the following quote from Rauschenbusch's book.

The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul that comes to him. But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it. It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion. Both of our sense of sin and our faith in salvation have fallen short of the realities under its teaching. The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscious. It calls on us for the faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of the nations.⁸

Protestantism in America gained momentum with the Second Great Awakening, as previously mentioned, however certain followers focused on the sins of society, such as poverty and inequality, and asked people to seek salvation through building "the Kingdom of God on this earth."⁹ As well, these followers in Protestantism were looking to new 19th century ideas to aid in the understanding of society and the church. Specifically, direct influence came from Germany's Higher Criticism¹⁰ and the book *Origin of Species*¹¹ (1859) by Charles

⁸ Rauschenbusch, p.5-6.

⁹ Bateman, p.3.

¹⁰ In the middle 19th century there was very limited graduate education in America, so serious scholars went to Germany for further training. Higher Criticism was

Darwin. Rauschenbusch's theology of the Social Gospel built upon these influences and solidified the movement. Consider the following quote from Bradley W. Bateman.

Instead of seeing the dislocations caused by industrialism as inevitable or desirable, the Social Gospellers saw them as the result of greed and the collective failure to protect people. Social Gospel leaders such as George Herron saw the terrible living conditions of workers and their families in urban areas as evidence of the beginning of a new millennium in which Christians were called to build the Kingdom of God. Not to make an effort to build this Kingdom in the face of such human suffering would be a social sin in the eyes of the Social Gospellers.¹²

As previously mentioned, the teaching of the Kingdom of God is dominant to the Social Gospel, and is vitally important to Rauschenbusch's theology of the Social Gospel. Consider the following quotes from Rauschenbusch's book.

It will be a similar increase in health when theology takes in hand the problems of social redemption and considers how its doctrines connect with the Kingdom of God in actual realization.

The social gospel has already restored the doctrine of the Kingdom of God, which held first place with Jesus but which individualistic theology carefully wrapped in several napkins and forgot.

Surely theology will not become less Christian by widening the scope of salvation, by taking more seriously the burden of social evil, and by learning to believe in the Kingdom of God.

The social gospel is, in fact, the oldest gospel of all. It is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets." Its substance is the Hebrew faith

being taught in Germany, and is a method of biblical interpretation that argued against seeing the Bible as literally true.

¹¹ This book began the worldwide marketing of the already existent theory of evolution, and had tremendous impact on all society, particularly education.

¹² Bateman, p.4.

which Jesus himself held. If the prophets ever talked about the “plan of redemption,” they meant the social redemption of the nation. So long as John the Baptist and Jesus were proclaiming the gospel, the Kingdom of God was its central word, and the ethical teaching of both, which was their practical commentary and definition of the Kingdom idea, looked toward a higher social order in which new ethical standards would become practicable.¹³

In addition, Rauschenbusch’s theology of the Social Gospel dealt with a “revised” teaching in all areas of Systematic theology (man, sin, salvation, church, Holy Spirit, the Word of God, eschatology, and more).

The Progressive Era that began in the late 19th century, which was a period of widespread social activism and political reform, was fueled by the Social Gospel movement. The coming about of social sciences (economics, political science, and sociology) being taught in American universities was one such result. The leaders in all three of these social science disciplines were known as “social Christians” who saw their work as central to showing the truth about American society and the need for reform.¹⁴ Their success was limited, but regained momentum with the emergence of Progressives in mainstream politics of the country. The most dominant outcome was probably the social survey movement. This was a method of social investigation that was developed in England and adopted in America during the late 19th century. Surveys were made of city / urban areas, and maps were created based on the information gathered. Maps would indicate various “social” data such as; nationalities of people, places of

¹³ Rauschenbusch, pp.17, 21-22, 24.

¹⁴ Bateman, p.5.

employment, locations of schools, churches, bars, and brothels. This information and practice was put to use in the Social Gospel movement to plan for large scale Protestant revivals and evangelism. On the political scene, the Protestant Social Gospel effect on the Progressive Era was at its height during the first part of the 20th century. The three top politicians included President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909), President William Howard Taft (1909-1913), and President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921); in which the country experienced tremendous social and political changes in society. Many historians call this period in the history of American religion the Third Great Awakening.¹⁵ Like its two predecessors, it demonstrated revival and reform; but the biggest difference was it took place in urban America.

Although the Social Gospel movement was somewhat short-lived historically its influence continued to show its legacy. It had lasting impact on mainline denominations, and continued impact in Protestant Divinity schools. The Social Gospel's directive for social reform led to ecumenical cooperation. The second half of the 20th century demonstrates its influence in teaching. Consider the following quote from Bateman.

When the young Martin Luther King Jr. arrived at Boston University in the 1950's to study theology, he found the Social Gospel tradition alive and well. He then used the theology of the Social Gospel to build the foundations of his own arguments for the civil rights of blacks. King was assassinated at the time that he was beginning to turn his focus to

¹⁵ _____. "38e. Religious Revival: The Social Gospel." U.S. History Online.

<<http://www.ushistory.org/us/38e.asp>> (Online: October 2016).

questions of economics justice, but like his predecessors in the late 19th century, he too combined a theological passion for the freedom of America's blacks and for the equitable treatment of America's workers.¹⁶

It is averred that Social Gospel themes learned as a child by President Lyndon B. Johnson allowed him to transform social problems into moral problems. This is demonstrated in his Great Society program, fight for racial equality and social justice, and approach to foreign policy. Today, the Social Gospel is still influencing mainline Protestant denominations like the Evangelical Lutheran Church, the Presbyterian Church, the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), and the United Methodist Church. Also, its influence is evidenced in many service and relief agencies of these Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church. The Social Gospel movement has been described as "the most distinctive American contribution to world Christianity."¹⁷

In summary, the Social Gospel movement, albeit short-lived historically was very influential during its time (the late 19th century and early 20th century); but has lasting impact, even up until today. It was predominantly a Protestant movement with a directive to apply Christian principles to solving social problems. Many men and factors helped plant the seeds, cultivate, and yield the fruit of the Social Gospel; including Washington Gladden, Jacob Riis, the Second Great Awakening, Germany's Higher Criticism, and the Progressive Era. Specifically, the Social Gospel was given unity and depth in a comprehensive

¹⁶ Bateman, p.8.

¹⁷ Wikipedia Online, p.10.

theology developed and written by a leader within the movement, Walter Rauschenbusch in 1917. Key to the practice of this new theology was the return to Jesus' message in the 1st century of the Kingdom of God. Adherents to the Social Gospel sought to functionalize the so called "Lord's Prayer" (Matthew 6:10) to rid the world of social problems. However, true bible believers as a part of true Christianity can examine the Social Gospel, in light of the Bible, and discern it is rooted in a perversion of true Bible doctrine and practice. Sincerity among proponents and seemingly truthful tenets of the Social Gospel do not exclude it from what the Bible describes as apostasy and heresy.

-by Keith A. Main, Assistant Pastor – Heritage Baptist Church & HBTS

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