

Meeting the Challenges of 21st Century Culture

The Challenge of Social Gospelism: How the culture sees the church (Part II)

Intro: This evening we continue think about the challenge of social gospelism: how the culture sees the church. For centuries the church thought of itself primarily as the agency to dispense the message of the gospel to a lost world; but alas today...

The preaching of the gospel has no seeming relevance in the world view of the 21st century secular culture.

In the worldview of the secularist:

Matter/energy is the ultimate reality.

Humans are autonomous and self-actualizing.

All moral values are relative, not absolute.

Human law abrogates and replaces divine law.

These principles undermine the foundational tenets of the gospel.

The gospel presumes accountability to a just God; but secularism denies His existence.

The gospel affirms a divine purpose in the creation leading to final judgment; but secularism affirms that humans shape their own destiny without God.

The gospel teaches the reality of sin as rebellion against the will of the creator resulting in condemnation; moral relativism makes preaching against sin irrelevant and intolerant.

The gospel affirms the need for humans to be saved; secularism denies the need of salvation except in the society's perceived need to rescue someone from what the world considers bad behavior.

So then what would the secular culture have the church to do?

The secular culture would say the church should become more tolerant and tone down its perceived judgmentalism or propensity for declaring certain behaviors "wrong."

The culture would say, "Doctrines of eternal rewards and punishments are passé. Quit talking about final judgment and eternal outcomes of heaven or hell, and start talking about how to improve life on earth."

The culture would say, "If the church wants to do something relevant, either relieve the conditions which society considers contributing to bad behavior like poverty or serve as a counseling agency to those whose behavior is unacceptable.

This is essentially the message of the social gospel which has replaced the spiritual gospel of the first-century church.

So how should the church respond? (Two Responses)

The church can cater to the culture, seeking to make itself "relevant" in the eyes of the secular world around it.

This morning I shared with you the responses of various popular or high profile church leaders who were queried about what the church

would need to do to take the initiative in becoming more “relevant” to the next generation. Their responses generated a list that is quite revealing. (Quickly read the list).

Pursuing these objectives would result in a church mission that would make the church a hybrid between the Red Cross and a political action committee. It assumes that the church is only relevant to the extent that it takes up the secularist agenda and works within it. Is this what we must do to be relevant in our world?

The church can proclaim the counter-cultural message of Jesus and His apostles.

It is obvious that the Lord and His apostles faced the same kind of world we live in, one with social ills of various kinds. It was a world of war, of abusive imperial power, human trafficking, a world of slavery, crime, poverty, and social stratification.

I submit that they possessed neither the organization nor the financial wherewithal to significantly remove these social ills. If this was their mission, then they were entirely unequipped to do it and utterly failed to accomplish it. In fact, it does not even appear that they made any effort to eradicate these things as such.

But I suggest that what they did do was far more effective in ultimately removing them. And so we ask, “What did the NT church do? What did they perceive to be their mission?”

They recognized that most of what is wrong in the world can be attributed to human sin.

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

The apostles addressed this fundamental issue. They did not enlist the brethren into a campaign against the swords or knives that took people’s lives; but rather they sought to bring about repentance in the thieves and the murderers that used such things to abuse others.

They spoke with conviction about the authority of God’s law and human accountability to it.

“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad.” (2 Corinthians 5:10)

The apostles made no effort to psychoanalyze the Greco-Roman population, offering some justification for why certain groups acted out. They held all people personally accountable for their actions and appealed to them to accept responsibility in view of the eternal judgment.

They prioritized the salvation of souls from sin.

The apostles had heard these words from the Lord Himself:

“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. “He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.” (Mark 16:15–16)

They made this their foremost passion, to proclaim the good news of the reign of God through Jesus Christ.

They proclaimed the love of God and the sacrifice of Jesus as the only remedy for sin.

“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus;”

(Romans 3:21–24)

For the apostles the ultimate solution to the problem of sin was for sinners to know and to confess their lost condition, placing themselves at the mercy of God’s forgiveness.

They encouraged acceptance of God’s kingdom (rule) through faith, repentance, and obedience to the gospel.

“And Peter said to them, “Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

The apostles made no effort to incentivize converts by some material benefit first (buying converts). So far as I know they never sent anybody a dozen baby ducks! Instead they tried to help people understand that the greatest gift they could ever receive had already been made available to them through the love of God.

They encouraged God’s people to model moral excellence in all relationships.

“Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.” (1 Peter 2:12)

It may be here that we might best show how the church makes a community better—not be creating organizations to hand out stuff or offer counsel, but rather to change people in their hearts and give them reason to submit to the Lordship of Jesus. Such an approach produces better fathers and mothers, better husband and wives, better workers and bosses, better

people who love their fellowman and offer their service to others in their time of need.

They lived in hope of the consummation when God would separation the righteous from the wicked.

“But according to His promise we are looking for new heavens and a new earth, in which righteousness dwells.” (2 Peter 3:13)

I know there are those who contend for an earthly consummation to the kingdom of God; but it would appear that the apostles were not set upon trying to make heaven on earth, but rather prepare people on earth for heaven. They knew that this world was coming to an end. They did not see in that permission to trash the planet; but it led them to set their sights on something greater than this earth.

In a word they sought to convert as many people as possible to the Lord Jesus Christ and enable them to experience His life-changing love.

There are clear differences in these two approaches.

There is a difference in how the world may respond.

Today’s social gospel approach may make the church more “liked” by removing the condemnation of sin and affirming God’s acceptance of all.

The NT approach may make the church hated for its condemnation of the world’s transgressions; but this would be in harmony with the experience of Jesus and the early church.

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” (John 15:18–19)

Has it ever dawned on these social gospellers that if the NT church was like what they advocated, why would anyone have ever opposed them?

There is a difference in the kind of people we may attract.

The social gospel approach will draw an endless stream of takers who will gladly use the church as an ATM for whatever needs they think they have and a provider of every free service the church is willing to offer.

The NT approach may turn off many of these people, but it will attract those who are seeking God and a right relationship with him. We might well remember here the words of the apostle John:

“And this is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be

exposed. But he who practices the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.” (John 3:19–21)

There is a difference in the outcome of the two approaches.

The social gospel approach may make the physical lives of people better here; but may do nothing to prepare souls for eternity. How many times have we gathered up a contribution for people in the name of Jesus who never returned to give Him glory much less show appreciation to the people who sacrificed to help them? And what good would it do to ensure that someone experienced a more comfortable life only to be lost eternally at the judgment?

The NT approach may provide people with a hope that will enable them to overcome difficult physical circumstances, but more importantly give them access to the eternal kingdom of God. If you want to do a “cannonball jump” into someone’s life, I suggest you really make a splash, not by giving them warm bread with butter, but rather giving them the true bread that comes down out of heaven and gives life to the world.

“I am the living bread that came down out of heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is My flesh.” (John 6:51)

What we need is not the timid love that seeks to make everyone like us by giving them what they want, but rather that bold love that seeks to give them what they desperately need, even if they don’t know that they want it or need it!

Conclusion: Finally, it all comes down to this. Every Christian has to come to terms with whether or not he/she wants to please the world around him or the Lord above him.