

**The Church You Can Read about in the Bible  
What should the church do with its collected funds? #3**

**Intro: In previous lessons we answered the question, “For what purpose was the local church formed? And one of the answers is that it was formed to provide a means by which God’s people may work together. The local church has leadership and a treasury by which the members can join together in accomplishing certain things.**

**So in our last two lessons we answered the question, “What did the church you can read about in the Bible do with their collected funds?**

**First we saw that the church used their collected funds to assist fellow-Christians in times of need.**

**Second we saw that the church used their collected funds to support those who devoted their time to teaching the word (gospel preachers and teachers).**

**Amazingly this is all that we see them doing in the Scriptures.**

**However today we see a completely different picture. We see churches that not only provide for the teaching of the gospel and the relief of needy saints; but a whole plethora of works without Biblical precedent. Among them are things like providing social services such as day care, counseling services, ministries to the homeless, weight loss classes, financial management seminars, secular education, “fellowship” meals, fitness and recreational facilities, and entertainment of various kinds. Many of these works require the establishment of separate organizations or institutions apart from the church that are supported by the church(es) to accomplish the work.**

**What happened? What motivated church to so drastically change from the clearly spiritual emphasis of the past to the more social emphasis of the present?**

**For an answer we need to take a look at religious history over the past century and a half and the emergence of what historians call the social gospel movement. The modern practice of the churches can be readily understood and seen as predictable, even inevitable, in light of the changing spiritual landscape.**

**History of the social gospel movement**

**The social gospel movement can be defined in this way:**

**“... a movement in American Protestant Christianity initiated at the end of the 19th Century and reaching its zenith in the first part of the 20th Century and dedicated to the purpose of bringing the social order into conformity with the teachings of Jesus Christ.”**

**It is the belief that one fundamental purpose of the gospel is improving the social circumstances of mankind and that the church should be used as a tool to aid in this work.**

**The social gospel movement was a response to the devastating social conditions that came about as a result of the industrial revolution. Brother Ed Harrell, who is also an accomplished historian, notes this transition:**

*In the decades following the Civil War the United States was transformed from an agrarian-rural society into an industrial-urban one with such rapidity that there was little time to even consider the momentous social changes involved in such a revolution. In the 1870's and 1880's the leaders of American society suddenly realized that they were faced with overwhelming social problems. The industrial revolution in this country raised problems in business and political ethics, employer-employee relationships, economic competition, and the nature of poverty and its remedy which shocked many American social philosophers out of a well-worn complacency. No less serious were the social maladjustments connected with the unparalleled rise of huge cities. Slums, drunkenness, prostitution, organized crime, juvenile delinquency, abject poverty, and all the other problems of the sprawling, filthy cities were convincing realities that demanded that something be done. By the 1880's leaders in most of the vocal professions began to protest against the evils of industrial society and suggest possible solutions. Novelists, journalists, educators of every sort, social workers, and industrialists and labor leaders began a quest for social justice which continues into the present.*

**In the face of these circumstances many religious leaders began to call upon the church as an institution to respond to this need by proclaiming a gospel of social justice and by organizing relief efforts to remedy the deplorable conditions.**

Those who responded to the need did so out of a changed view of the content of the faith and the mission of the church. They were motivated by concepts of theological liberalism and divine immanence.

Traditionally, the historic church had proclaimed a spiritual gospel designed to prepare souls for eternity. However the scientific world had challenged the fundamental assumptions of the historic faith—things like the existence of God, the possibility of the miraculous, the inspiration of the Scriptures. The prospects of life after death, eternal judgment, heaven and hell were now in doubt. What would such people do who through the influence of modernism could no longer teach these things?

Many of them, having embraced theological liberalism, joined the social gospel movement and sought to activate the church in the cause by preaching social justice. By and large they were anti-capitalists who advocated governmental socialism or communism as the ultimate solution to the problems of social injustice. The church's role was to be the voice for social

justice and to mobilize in the political realm to effect change. We still see this approach to faith in many denominations today.

These theologians established the ecumenical organizations that were founded to unite different denominations in common social causes such as the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America, The World Council of Churches, and the National Council of Churches of Christ in America.

But it is incorrect to say that only theological liberals were advocates of the social gospel.

Many evangelical groups also sought to wed the social gospel to the church's mission while maintaining faith in the historic truths of the gospel.

Some contended that social justice was a part of Jesus' teaching and that the spread of the kingdom of God involved the rectifying of social ills. These groups stressed the need to build and maintain institutions to affect social change. This was the origin of various organizations for social relief such as the Salvation Army, YMCA, and various rescue missions.

Others suggested that these efforts could be seen as a means to an end. By engaging in social work, the church might open up doors to save souls.

The result was an attempt to embrace a "both/and" approach. In other words, the church would teach and practice both a spiritual and a social gospel simultaneously.

Today we can see that churches that offer all of these social services are immensely popular; and people tend to flock to those places where all these things are made available to them.

The churches in turn gladly accept the crowds and see it as God's blessing on their efforts. And undoubtedly some of those who attend are eventually converted to the respective faiths; thus legitimizing the group's claim that embracing the social gospel is a good thing that leads to saving of souls.

Others continued to proclaim a spiritual gospel focusing on the salvation of people with the understanding that changing people one by one will change and make society better.

They maintained that it was not the ultimate goal of either Jesus or the NT church to create some earthly utopia.

The fact that they continued to stress the church's spiritual mission to save souls does not suggest that they did not care about the social ills around them. In fact, those who were saved were encouraged to actively show love to their fellowman as individuals and meet the needs of those around them as they had ability and opportunity. It simply meant that they felt that the church had a unique mission authorized by the NT that it

alone could fulfill; and that the church should not be burdened with an additional social mission without Biblical precedent. Of course, all of this helps us understand why churches have changed; but it doesn't address the question of whether those changes are Scriptural or warranted.

### **Evaluating the social gospel movement**

First it becomes evident that the NT church made no attempt to address and cure the social ills of the first century. They did not preach a social gospel with spiritual implications; they preached a spiritual gospel with social implications. Let me explain:

For the apostles, the overarching problem of the human predicament is the problem of sin.

*“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Romans 3:23, NASB)*

The solution of that problem is found in the love of God who gave His only son as a sacrifice for sin and whose death is an inducement to the sinner to repent and live in keeping with the will of God. The ultimate goal of the gospel then is to produce people prepared for the eternal judgment.

*““For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.” (John 3:16, NASB)*

But in the meantime they are transformed into people of love who manifest that love in every relationship of life. As the Christian is changed the world around him is changed.

*“Do not lie to one another, since you laid aside the old self with its evil practices, and have put on the new self who is being renewed to a true knowledge according to the image of the One who created him” (Colossians 3:9–10, NASB)*

He will live in love all his relationships and every one of them will be changed for the better (marriage, home, citizen, worker) and will take advantage of every opportunity to show love to others, while realizing that the overarching concern of the gospel is always the eternal salvation of men, not merely their earthly comfort.

Each time someone is converted to the Lord the world is made better; but it is the by-product of a spiritual gospel.

Second, the social gospel approach to church work is at cross purposes with the idea that we need to simply be like the primitive church.

Because we lack historical perspective we tend to presume that things as they exist now have always existed that way. Nothing could be further from the truth! Up to the implementation of the social gospel in the past century, almost all reformation groups worked out of the same basic paradigm. The Scriptures are the sole authority for the church and nothing should be done that does not have Scriptural warrant.

Consider for example this quote:

*“Nothing should be used in the church which has not either the express Word of God to support it, or otherwise is a thing indifferent in itself, which brings no profit when done or used, but no harm when not done or omitted.” (John Hooper, Puritan Bishop of the early 17<sup>th</sup> century).*

*VI. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men. . . . (Westminster Confession of faith, 1636).*

These statements are not from a so-called “church of Christ” preachers. They reflect the widespread belief among reformation churches that Christians should practice only what is found in the NT.

*“For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church.” (1 Corinthians 4:17, NASB)*

But the social gospel movement puts that concept in jeopardy.

Initially efforts were made to justify the social gospel movement based on the old hermeneutics; but as the church continued to change, it became evident that the old way of establishing authority for a church’s practice was being strained beyond credibility.

Consequently most groups now oppose a pattern theology of the church. In other words, we can no longer say, “Let’s find out what did the NT church did and that’s what we’ll do.” So many preachers even in churches of Christ so-called are calling for a new hermeneutics—that is, a new approach to how to discern and apply Biblical truth. And this new approach of course will allow for the practice of all these things which the church of the NT did not do!

Third, to assign a social gospel mission to the church is to require what the church was not equipped to accomplish.

The simple organization of the local church is sufficient for it do its work as a teaching institution and to assist the needy among it.

*PAUL and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:” (Philippians 1:1, NASB)*

However, it is far from adequate to take on the mission of relieving the social ills of society.

Earlier in the series I presented a lesson on the organization of the church. The NT reveals a simple organization of elders, deacons, and members. It is perfectly sufficient to accomplish the mission of the

church taught in the NT (to preach the gospel, edify saints, and support the needy); but it is quite inadequate to take on the complex social issues that plague any society.

Consequently, the organization of modern churches looks more like this (chart). Now can you see why? When the church changes missions, it must also change its organization, creating additional officers and parachurch organizations not mentioned in Scripture. Moreover, the church simply did not, nor does it now, have the resources to begin to tackle the social ills of our world. And the more we attempt to do this, the less we are able to do what we were intended to do, namely, spread the gospel all over the world. One of the concerns I have is that embracing the social gospel dilutes the effectiveness of the church's spiritual mission.

First it means that fewer preachers will enter foreign fields and more preachers willing to preach will lack the support to do so. Second, it means that funds that might be used for teaching the gospel now provide equipment and funds for recreational activities.

Third, it creates an expectation in the minds of the society that churches exist to give away things. No wonder people constantly come to our door as if the church were an ATM for their personal crises; but have no interest in the spiritual purposes of the church. In many places the church's actions have convinced them that they are not much more than glorified Red Crosses.

**Conclusion: There is certainly a lot more to say about this subject.**

**I want to make clear that the issue is not whether Christians should care about the problems of people around us. We must, and should use every occasion as followers of Jesus to assist those around us in need and even to pursue careers that would help better our world. But at the same time we must not lose the eternal perspective that the Scriptures give us; nor should we alter the plan of God for the church to accommodate the demands of the culture around us.**

**The ultimate solution to the problems of this world is the conversion of sinners to the Lord.**