

THE SOCIAL “GOSPEL”

INTRODUCTION

- The term “social gospel” is a term usually used to refer to a Protestant Christian movement that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries
- Its aim was to apply Christian ethics to social problems such as economic inequality, poverty, crime, racial tensions, slums, unclean environment, child labor, lack of unionization, poor schools, etc.
- “According to the social gospel, the betterment of society equals salvation. People are basically good, as seen by the social gospel, and society is gradually becoming more moral. If we feed enough people, educate enough children, dig enough wells, and redistribute enough wealth, then we will see God’s kingdom manifest. If we preach enough love, justice, brotherhood, and goodwill toward men, then the remnants of greed and selfishness in mankind will be overwhelmed and give way to goodness.”¹
- Proponents of the social gospel “de-emphasized salvation, sin, heaven, and hell. They believed that man’s primary issue was evil in society, and only when these evils were conquered could a person concern himself with his own personal sin: as long as man was under evil institutions, he could not stop walking in sin.”²
- “Social Gospel: An approach to the Christian faith, popularized by Walter Rauschenbusch early in the twentieth century, that emphasizes the social implications of the gospel and calls the church to give attention to social action on the basis of the theological vision of the kingdom of God. Proponents of the social gospel assert that the Christian task includes partnering with God in transforming human society along the lines of the kingdom of God, a goal advanced by means of the regeneration of all human relationships. Social gospel advocates call on Christians to work for the transformation of economic structures that perpetuate poverty and injustice.”³
- It was an attempt to bring into practice the portion of the Lord’s prayer that says, “Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10)
- Most proponents were postmillennial in their eschatology, believing that the Second Coming could not happen until humankind was rid of social evils
- According to the social gospel, Christians need to concentrate on the world now, not the world to come
- In their view, the church should divert its efforts from the salvation of individuals to the salvation of society
- The church should be about the kingdom of God on earth instead of teaching about a coming kingdom to be established by Christ
- In other words, the church was to save the world, not be saved out of it
- Social gospel advocates focus on society, arguing essentially that society needs redemption rather than individuals
- Most of those associated with the original movement were theologically liberal clergy who had made social concerns central to the gospel
- While they didn’t necessarily completely abandon the true Gospel, they did subordinate it to alleviating social ills, believing that Christianity needed to change in order to survive
- “That which was unacceptable to modern man, such as the incarnation, the atonement, creationism, inspiration and authority of Scripture, etc., had to be rejected. That which was acceptable and appreciated by

¹ <https://www.gotquestions.org/social-gospel.html>

² <https://www.compellingtruth.org/social-gospel.html>

³ Stanley Grenz and Jay Smith. *Pocket Dictionary of Ethics*, InterVarsity Press, 2003.

the culture was to be retained and emphasized. Western societies had little problem with the social agenda and as time moved forward the church accommodated such thinking.”⁴

- Sadly, the effect of the social gospel has resulted in a complete redefinition of the Gospel such that the doctrines of sin, salvation, heaven and hell, and the future kingdom of God are downplayed

TODAY’S SOCIAL GOSPEL AGENDA

- Sadly, evangelicals today are increasingly adopting the missional, social gospel of liberalism
- But rather than the rank liberal form of it from 100 years ago, the more common approach is to espouse a two-tiered gospel which is composed of the true Gospel of redemption and the social gospel of improving human suffering
- “Most recently the shift toward the social agenda has gained the upper hand in most evangelical circles and is rapidly being given equal status with the proclamation of the gospel message. As a matter of fact, a two-tiered gospel has arisen composed of both the Great Commission and the so-called Cultural Mandate.”⁵
- This has resulted in a renewed emphasis on digging wells, feeding the poor, constructing buildings, providing medical care, and alleviating all human suffering in general
- These are worthy causes to some degree and everywhere true Christianity has gone it has benefited society
- But historically, conservative Christianity has always viewed social improvement as taking a backseat to the church’s true calling of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples...the social agenda has never been an end in itself
- Such is no longer the case in many evangelical circles
- The more contemporary version of this approach began with John Stott in the early 1970s
- At the 1974 Lausanne Conference, 2000 people signed the Lausanne Covenant which declared that evangelism and social involvement are part of our Christian duty; however, the covenant was quick to state that, of the two, gospel proclamation is primary
- However, on the last day of the conference, about 200 attendees drafted a statement that gave social action equal status with gospel proclamation
- “While it was too late to change the wording of the Lausanne Covenant, Stott (who had chaired the committee that drafted the Covenant) publically affirmed the alternative Radical Discipleship position the last night of the conference. It was a watershed moment for world evangelization, essentially redefining the church’s mission. After the 1974 conference, in the face of resistance from Billy Graham and others, Stott continued to press for an equal role for social action in Christian missions. By 1982, the triumph of Stott’s view was clear. In that year he chaired a Lausanne committee tasked to write a report on the subject. Under Stott’s guidance, the report again recommended that the church make social action and evangelism equal partners in the fulfilling of the Great Commission: “They are like the two blades of a pair of scissors or the two wings of a bird. This partnership is clearly seen in the public ministry of Jesus who not only preached the gospel but fed the hungry and healed the sick. In his ministry, *kerygma* (proclamation) and *diakonia* (service) went hand in hand. His words explained his works, and his works dramatized his words. Both were expressions of his compassion for people, and both should be ours.”⁶
- Stott believed that the Gospel includes not only the good news that Jesus Christ has died to provide salvation but also the need to alleviate the social injustices found in our world today

⁴ <https://tottministries.org/the-social-gospel-yesterday-and-today-part-1/>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Joel James and Brian Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions,” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 25/1 (Spring 2014), 32.

- This sentiment has continued today in the most recent Lausanne Conference (Cape Town 2010)
- “Cape Town 2010 must call evangelicals to recognise afresh the biblical affirmation of God’s redemptive purpose for creation itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out, the biblical truth that the gospel is God’s good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for persons, and for society, and for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God’s people... Christians who are working in environmental biology and creation care have a valid missional calling which needs to be recognised, encouraged and resourced by the church, for they model how to integrate the care of creation into what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Caring for creation is an act of fidelity to the whole biblical gospel and the mission that flows from it.... Our missional calling demands more careful and critical consumption, creative production, prophetic denunciation, advocacy for and mobilization of the victims of world injustice.”⁷
- “Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.”⁸
- Francis Chan has also adopted this emphasis, writing in his book *Crazy Love* that the church must work toward the alleviation of “suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America.”⁹
- Similarly, David Platt has propagated the two-tiered gospel in his book *Radical*: “As we meet needs on earth, we are proclaiming a gospel that transforms lives for eternity.”¹⁰
- Tim Keller also embraces the importance of social action as an expression of the Gospel: “The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice and love have won...If Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world...Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things – and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all.”¹¹
- “The purpose of Jesus’ coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it. It is not just to bring personal forgiveness and peace, but also justice and shalom to the world... The work of the Spirit of God is not only to save souls but also to care and cultivate the face of the earth, the material world.”¹²
- Rick Warren echoes a similar sentiment in his PEACE plan for changing the world:
 - **P**romote Reconciliation
 - **E**quip Servant Leaders
 - **A**ssist the Poor
 - **C**are for the Sick
 - **E**ducate the Next Generation

⁷ <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/cape-town-2010/1194-twg-three-wholes-condensed.html>

⁸ <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>

⁹ Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*, 21.

¹⁰ David Platt, *Radical*, 135.

¹¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, 212.

¹² *Ibid.*, 223.

- Rob Bell expressed similar convictions in *Velvet Elvis*: “For Jesus, the question wasn’t how do I get into heaven? But how do I bring heaven here?...The goal isn’t escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work.”¹³
- These examples demonstrate that many within contemporary evangelicalism continue to co-mingle the social gospel with the biblical gospel

SUPPOSED SUPPORT FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL¹⁴

Old Testament Israel

- There are many texts in the OT that supporters of the social gospel turn to for a biblical foundation for social involvement of the church

Leviticus 19:15 ~ You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly.

Leviticus 23:22 ~ When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field nor gather the gleanings of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien. I am the LORD your God.

Proverbs 25:21 ~ If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink;

Isaiah 10:1-2 ~ Woe to those who enact evil statutes And to those who constantly record unjust decisions, 2 So as to deprive the needy of justice And rob the poor of My people of their rights, So that widows may be their spoil And that they may plunder the orphans.

Isaiah 58:10 ~ And if you give yourself to the hungry And satisfy the desire of the afflicted, Then your light will rise in darkness And your gloom will become like midday.

Amos 2:6; 4:1; 5:24 ~ Thus says the LORD, “For three transgressions of Israel and for four I will not revoke its punishment, Because they sell the righteous for money And the needy for a pair of sandals...4:1 Hear this word, you cows of Bashan who are on the mountain of Samaria, Who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, Who say to your husbands, “Bring now, that we may drink!”...5:24 But let justice roll down like waters And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

- How should we respond to the claims that commands to OT Israel prove the case for the social gospel?
- It is true that many similar instructions are given in the NT (Acts 6:1-6; James 1:27)
- However, it is critical to understand that God’s instructions about social issues in the OT were given almost exclusively to the nation of Israel and were concerned primarily with those living in Israel
- “Drawing strictly from the Old Testament Scriptures yields a picture of a loving, concerned, caring God who nevertheless focused attention, with almost no exceptions, on the poor and needy living in Israel under the Theocratic kingdom and the Mosaic Law. In the Old Testament no provisions were made for the destitute living throughout the world. No social outreach to surrounding nations can be found. Therefore, to press into service the social program found in the Old Testament as a pattern for today’s global outreach to the needy is to go beyond what the Old Testament teaches.”¹⁵

¹³ Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis*, 147, 150.

¹⁴ Adapted from <https://tottministries.org/the-social-gospel-yesterday-and-today-part-2-sp-224/>

¹⁵ Ibid.

Jesus' Command to be Salt and Light

Matthew 5:13-16 ~ You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled under foot by men. 14 You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden; 15 nor does anyone light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. 16 Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.

- Supporters of the social gospel claim that the way believers are to be salt and light is through social and political involvement
- Meeting the needs of the hungry, reducing the number of poor, and promoting justice and shalom have a preserving influence that hinders social decay
- How do we respond? → Salt has a negative function, preventing decay and deterioration...light has a positive function, shining into the darkness
- In context, Jesus is talking about the importance of individual citizens of his kingdom living in such a way that demonstrates the power of Christ to change lives and bring light to sin-darkened souls
- The goal of this is to bring glory to God and to draw people to him
- The aim of this text is not to call believers to change society through good deeds nor is it to address all kinds of economic or social problems
- Rather, Jesus makes it clear that the primary duty of believers is to spread forth the message of salvation

The Example of Jesus

- Advocates of the social gospel point to the fact that Jesus spent much of his time with the oppressed of society and healed sick people
- They argue that Jesus not only preached repentance but he also focused on relieving the physical needs of hurting people

Matthew 4:23-24 ~ Jesus was going throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people. 24 The news about Him spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them.

Matthew 11:5 ~ the BLIND RECEIVE SIGHT and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the POOR HAVE THE GOSPEL PREACHED TO THEM.

- In response, we must ask the question, not “What would Jesus do?” but “What did Jesus do?”
- It is true...Jesus showed deep compassion for the poor, sick, and outcasts of society
- But those miracles were never intended to be the motivation for the church to focus on social action, as if the church were to continue Jesus' program of social engagement by non-miraculous means
- Rather, his miracles were always intended to declare that he was the Messiah, sent to rescue the world in sin

John 5:36 ~ But the testimony which I have is greater than the testimony of John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish—the very works that I do—testify about Me, that the Father has sent Me.

John 10:24-25 ~ The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, “How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” 25 Jesus answered them, “I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father's name, these testify of Me.

- “To construe the miracles of Jesus as grounds for making social action central to the church’s mission is to turn a blind eye to Jesus’ stated purpose for His miracles. In fact, Jesus frequently found that His priority ministry of preaching was hindered by the relentless demands of the mercy-seekers, leading Him at times to instruct those whom He healed not to spread the word about His power (Mark 1:42–45; Matt 9:30). Jesus understood all too well that social relief can swallow up time and effort that should be dedicated to preaching, evangelism, and discipleship.”¹⁶
- Furthermore, his focus was always on spiritual needs
- This is why he almost always focused his statements on the fact that he came to rescue sinners

Mark 1:38 ~ He said to them, “Let us go somewhere else to the towns nearby, so that I may preach there also; for that is what I came for.”

Mark 10:45 ~ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

Luke 4:43 ~ But He said to them, “I must preach the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.”

- “Without doubt He often healed the sick, fed great crowds at times, and ministered to the poor and despised of society. Jesus had compassion on the hurting and rejected and spent time with sinners. But it should also be observed that Jesus spent much time with wealthy people, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He ate in the homes of well-to-do tax collectors such as Zacchaeus and powerful Pharisees. He spent time with notorious sinners such as Mary Magdalene but also with religious leaders such as Nicodemus. The financial status and social standing of people around Jesus did not seem to matter – He ministered to everyone who would listen and challenged (and often condemned) those who would not. In short, Jesus was the perfect embodiment of the command found in Leviticus: ‘You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly’ (19:15).”¹⁷
- “It is also instructive to note what Jesus did not do. He healed some sick, but not all. He healed many in His immediate presence, but He established no hospitals or clinics, nor did He eradicate sickness in Israel, or on earth, although it was in His power to do so. Jesus fed up to 5000 people on occasion but He did not start a soup kitchen or breadline. He paid special attention to the poor but He did not relieve their debt or set them up in small businesses or give them loans. Jesus loved widows and orphans but did not establish a home for either. Whether Christian agencies should be established for these concerns today is another matter, but it would be going beyond both the instruction of Scripture and the example of Christ (or His apostles later in the New Testament history) to claim that we are to do so today because of what Jesus did while on earth. Jesus neither commanded us to do such things nor did He do them Himself.”¹⁸

Matthew 25:31-46

Matthew 25:31-46 ~ But when the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. 32 All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats; 33 and He will put the sheep on His right, and the goats on the left. 34 Then the King will say to those on His right, ‘Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. 35 For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; 36 naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.’ 37 Then the righteous will answer Him, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? 38 And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? 39 When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?’ 40 The King will answer and say to them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these

¹⁶ James and Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus: A Response to the Social Action Trend in Evangelical Missions,” in *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 45.

¹⁷ <https://tottministries.org/the-social-gospel-yesterday-and-today-part-2-sp-224/>

¹⁸ Ibid.

brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me.’ 41 Then He will also say to those on His left, ‘Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; 42 for I was hungry, and you gave Me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me nothing to drink; 43 I was a stranger, and you did not invite Me in; naked, and you did not clothe Me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit Me.’ 44 Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of You?’ 45 Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to Me.’ 46 These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

- Social gospel advocates argue that at the heart of true Gospel work is doing works of social justice such as feeding the hungry, clothing the poor, and caring for the oppressed
- These acts of mercy play a necessary role in people being saved
- Perhaps this philosophy is best captured by the mantra: “Preach the gospel; if necessary, use words”
- “Matthew 25 has become a favorite passage for many progressive and younger evangelicals. Even in the mainstream media it seems hardly a week goes by without someone referencing Jesus’ command to welcome the stranger, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. And few biblical phrases have gotten as much traction as ‘the least of these.’ Whole movements have emerged whose central tenet is to care for ‘the least of these’ a la Matthew 25. The implications – whether increased government spending, increased concern for ‘social justice,’ or a general shame over not doing enough – are usually thought to be obvious from the text.”¹⁹
- How do we respond? → critical to correctly understanding this passage is determining who “the least of these” (v. 45) really are
- Clearly, from the context they are not society’s poor and downtrodden as many claim
- Instead, “the least of these” refers to other Christians in need...particularly, it refers to itinerant Christian teachers who were/are dependent on the hospitality of fellow believers
- In v. 45, Jesus used the phrase “one of the least of these” but in v. 40 he used the more exact phrase “one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them”
- The more complete phrase in v. 40 should be used to explain the shorter phrase in v. 45
- Thus, the reference to “one of these brothers of Mine” cannot refer to all of suffering humanity since “brother” is not used that way in the NT
- “brother” is always used in the NT to either refer to a physical-blood brother or the spiritual family of God
- Since Jesus is clearly not asking us to care only for his physical family, he must be insisting that whatever we do for our fellow Christians in need, we do for him
- Furthermore, it makes sense to think Jesus is comparing service to fellow believers with service to him rather than to the general poor of humanity
- This is true because it is the body of Christ that represents Christ on earth, not the poor
- Thus, this passage is equating caring for Jesus’ spiritual family with caring for Jesus
- “Matthew 25 is certainly about caring for the needy. But the needy in view are fellow Christians, especially those dependent on our hospitality and generosity for their ministry. ‘The least of these is not a blanket statement about the church’s responsibility to meet the needs of all the poor (though we do not want to be indifferent to hurting people). Nor should the phrase be used as a general cover for anything and everything we want to promote under the banner of fighting poverty. What Jesus says is this: *if we are too embarrassed, too lazy, or too cowardly to support fellow Christians at our doorstep who depend on our assistance and are suffering for the sake of the gospel, we will go to hell.* We should not make this passage say anything more or anything less.”²⁰

¹⁹ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 162.

²⁰Ibid., 164-165.

- “Christ’s words in Matthew 25 have *nothing* to do with the social justice [proponents of the social gospel] advocate. Matthew 25:34–46 was never written as a blueprint for salvation through social work nor should it be employed as such. It’s not an argument for preaching the gospel through our actions alone, but rather that our actions authenticate the gospel we preach. And those actions must be prioritized towards our suffering fellow believers. So please, care for other believers because Jesus commanded us to. Realize that a lack of care may point to a lack of saving faith. And preach the gospel with words because they’re always necessary.”²¹

THE MAIN ERRORS OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL²²

A Redefinition of the Gospel

- Social gospel advocates describe the gospel in terms of human flourishing...and if that’s the essence of the gospel, then anything that increases that flourishing is gospel ministry
- Thus, caring for the poor, getting clean water to towns, and building an orphanage is just as much a fulfillment of the Great Commission as sharing the Gospel, making disciples, and planting churches
- However, making the gospel about bettering unbelieving society is to is to misrepresent the gospel
- “Is social reconstruction even an appropriate way for Christians to spend their energies? I recently mentioned to a friend that I was working on a book dealing with sin and our culture’s declining moral climate. He immediately said, ‘Be sure you urge Christians to get actively involved in reclaiming society. The main problem is that Christians haven’t acquired enough influence in politics, art, and the entertainment industry to turn things around for good.’ That, I acknowledge, is a common view held by many Christians. But I’m afraid I don’t agree...God’s purpose in this world – and the church’s only legitimate commission – is the proclamation of the message of sin and salvation to individuals, whom God sovereignly redeems and calls out of the world.”²³

An Overly Realized Eschatology

- An emphasis on social concerns springs from a desire to bring in the kingdom now
- Those who advocate for the social gospel argue that Christ came to eliminate the results of the Fall; thus, anything that promotes the good of individuals and society should be embraced as gospel work
- The kingdom of God is brought into existence via the reduction of evil and injustice in society just as much as through proclamation of the gospel, the making of disciples, and the planting of churches
- “To orient the gospel toward human flourishing and general societal improvement is to step into the trap of an overly realized eschatology. It’s a version of postmillennialism. Ultimately, it attempts societal transformation that only Christ’s return can bring. Furthermore, its common-grace approach to the Great Commission ignores the fact that, biblically speaking, one participates in the blessings of Christ’s kingdom only by believing in the King (John 3:3). Making social action an equal partner with the gospel, in effect, subordinates the need for repentance and forgiveness to temporal needs.”²⁴

A Preference for Indirect Gospel Ministry Over Direct Gospel Ministry

²¹ <https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B151009>

²² Adapted James and Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus.”

²³ John MacArthur, *The Vanishing Conscience: Drawing the Line in a No-Fault, Guilt-Free World*, 12.

²⁴ James and Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus,” 38.

- Generally, when social action is seen as an equal counterpart to true Gospel proclamation, actual direct gospel ministry is very limited
- The assumption is that the church must first portray the gospel by means of social action before it can preach the gospel in words; however, very rarely is the gospel proclaimed clearly and boldly
- “At one time, ‘holistic ministry’ was an expression intended to move Christians beyond proclamation to include deeds of mercy. Increasingly, however, ‘holistic ministry’ refers to deeds of mercy without any proclamation of the gospel – and that is not holistic. It is not even halfistic, since the deeds of mercy are not the gospel...Judging by the distribution of American mission dollars, the biggest hole in our gospel is the gospel itself.”²⁵
- For this reason, direct gospel ministry must always take priority over social relief efforts

A Pragmatic Attempt to Win the Approval of the World

- As the Gospel has become increasingly offensive to this postmodern world, the church has looked for ways to be accepted and no longer labeled as unloving and intolerant
- Social involvement is one way that many evangelicals have found to overcome the hostility of the world
- “Social action is safe. It avoids the scandal of the gospel. It allows churches to be active and to be accepted by the world. Unfortunately, a spirit of pragmatism (and a corresponding spirit of doubt about the power of the gospel) appears to lie behind much of the social justice movement...Today’s socially conscious unbelievers will be wooed to Christianity by means of highly visible social relief projects – examples of human caring that they can applaud and endorse even as unregenerate people. Once the social justice agenda has made them fond of the church, then they can be nudged toward Christ. It’s the new pragmatism: the gospel needs a lead-in because it will never succeed by itself.”²⁶
- The danger of such an approach is two-fold: 1) It moves the Gospel to second place; 2) The medium of social action becomes the message

A Blindness to How the Early Church Fulfilled the Great Commission

- Jesus charge given in the Great Commission was clearly one of making disciples

Matthew 28:19-20 ~ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

Luke 24:46-48 ~ and He said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, 47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. 48 “You are witnesses of these things.

- A quick survey of the book of Acts reveals that the apostles and early church leaders fulfilled the Great Commission, not by social action endeavors, but by the preaching of the Word for the salvation of sinners and the edification of the saints
- “What about the apostles’ social action endeavors? In fact, the only church-organized relief projects mentioned in Acts and the Epistles took place within the church, including the various financial gifts sent by the Greek churches to the impoverished believers in Jerusalem (Acts 11:29–30; Rom 15:25–26; Gal 2:10)

²⁵ D. A. Carson, *The Hole in our Gospel*.

²⁶ James and Biedebach, “Regaining Our Focus,” 40.

and widow care (Acts 6:1–6; 1 Tim 5:3–16). In short, the deacons of Acts 6 were ministers to the church, not missionaries to the world... This doesn't mean that the early Christians showed no concern for the needy outside the church... Loving the hurting people around us is a normal part of daily Christian living, an expected fruit of gospel proclamation. However, there is no evidence that the apostles tried to make social relief the face of the church or that social action projects were part of their Great Commission strategy."²⁷

- “We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.”²⁸

A Difference Between Instructions to Individual Believers and Those to the Church

- Christians are to be loving and generous to all people

Luke 10:30-37 ~ Jesus replied and said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among robbers, and they stripped him and beat him, and went away leaving him half dead. 31 And by chance a priest was going down on that road, and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. 32 Likewise a Levite also, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. 33 But a Samaritan, who was on a journey, came upon him; and when he saw him, he felt compassion, 34 and came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I return I will repay you.’ 36 Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robbers’ hands?” 10:37 And he said, “The one who showed mercy toward him.” Then Jesus said to him, “Go and do the same.”

Galatians 6:10 ~ So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

- However, the “subject of society is seldom addressed, but when it is the emphasis is on being excellent representatives of Christ to the world (salt and light) (Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pet 2:11-15; Titus 3:1). Specifically, Christians were taught to take care of their (Christians’) poor (Acts 6:1-7; I Timothy 5:3-16; 1 John 3:17; James 2:15-17), handle their own legal differences (1 Cor 6:1-8), and discipline their rebellious people (1 Cor 5). But they were not instructed to take care of society’s poor, handle its legal issues or discipline its sinners.”²⁹
- Additionally, the mission of the church does not include attempting to remedy the consequences of the sin of unbelieving humanity through social action
- Instead, the primary mission of the church is to uproot sin itself through the gospel
- In other words, personal expressions of mercy and church-organized social action programs are not the same thing
- “The Scriptures are clear that God’s people must do good, show mercy, care for the poor, and be concerned with matters of justice in every aspect of society. But there is never any indication that the church as an institution is to see this as its task.”³⁰
- Clearly, the social gospel is not the true Gospel and the church was never given the task of transforming culture through social efforts
- As believers, we should be salt and light and seek to minister to the lost around us through acts of genuine care and compassion
- But none of this must replace the true Gospel or the church’s divine mandate to make disciples

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, 26.

²⁹ https://tottministries.org/the-social-gospel-yesterday-and-today-part-2-sp-224/#_edn25

³⁰ Ibid.