

**The Church You Can Read about in the Bible  
What should the church do with its collected funds? #4**

**Intro: Let's continue to think about the church you can read about in the Bible. We are answering the question, "What should the church do with its 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.**

**This change in church practice came about in the last century in response to the devastating social conditions that came about as a result of the industrial revolution. 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. (Social gospel defined chart). There were three responses (chart). Thus was born the social gospel movement. Understanding the history of the movement can help us understand why churches have changed radically over the past hundred years from the tradition spiritual gospel approach that dominated religious history for centuries.**

**But we must also evaluate whether this change is warranted by the Scriptures; and we begin our evaluation in our last lesson.**

**Evaluating the social gospel movement**

Reviewing a couple of points we made in the last lesson:

First the NT church made no attempt to address and cure the social ills of the first century. Their focus was to save sinners in view of eternal judgment.

They taught the saved to be conformed to the character of Christ. They did not preach a social gospel with spiritual implications; they preached a spiritual gospel with social implications.

Second, the social gospel approach to church work puts in jeopardy the idea that we need to simply be like the primitive church. Instead it calls for the

rejection of “pattern theology” and puts in its place a “new hermeneutics” that allows more flexibility for the church to add the social practices of the social gospel movement.

Third, the social gospel mission of the church requires what the church was not equipped to accomplish either organizationally or in terms of available resources.

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

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.

*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)*

This organization is perfectly sufficient to accomplish the mission of the church taught in the NT (to preach the gospel, edify saints, and support the needy).

However it is quite inadequate to take on the complex social issues that plague any society.

When the church changes missions, it must also change its organization, creating additional officers and parachurch organizations not mentioned in Scripture.

Consequently, the organization of modern churches looks more like this (chart). Now can you see why?

Moreover, the church simply did not, nor does it now, have the resources to begin to tackle the social ills of our world.

How could the Lord’s church made up of a relatively small number of people relieve the problems of millions of people all over the world? Such would require resources far above what the church possesses? In fact if we used every dime we could generate from our giving, it would not be a drop in a bucket toward remedying the problems we see around us.

The more we attempted 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.

What ultimate difference would it make if we relieved some measure of suffering in this world, but left people unprepared to meet the Lord the eternal suffering that awaits the disobedient?

Fourth, the mechanisms of the social gospel largely replace the responsibilities God has placed upon individual Christians and social organizations.

The NT is filled with commands to Christians as individuals about their personal responsibilities in the various relationships of life.

Parents have a special responsibility to provide the needs of their children, including their education and recreation.

All of us are commanded to be ready for every good work, to do good to all men especially of the household of the faith (Gal. 6:10).

In working with our hands the thing that is good (Eph. 4), we may choose a career that helps our fellowman with social problems (marriage counselors, social workers, doctors, etc. make a contribution to the well-being of society).

In an earlier lesson we showed that the Scriptures actually forbid in principle the transfer of what is an individual and personal responsibility to the church:

*“If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, let her assist them, and let not the church be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed.” (1 Timothy 5:16)*

Paul explicitly forbids Christians to take duties that are uniquely theirs and seek to transfer them to the local church. But just as the Scriptures teach believers to take care of their widows, so should they take care of the social and recreational needs of their families, and not transfer this work to the church to provide.

Understandably, it is immensely popular to many people for the church to provide for them what they should be providing for their families themselves, especially in a time when husband and wife are working full-time.

Surely no one could deny that Christians may form human institutions for the relief of social ills to engage in good works. Many such organizations exist that Christians may participate in. But it makes no more sense for the church to build and maintain such institutions than it would be for the Rotary Club to serve the Lord's Supper at their weekly meetings. In other words, let the church do what it was founded to do; and let human institutions do what they were founded to do!

Fifth, the rationale for social gospelism seriously misrepresents the ministry and benevolent acts of Jesus.

Many people will find justification for the social gospel in the benevolent acts that Jesus performed. Since Jesus healed people, it is argued that we ought to build hospitals and plan medical “missions.” Since Jesus on a couple of occasions miraculously fed the crowds listening to him, we ought to create organizations to feed and house the homeless, etc.

Yet if one thinks about it, it is clear that Jesus had the power to heal all disease, to supply food for all hungry people. In fact, he could have done so in a moment. Yet He did not do so! That was not His mission. Instead He made it clear as we noted in an earlier lesson that His mission was to preach the gospel:

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

If churches want to do the Lord’s work, let them, instead of organizing fun and games, establish as many opportunities as possible to teach people the word of God. At least that would enable them to identify with the purpose that Jesus said He came to accomplish.

The social gospel argument from Jesus’ benevolent miracles misrepresents the purpose for their accomplishment as well.

They were signs of His divine credentials to preach the gospel and a testimony to his love for mankind.

*“this man came to Him by night, and said to Him, “Rabbi, we know that You have come from God as a teacher; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him.” (John 3:2)*

Sixth, the appeal of social amenities leaves in doubt the motivations of those who become Christians.

Based on the rationale that we do whatever we can to get them in the building and then teach them, many groups go to great lengths to capture the unbelieving crowds. And churches are left like competing bidders in an auction for the potential attendees.

Who can provide the most entertaining service?

Who offers the most parties?

Who has the best gym?

Who gives away the most money?

Recently a church in Mount Juliet sent its young people out to a local gas station and offered \$5 of free gasoline to any who wanted it. No doubt, their actions might lead people to want to go to church there in appreciation for the giveaway. But again, has the gospel been corrupted when people are given motivation to respond by financial incentives? Are they

responding out of a conviction that they are sinners who need God's salvation? Or, are they seeking "loaves and fishes?" Jesus clearly warned against responding to them simply for the earthly benefit they provided. He carefully guarded against that. One of the strongest sermons Jesus ever proclaimed was directed to those who followed him primarily because of what they thought He could give them.

*"Jesus answered them and said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves, and were filled." (John 6:26)*

Just as people sought Jesus because of the free food He gave them rather than the spiritual message that those signs point to, so people may seek churches with the same wrong motivations. What are you willing to do for me? Not what is message you preach?

His discourse on the bread of life left most of them disappointed because it signaled to them that Jesus would not be the kind of Messiah they wanted him to be.

*"As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore." (John 6:66)*

Unfortunately that same thing happens to a lot of churches today that refuse to be defined by the desires of the culture around them.

Seventh, the modern social gospel movement has an ecumenical and multi-cultural emphasis that encourages and even pressures Christians to compromise the spiritual message of the gospel.

As I pointed out in the historical section, it was apparent to religious leaders early in the last century that no church (denomination) could tackle the social challenges of the world alone; there had to be organized cooperation among the churches. Thus, the various ecumenical organizations were created to provide a mechanism for groups to work together.

It was logical that the reach of these cooperative efforts not only embrace Christian organizations, but also other religions. Emerging Church leader Brian McLaren suggests this in a July 28, 2008 interview, on ChristianPost.com:

*"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." (quoted from "The Shameful Social Gospel" by TA McMahon).*

How can this be reconciled with the Lord's exclusive claims?

*"Jesus \*said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but through Me." (John 14:6)*

Do you see that religious exclusivism is regarded by many as a cause and barrier to social equality? So that means that those who insist upon one way to serve the Lord are working at cross purposes with those who think that all religions are equally valid.

So then participation in social gospel projects necessitates that we at least give the appearance of granting saved status to those with whom we join in doing good works though they may have never even obeyed the gospel as taught in the NT. It means that the church must “water down” its message rather than challenge religious error. And the ultimate effect will be that the social gospel movement will work also toward weakening the church’s distinctive message.

**Conclusion: All things considered, the social gospel is contrary to the Lord’s purposes for the local church. It is important that we do not allow the fact that we consider something a good work to change the work God has given the church. It has a unique mission that should not be compromised for the sake of other works, no matter worthy.**