

The Shameful Social Gospel

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"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth." [Romans 1:16](#)

For various reasons, Christians of different sorts have tinkered with "the gospel of Christ" as though it needed adjustments. Not major alterations, most will tell you, but just some minor tweaking here and there. The changes often begin by one's declaring that there is no real change involved, simply a shift in emphasis. Yet, no matter what the rationale may be, the end result is being "ashamed of the gospel of Christ."

To be "ashamed of the gospel" covers a number of attitudes from being totally embarrassed by it to thinking one can improve upon it a bit to make it more acceptable. One example of the former is the recent claim by an Emerging Church author that the teaching regarding Christ's paying the full penalty for the sins of mankind through His substitutionary death on the Cross is irrelevant and viewed as "a form of cosmic child abuse." More subtle examples include trying to make the gospel seem less exclusive, and the "softening" of the consequences from which the gospel saves mankind, such as the wrath of God and the Lake of Fire.

Prevalent among many religious leaders who profess to be evangelical Christians (i.e., Bible-believing Christians) is the promotion of a gospel that is acceptable to, and even admired by, people throughout the world. Today, the most popular form of this is the social gospel.

Although the social gospel is common to many new movements among evangelicals, it is not new to Christendom. It had its modern beginning in the late 1800s, when it developed as a way to address the various conditions in society that caused suffering among the populace. The belief was, and is, that Christianity will attract followers when it demonstrates its love for mankind. This could be best accomplished by helping to alleviate the suffering of humanity caused by poverty, disease, oppressive work conditions, society's injustices, civil rights abuses, etc. Those who fostered this movement also believed that relief from their conditions of misery would improve the moral nature of those so deprived.

Another driving force behind the introduction of the social gospel was the eschatological, or end times, views of those involved. Nearly all were amillennialists or post-millennialists. The former believed that they were living in a (symbolic thousand-year) time period in which Christ was ruling from heaven, Satan was bound, and they were God's workers appointed to bring about a kingdom on earth worthy of Christ. Post-millennialists also believed they were in the Millennium, and their goal was to restore the earth to its Eden-like state in order for Christ to return from Heaven to rule over His earthly kingdom.

The social gospel, in all of its assorted applications, helped to produce some achievements (child labor laws and women's suffrage) that have contributed to the welfare of society. It became the primary gospel of liberal theologians and mainline denominations throughout the 20th century. Although its popularity alternately rose and fell as it ran its course, it was often energized by the combination of religion and liberal politics, e.g., Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement. Midway through the last century and later, the social gospel influenced developments such as the liberation theology of Roman Catholicism and the socialism of left-leaning evangelical Christians. It is in this present century, however, that the social gospel has gotten its most extensive promotion. Two men, both professing to be evangelicals, have led the way.

George W. Bush began his presidency by instituting the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. His objective was to provide government funding for local churches, synagogues, mosques, and other religious ministries that were providing a social service to their community. Bush believed that programs run by "people of faith" could be at least as effective as secular organizations in helping the needy, and perhaps more so because of their moral commitment to "love and serve their neighbor." As he prepares to leave office, he has declared that he considers his Faith-Based program to be one of the foremost achievements in his tenure as president. Presidential candidate Barack Obama stated that, should he win the election, he will continue the Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Rick Warren, the mega-selling author of *The Purpose-Driven Church* and *The Purpose-Driven Life*, has taken the social gospel to where it's never been before: not only worldwide but into the thinking and planning of world leaders. Warren credits business management genius Peter Drucker with the basic concept that he is executing. Drucker believed that the social problems of poverty, disease, hunger, and ignorance were beyond the capability of governments or multinational corporations to solve. To Drucker, the most hopeful solution would be found in the nonprofit sector of society, especially churches, with their hosts of volunteers dedicated to alleviating the social ills of those in their community.

Warren, acknowledging the late Drucker as his mentor for 20 years, certainly learned his lessons. His two *Purpose-Driven* books, translated into 57 languages and selling a combined 30 million copies, reveal the game plan for what Drucker had envisioned. Warren had local churches implement this vision from his books through his enormously popular 40 Days of Purpose and 40 Days of Community programs. To date, 500,000 churches in 162 nations have become part of his network. They form the basis for his Global P.E.A.C.E. Plan.

What is his P.E.A.C.E. plan? Warren's presentation of the plan to the church is found at www.thepeaceplan.com. On video, he identifies the "giants" of humanity's ills as spiritual emptiness, self-centered leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy, which he hopes to eradicate by (P)lanting churches, (E)quipping leaders, (A)ssisting the poor, (C)aring for the sick, and (E)ducating the next generation.

Warren uses the analogy of a three-legged stool to illustrate the best way to slay these giants. Two of the legs are governments and business, which have thus far been ineffective, and, just like a two-legged stool, cannot stand. The third very necessary leg is the church. "There are thousands of villages in the world that have no school, no clinic, no business, no government—but they have a church. What would happen if we could mobilize churches to address those five global giants?" Warren reasons that since there are 2.3 billion Christians worldwide, they could potentially form what President Bush has termed a vast "army of compassion" of "people of faith" such as the world has not yet experienced.

In addition to the *Christian version*, Warren has an expanded *inclusive version* of the P.E.A.C.E. plan that has drawn support and praise from political and religious leaders and celebrities worldwide. At the 2008 World Economic Forum, he declared, "The future of the world is not secularism, but religious pluralism...." Referring to the ills besetting the world, he declared, "We cannot solve these problems without involving people of faith and their religious institutions. It isn't going to happen any other way. On this planet there are about 20 million Jews, there are about 600 million Buddhists, there are about 800 million Hindus, there are over 1 billion Muslims, and there are 2.3 billion Christians. If you take people of faith out of the equation, you have ruled out five-sixths of the world. And if we only leave it up to secular people to solve these major problems, it isn't going to happen" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGytW4yh0C8>).

To accommodate working with people of all faiths Warren has revised the "P" in his P.E.A.C.E. from "planting evangelical churches" to "(P)romoting reconciliation" and the "E" from "equipping

[church] leaders" to "(E)quipping ethical leaders." Warren has elsewhere acknowledged his practical shift to pluralism: "Who's the man of peace in any village—or it might be a woman of peace—who has the most respect?...They don't have to be Christian. In fact, they could be Muslim, but they're open and they're influential, and you work with them to attack the five giants [to which he has added global warming]." He quotes a secular leader who affirms what he's doing: "I get it, Rick. Houses of worship are the distribution centers for all we need to do."

Warren has joined the advisory board of Faith Foundation, established by former British prime minister and recent Roman Catholic convert Tony Blair. The Foundation's goal is to further understanding and cooperation among the six leading faiths: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jewish. How does the Cross fit into this ecumenical gathering? It doesn't. Critical to achieving that ecumenical goal is the elimination of the problem of *exclusive* religions, a concern articulated by one of the World Economic Forum panelists: "There are some religious leaders in different religious faiths who, in seeking to affirm their own faith and its authenticity and legitimacy...deny other people their faith with its legitimacy and authenticity. I don't think we can keep going like this without...spawning the kind of hatred we are all here to try and solve. I think it's up to us to hold the clergy's feet to the fire of whatever faith. That we insist that we affirm what is beautiful in our own traditions while at the same time refusing to denigrate other faith traditions by suggesting that they are illegitimate, or consigned to some kind of evil end."

The Bible declares all the religions of the world to be "illegitimate" and "consigned" not to "some kind of evil end" but to their *just* end. Only belief in the biblical gospel saves humanity: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name [Jesus Christ] under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved;...He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" ([Acts 4:12](#); [John 3:36](#)).

The history of the social gospel is, in nearly every case, a sincere attempt by Christians to do those things that they believe will honor God and benefit humanity. In every case, however, the practical working out of "benefiting humanity" has compromised biblical faith and dishonored God. Why is that? God's Word gives no commission to the church to fix the problems of the world. Those who attempt to do so are starting out under a false premise, "...a way which seemeth right unto a man," not *God's* way. So where can it go from there? "The end thereof are the ways of death," i.e., destruction ([Proverbs 14:12](#)). Furthermore, the problems of the world are all *symptoms*. The root cause is sin.

What percentage of the "people of faith," who comprise all religions and make up five-sixths of the world's population, understand and accept the gospel—the only cure for sin? Or how many of the 2.3 billion "Christians" in the world believe the biblical gospel? The numbers tumble down exponentially. "Yes, but...they are a massive volunteer force and distribution outlet of resources for slaying the giants of world suffering!" What does it profit the billions of "people of faith" who may alleviate some of the world's symptoms yet lose their very souls?

The social gospel is a deadly disease for "people of faith." It reinforces the belief that salvation can be attained by doing good works, putting aside differences for the common good, treating others the way we want to be treated, acting morally, ethically, and sacrificially—and that doing so will endear humans to God. No. These are self-deceptive strivings that spurn God's salvation, deny His perfect standard, and reject His perfect justice. Salvation is "not of works, lest any man should boast." In fact, it is "by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" ([Ephesians 2:8-9](#)). Jesus declared Himself to be condemned humanity's only hope for reconciliation with God: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" ([John 14:6](#)). There is no other way, because God's perfect justice demanded that the penalty for sin for every human ("for all have sinned"—[Romans 3:23](#)) be paid. Only the perfect, sinless God-Man could and did pay that infinite penalty in full by His death upon the Cross. Only faith in Him reconciles a person with God.

The shameful social gospel today not only promotes "another gospel," it helps prepare a kingdom contrary to the teachings of Scripture. "For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" ([Philippians 3:20](#)). He will return from heaven ([John 14:3](#)) to "rapture," or catch, those who believe in Him (His bride) up into the clouds and take them to heaven ([1 Thessalonians 4:17](#)). The kingdom that remains on the earth will be the kingdom of the Antichrist.

Consistent with its amillennial/postmillennial beginnings, the efforts of the social gospel are earthbound in their attempted restoration of the kingdom of God. Eugene Peterson has infiltrated that heresy into his Message Bible: "God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again" (a perversion of [John 3:17](#)).

Rob Bell, in his book *Velvet Elvis*, reflects the "fix the earth" eschatology of nearly all Emerging Church leaders: "Salvation is the entire universe being brought back into harmony with its maker. This has huge implications for how people present the message of Jesus. Yes, Jesus can come

into our hearts. But we can join a movement that is as wide and as big as the universe itself. Rocks and trees and birds and swamps and ecosystems. God's desire is to restore all of it....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."

For Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren, this is the future way of life for the Christian. In an interview July 28, 2008, on *ChristianPost.com*, he said: "I think our future will also require us to join humbly and charitably with people of other faiths—Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, secularists, and others—in pursuit of peace, environmental stewardship, and justice for all people, things that matter greatly to the heart of God." No, what matters to the "heart of God" is "that all should come to repentance" and believe the gospel.

Anyone who puts his hope in this social gospel, which employs "people of faith" to make "this world the kind of place God can come to," needs to heed the words of Jesus in [Luke 18:8](#): "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" People of *all faiths*, yes, but certainly not "*the* faith," for which Jude exhorts true believers to earnestly contend. Lord, help us all not to be ashamed of Your gospel! **TBC**

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