

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

Scripture Reading: Galatians 1:6-12

INTRODUCTION

1. Have you ever heard of the term “social gospel?” The concept is widely accepted and practiced in the Western world today and the evidence of it is all around us everywhere we go. Today I want to speak to you about the errors of the social gospel. I want to begin with an illustration:

- a. A few miles from here on Rt. 60 in the Toano area is a church bldg called Olive Branch. From the architecture of the bldg, it looks like it was built in the mid 1800's, and they say A. Campbell preached there a couple of times. The bldg is typical of its day – one main auditorium for the assembly and few other rooms. This church bldg was built in a day & age when you could not keep most people away from worshipping God. Churches were growing like wildfire in America. They have been in continuous operation since the church was built, I am told.

Compare:

- b. Over in Roanoke is a community called Cave Spring, where my clinic was located. In that community you will find the Cave Spring church. Their main bldg is about the size of this one we are in today, and the campus is about the size of the campus this bldg here is on. The Cave Spring church auditorium can seat a 1000 people. They have a gym, a gymnasium, a pool, many sports teams, a family life center, a “missions control center” as they call it, a daycare, counseling services, singles groups, diet programs, clubs, and on and on. Pretty much all the same stuff that the community center just down the street has. They have a staff of approximately 50 people, yet they struggle to come up with new ideas and new programs to keep people using their facility, even though many of the people who use it are not even members of the church itself.
- c. What's going here? I will guess that most of you can think of several churches like the Cave Spring church – huge campuses with many social programs and a massive budget, but struggling to stay interesting to the masses. You would think that it would be the little Olive Branch church that would be struggling, but it's not. What's going on here is called the Social Gospel.

2. Meaning of the term “Social Gospel”

- a. The “Social Gospel” is a politically and doctrinally liberal religious movement in the USA & Western Europe that believes the work of God's church is to:
 - i. Eliminate human suffering through social reform.
 - ii. Take a public and activist role in opposing social injustice and advocating for human rights.
 - iii. Serve the perceived needs of the “whole man” by spending time and resources not on “just” the gospel and spiritual matters, but on mental and physical health, substance addiction, lifestyles, and other similar non-spiritual matters of daily life.
- b. Specifically -
 - i. Involve the church primarily, if not exclusively, in political and social programs and agendas.
 - ii. Churches set up copies of human institutions to accomplish this – such as foreign aid groups, political lobbyists, or institutions like the ones I mentioned at the Cave Spring church.
 - iii. Engage in public demonstrations, civil disobedience, and political lobbying to achieve its constantly increasing agenda and range of social goals.

3. **Brief History & Major Social Influences – *Where did these ideas come from?***
 - a. Began during the industrial revolution of the 1800's, really became an active force in the 2nd half of the 1800's. By the 20th century, most so-called "main-stream" denominations were involved in this movement. Began in the so-called protestant denominations, but quickly swept in the catholics and the jews.
 - b. A reaction against capitalism – especially the widespread poverty, crime, and alleged labor abuses of the Victorian era in Western Europe and the USA.
 - c. The rise of socialism and the mistaken idea that socialism was the correct political solution for the problems of mankind.
 - d. As the social gospel expanded, so did its rejection of the ideas that 1) the primary work of the church was evangelism and 2) the primary responsibility of the individual was self-denial, obedience & service to God –ideas which it proponents mockingly labeled as "fundamentalism."

A. Major Points of the Social Gospel.

1. SG theologians said that the church was failing, that its purpose was no longer relevant in the new industrial age. They took it upon themselves to decide this by their own judgment or wisdom and to redefine the purpose of the church. They did this because they mistakenly believed that the church should have been able to prevent what they saw as the materialism, greed & injustice of capitalism.
2. They mistakenly concluded that the only way mankind could hope to be saved and become righteous was if mankind was saved from the social and political evils that made them sin in the first place.
3. They mistakenly decided that individual human salvation was secondary to worldwide social reform, because worldwide social reform would bring millions to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
4. And so, these theologians naively decided that it is the responsibility of the church to:
 - a. End world poverty & human suffering
 - b. End social injustice
 - c. Advocate to governments and institutions on behalf of human rights.

Let's Look at These Points from the Perspective of the Truth, the Bible - the Word of God

B. Christians Are Not to Measure Themselves by Human Standards or Wisdom

2 Corinthians 10:12, 17-18 – "For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.... (v17) But he who glories, let him glory in the LORD. For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends."

C. Is a Work of the Church to End World Poverty & Human Suffering?

1. This is not possible for two reasons. The evidence of about 5000 to 6000 years of human history, and the testimony of Jesus Christ Himself in the house of Simon the leper in **Matthew 26:6-11** - And when Jesus was in Bethany at the house of Simon the leper, a woman came to Him having an alabaster flask of very costly fragrant oil, and she poured it on His head as He sat at the table. But when His disciples saw it, they were indignant, saying, "Why this waste? For this fragrant oil might have been sold for much and given to the poor." But when Jesus was aware of it, He said to them, "Why do you trouble the woman? For she has done a good work for Me. For you have the poor with you always, but Me you do not have always.

2. Brethren, the fact is that no earthly power will ever end poverty & human suffering, including anyone claiming to speak for the Almighty God. If that were the case, His instructions to us would have been different, and would have included precisely how and when Christians were to end all that poverty.
3. No government, including America's, has ever even come close to such a feat. Look at the trillions that the US Gov't has spent on public aid of all kinds since the days of Roosevelt, Kennedy, and Johnson. Can't be done. In spite of this, what do gov'ts always ask for? More Money! What do the social gospel institutions always ask for? More money! It is clear that more money will not solve the ills and problems of the human race!
4. **Does this mean, as some claim, that Christians opposed to the social gospel are indifferent to the poor? Not at all!**
5. The Bible clearly teaches that each local congregation is to take care of the poor and sick among its own number, and the Bible clearly teaches that each of us individually are to always be willing both to show hospitality and to assist people we encounter who are in hardship. In just the time that I have been serving Colonial as your preacher, I am aware personally of several occasions when we have done just that – helped people in distress. I would not be surprised to find out that other kinds of aid have been given by different ones of you, and you simply did it and did not talk about it, as Jesus told us not to in the sermon on the mount.
6. Last year, in 2005, in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the outpouring of aid from Christians all over NA was amazing. I observed this by monitoring the Yahoo email group *Brethren on Line*. Within days, lists of both individuals and congregations in need were published. Immediately, groups of Christians banded together to collect money, goods, clothes, building materials, medical supplies, whatever was needed. Trucks were rented, some as far away as Canada and California, and the people came! Needs were met without the creation of one single human institution, without one "pastor" or local church rising up and saying "We'll be in charge of this, send all your money to us."

D. Is a Work of the Church to Combat Social Injustice?

1. What is or is not social injustice is largely a matter of opinion and changes continually with time and place.
2. The SG preachers say the church's duty is to respond to worldwide ignorance, hunger, disease with "reform" in government, legal systems, education, nutrition, and better health care.
3. Scripture – nowhere is any such teaching found in the Bible! If it had been God's intention to place on earth an organization to combat social injustice, where is the mandate for that in the scripture?
4. The enduring example of the early Christians –
 - a. And why would God have left us in the Bible so many examples of the faithful who did just the opposite – accepted and endured social injustice rather than organize and fight against it?
 - b. Likewise, the early Christians, upon being released from prison, upon being driven out of a city, upon being whipped or beaten, did not organize into political groups or engage in civil disobedience by blocking streets or taking over buildings.
 - c. What did they do? They immediately resumed preaching the gospel!!
5. It is the responsibility of government and social institutions to regulate and manage themselves.
6. It is the responsibility of each local congregation of the Lord's church to manage its own affairs and not to try to enter in to the affairs of others.

E. Is a Work of the Church to Advocate for Human Rights?

1. What is or is not human rights is also a matter of opinion, time, and situation.
2. Scripture – once again, nowhere is any such teaching found in the Bible!
3. If this had been God’s intention, why did God not prescribe in the Bible a specific plan for this as well?
4. Why did Jesus not go to the Kings, governors, and politicians and confront them during His ministry? (This is what the leaders of the SG have done for decades now). Instead, Jesus went to the poor, the sick, the uneducated, and the general population. Why?
5. Because the lowly in life and the humble will listen and obey! **1 Corinthians 1:25-26** – “Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” Paul is telling the church in the city of Corinth that the gospel does not appeal to the high and mighty, to those who trust in themselves and human wisdom.

F. Is It Possible for Religious Groups & Denominations Teaching the Social Gospel to Literally Save the World by Bringing Everyone or Nearly Everyone to Christ?

1. Only those who obey the gospel of Christ will be saved - not everyone:
Matthew 7:21-23 - "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'"
2. How many will that be? Not many – **Matthew 7:13-14** - Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.
3. Does anyone dare deny the truth of these words of Jesus Christ? If someone still insists that all can be saved through the social gospel, what do they say about the millions who lived before the invention of this false gospel 150 years ago?

G. Has Worldwide Social Reform Happened? Have Millions Come to the Gospel?

1. Until recent years, I think many SG denominations would have rigidly insisted YES! Human nature says we must feel justified in what we do, especially if untold millions of dollars are involved. Just look at our government!
2. But more and more denominations are admitting that these great programs with their huge budgets are NOT bringing people to worship, let alone commit themselves to Christ.
3. Yes, *social change* has happened, society is continually changing, but people remain basically the same, with the same strengths and the same weaknesses. Social reform has not happened, especially the silly idea of the elimination of human suffering.

H. What is the Gospel? Is it a social or individual? Is it earthly & temporal, or is it spiritual?

1. We can answer these questions from the Bible, the word of God!
2. The phrase “the gospel” appears 80 times in the NT (NKJV) often as the “gospel of Christ” or the “gospel of God”
3. **Consider 4 verses** – **Romans 1:16** For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek.

1Th 2:4 But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.

1Co 15:1-4 - Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you--unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

Mark 16:15 And He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

4. From these verses we conclude -
 - a. The Gospel came from God by Jesus Christ his son – it is spiritual, divine in origin
 - b. The Gospel is to be delivered to all men for their salvation. It is not for governments, societies, or institutions – it is individual.
 - c. Individuals are to be the stewards of the gospel
 - d. The gospel is about Jesus Christ, it is not about social change.
 - e. The social gospel is not the gospel of Jesus Christ

I. **What does the Bible say about False Doctrines such as the Social Gospel Agenda?**

1. Jesus tells us how to discern a false teacher – by what they produce, by what the results of their labors are - **Matthew 7:15-20** - Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them.

What Jesus is saying is simply that God will not bless and He will not prosper the efforts of those who distort or pervert the Truth, the real Gospel. And so He says look! Look to see what the results of a teacher's efforts are. Then you will know, it is not a secret!

2. Well, what has been the result of the “social gospel” over the last 100 years?
3. Consider the following –
 - a. A diversion of literally \$100's of millions from scriptural uses to create worldwide institutions, do political lobbying, and pay the media.
 - b. The creation of this new (but false) teaching called the “social gospel” along with its own seminaries and adherent theologians.
 - c. The further division of already divided denominations into even more warring camps.
 - d. A tradition of civil disobedience, government interference, & disrespect for authority.
 - e. A gradual movement away from anything related to the Bible, evangelism, and righteous living, and an almost exclusive focus on worldly human problems.
 - f. What is just as bad, if not worse, today that ever before? Social injustice, poverty, greed, human suffering in general.
 - g. What has not been achieved in 100 years?
 - i. The establishment of a utopian society on earth (false “kingdom of God”)
 - ii. The elimination of all human suffering that the SC was supposed to eradicate.

- h. Given all the above, would you say these people are as naive as the hippies of the 60's? Would you say that the "social gospel" has failed?

It is not the Gospel of Christ!! The Gospel of Christ does not fail!!

J. So How Does God View Such False Gospels?

There is one Gospel – and it is not the Social Gospel, because the SG is devised by man and not by God -

Galatians 1:6-12 - I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

K. CONCLUSION

1. Think about the following simple point – if local churches would simply focus on what God has commanded a local church to do– then there is not doubt that the world as a whole would see less social injustice, less poverty, and men showing more respect for each other and their rights. A by-product of people striving to live right.
2. This will never happen when groups calling themselves churches fail to abide by the simple pattern that God has given us in the Bible! Why? Because God won't bless sin. Failing to follow God's Word is disobedience and disobedience is sin!
3. **Ecclesiastes 12:13-14** - Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is man's all. For God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil.