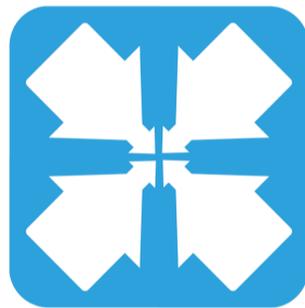


IS THE GOSPEL THE SAME AS “SOCIAL JUSTICE”?

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INTRODUCTION

A prominent cultural theme today is the notion of social justice or as it is known in Christian parlance, the “social gospel.” Historically, its noble aim is to help the downtrodden in society and defend those who are not able to defend themselves. This movement has its roots in 19th century American social and scholastic efforts. In keeping with the postmillennialism of that day, these 19th century Christians strove to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth through their social action on behalf of the needy. Even though the movement weakened during the world wars era, it made a resurgence again after the end of WW II. In these later years, the movement lacked the overt Christian underpinnings of its 19th century predecessor and took on more of a secular perspective. The movement had morphed into an engine for social reform with scant mention of the earlier postmillennial emphasis of doing the work of Jesus Christ. In the late 20th century and early 21st century, this movement is viewed more as a movement to aid disenfranchised people groups and in some instances, it has been known to attack Christians and political conservatives for their traditional values. In this brief reflection on the social gospel/social justice movement, we ask several questions: 1) Should Christians embrace this movement? 2) Should Christians serve the needy without presenting the gospel message? 3) Does a holistic Christian worldview encompass both the sharing of the gospel and serving the downtrodden of society? After our brief examination of the topic, we believe the chief priority for Christians is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ during ministry settings. It is this message that will truly transform lives. Moreover, we believe that Christians should also strive to meet the needs of the downtrodden of society in conjunction with sharing the gospel message of a life transformed by the resurrected Jesus Christ.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

SOCIAL GOSPEL/SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT



In her article, "The Social Gospel as a Grassroots Movement," Wendy Deichmann discusses the early development of the social gospel (SG) movement. She identifies two of the early leaders of the SG movement, in American academia, as Shailer Mathews and Walter Rauschenbusch who were formulating in the 1870s what had already been developing in Christian ministries during the 1860s; a common sense explanation of the implications of Christian teaching and ethical imperatives in the wake of tremendous social upheaval of their time. These teachings came from the New Testament themes of the advent of the kingdom of God, the first and second great commandments, and the Golden Rule. (3)

In tandem with the social activism on behalf of the underprivileged, the theological impetus for the SG came from the belief that Christians were supposed to build the Kingdom of God here on earth (postmillennialism). In addition to Deichmann's perspective of these early SG leaders, James Ely observes Rauschenbusch as advocating for a form of "Christian socialism." Ely also notes that SG leaders, in this early stage, emphasized the need for a revised socio-economic environment where the government would step in to lessen social problems. (5)

In addition to Mathews and Shailer, Deichmann recognizes other SG leaders of that early, pre-war era, Pastor Reverdy Ransom and a journalist, Ida B. Wells-Barnett, as ones who were exemplary in their defense of the downtrodden. Ransom was outspoken against the civic corruption that effected the working conditions of his congregants in Chicago. After his work in Boston, Ransom began to advocate for the civil rights of African-Americans in Boston and New York City. Wells-Barnett expressed outrage over segregation and the repeated lynchings of African-Americans. She was well-known for being a very effective advocate and "social gospeler." (3)

During the era after the world wars when Americans prospered financially, there was a movement in U.S. evangelicalism to conduct short term missions trips to Latin America. Michael Clawson observes that organizations such as Campus Crusade, Intervarsity, and others were sending thousands of young Christians on short term missions trips to the "Two Thirds" world in the 1950s and 1960s. During these trips, the missionaries were able to see the poverty stricken conditions and other social conditions that Latinos in these countries were burdened with. This motivated them to not focus only on soul-winning, but also to realize that they must work to further "social justice" at home which took them beyond their normal conservative evangelical perspective. (1)

In addition to the experience of these short term missionaries, Clawson also shares about the back and forth dialogue between conservative factions of the evangelical church in the U.S. that favored only conducting evangelism in mission efforts and the liberal faction who were more engaged with the “social aspect” of the gospel. In response to these concerns, two Latin American Christian leaders, C. Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar addressed them in the 1970s by offering a new perspective where the work on behalf of the downtrodden was based upon a renewed emphasis on Biblical teachings rather than leftist political philosophy. They further stated that the church should not be interested in just making converts. Rather, the church must also be active in serving the poor and advocate for social justice concerns. (1)

This renewed perspective on social justice from Padilla and Escobar began to be a topic of discussion at prominent evangelical missions conferences of that timeframe. At an InterVarsity missions conference in 1970, Samuel Escobar gave a talk on the weakness of only sharing the gospel alone and shared the perception by many in some parts of the world that Christian missionaries were selfish, irrelevant, and unconcerned. In contrast to these Christians, communists were observed to be committed, disciplined, and self-sacrificial. In order to be effective Christian missionaries, Escobar taught that Christians should be concerned in word and deed to include advocacy against injustice, prejudice, abuse, and the selfish individualism of Christians. The acceptance of a fully orbed gospel approach blending both evangelism and social action became more accepted in American evangelicalism due to the efforts of Escobar, Padilla, and other Latin American leaders. At the well-known Lausanne conferences, Padilla and Escobar discussed that the gospel cannot be presented with just words alone in a missional context. Rather, it should also refer to specific forms of man’s involvement in the world. Of note was the approval of Billy Graham who stated that one result of the Lausanne conference that came through loud and clear was that evangelical Christians should be engaged in social concerns.

As a result of the work of Escobar and Padilla at the conference, an entire section on Christian social responsibility was included in the Lausanne Covenant. This section of the covenant affirmed both the necessity of Christian evangelism and socio-political activity. (1)

SOCIAL JUSTICE/EVANGELISM OBSERVED IN SCRIPTURE



In addition to the history of the social justice or SG movement, the concept of social justice is clearly observed in Scripture as well. An example of this is given by Ross who wrote on the topic in a blog post.

God had a deep concern for those who had sold themselves into slavery. God was so concerned about the abuse of Israeli slaves at the hands of their fellow citizens that the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed the destruction of Jerusalem as punishment for their cruel treatment of these slaves. As observed in Jeremiah 34:8-17, the activity of Yahweh on behalf of these oppressed ones gives us a hint at the disposition of God towards those who are deemed to be weak in society. He loves and defends those who cannot defend themselves. Jeremiah is not the only prophet who pens this divine concern for the downtrodden. (9)

(Click here to read Ross's blog article, ["Unjust Treatment of Slaves and God's Response"](#))

Throughout the entirety of the Old Testament, one of God's most prominent themes is the care of those who are humble in status, such as slaves. God's ire against those who would victimize the vulnerable in society is also a prominent theme as well. This is observed throughout the Old Testament where God is concerned with defending and taking care of the fatherless, the widow, foreigners, the poor, and the oppressed (Ex. 22:22, 24; Deut. 10:18, 14:29, 16:11, 24:17,19; Ps. 10:14, 68:5. 82:3, 94:6; Pr. 23:10; Is. 1:17, 23; Jer. 49:11; Zech. 7:10; Mal. 3:5). However, not only is God concerned about social justice. What we also see in the pages of the Old Testament is God's desire to evangelize. One example of this is observed in the book of Jonah where there is an ongoing dialogue between God and the prophet Jonah regarding the nation of Assyria. God has instructed Jonah to go and proclaim God's truth to them and urge them to repent of their sins. Most are familiar with this story. Eventually after running from God, Jonah finally agrees to evangelize and Assyria does in fact turn from its evil ways towards God. As a result of Jonah's proclamation to Nineveh, the King of Nineveh repents and part of the turning from evil is for the Ninevites to "call urgently on God" and for the people to "give up their evil ways (Jonah 3:8)." We also see God's strong desire to be compassionate and merciful when he chastises Jonah for his bad attitude against the Ninevites. God shares his concern for the many people of Nineveh who needed His guidance and who may have perished had not Jonah proclaimed God's truth (Jonah 4:10-11).

Not only is the need for social action and evangelism observed in the Old Testament, but also in the New Testament as well. God's strong desire to aid those who are downtrodden in society is revealed when Jesus discusses his close association with the needy in Matthew 25. In this chapter, He reveals that those who take care of the needy will be gladly welcomed into heaven whereas those who do not take care of the downtrodden will go away to eternal punishment (vv. 31-46). Jesus also goes out of his way to share the truth about Himself to the Samaritans revealing His desire to evangelize and also that relationship with him is racially inclusive (John chapter 4).

Not only is this concern for the underprivileged observed in the words of Jesus but also in the daily lives of the early church where they all gave of their finances to where there was no one in the church who was in need because they all “shared everything they had (Acts 4:32-35).” On occasion, inequities would also manifest themselves and it was clear that the early church was concerned in making sure that everyone’s needs were taken care of. We see evidence of this when the Hellenistic Jewish widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6:1) and also when Paul called out “Cephas” for choosing favorites on a racial basis (Galatians ch. 2). In both cases, the early church leaders made sure to right the wrong that had been committed.

Additionally there is a strong emphasis on evangelism not only from Jesus, but also extensive evangelism efforts were observed in the ministry of the apostles. As the *Book of Acts* opens and before he ascends to heaven, the risen Jesus instructs that the apostles will be witnesses for him and this extends not only in the areas surrounding them but to the entire world (Acts 1:8). In Acts chapter two, Peter gives his famous sermon to those gathered in Jerusalem on the day when the Holy Spirit fell upon the apostles with the evidence of speaking in tongues. In accord with what Jesus instructed, throughout the *Book of Acts*, Paul, Peter, and other early church leaders are observed testifying and giving witness of the risen Jesus Christ (Acts 2:14-41, 4:2, 4:33, 5:42, 8:5, 8:12, 8:25, 10:42, 13:38, 17:23, 18:15, 20:24, 26:22, 28:23, 31, 13:31). Additionally, Paul feels so strongly about Jews knowing the gospel message of Jesus that he states that he would rather himself be accursed than his own people, the Jews (Romans 9:3). The New Testament also reveals that Paul was arrested for his public testimony about Jesus Christ (Acts 21:33). Eventually, Paul and many of the other apostles are martyred for their faith. (9)

THE RISK OF REPLACING THE GOSPEL WITH GOOD DEEDS

In addition to the historical and Biblical justification for the necessity of helping the disenfranchised and for sharing the gospel, consider this fictional version of something that can happen in short term missions trips.

After raising funds and developing the right skillsets, a church missions team flew to Honduras to help impoverished villagers rebuild homes and wells. While serving and working hard, the missions team told them things like "Jesus loves you," "We are Jesus' hands and feet," "We are servants of Jesus," and "It's all about Calvary." The team exemplified amazing selfless service, love, and humility. What a great Christian example, right? I would say so, but the team flew back to the U.S. without actually explaining who Jesus is and what His love accomplished on the cross ("Calvary"). They left without proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ and after they left, Jehovah's Witnesses (a Christian cult) came in to teach the villagers. The villagers were receptive to a false Jesus and a false Gospel.

Here is an example of an actual situation that we observed last year in which Christians did not share the gospel message when performing an act of kindness. Imagine the potential consequences of this well intended situation.

I was walking through the Appalachian State University campus in North Carolina and noticed a group of Christians from a local church manning a table where they were giving away free hotdogs to hungry university students.

A student dressed in Middle Eastern attire walked up to the table and asked, "What is the catch?" One of the men manning the table said, "There is no catch, we just want you to know that Jesus loves you." Then the student took a hotdog and as he was walking away he lifted it up above his head and said "Thank you Jesus."

Filled with joy, the Christians watched him walk away from them as he was heading towards another table, a Jehovah's Witness table. What if the good deeds done by these genuine Christians created a burning desire for this ASU student to learn about Jesus? If he visited the Jehovah's Witnesses table, he would be led astray and given a false Jesus. To be clear, Christians giving away free food is a good deed done in love and the Lord uses our feeble efforts for His purposes. After all, God does the saving but the act in and of itself does not share the gospel message. What we do out of kindness does not save the lost. This is definitely something that Christians need to think about. In addition to this act of charity, I would have at least given that student a gospel tract.

It stands to reason that most people in our society like change if it makes things better for everyone. Most students whom I (Greg) have spoken to, whether Christian or not, want to contribute towards making the world a better place. Most of us want social justice! We want to see the homeless given a home, the hungry given some food, widows and orphans cared for, and racism eliminated. But what is social justice? We need to be careful and ask people to define their terms. For Christians, social justice can look like taking care of the poor and the less privileged, but it is a natural result of the transformational work of the gospel and our obedience to God. Christians view social justice as *results of our hope* in Christ and *obedience* to God. Secularists view social justice as *the hope*, a hope of works.

WHAT IS SOCIAL JUSTICE TODAY?

In her essay, "What is Social Justice," Dr. Susan Torres-Harding, an associate professor at Roosevelt University located in Chicago, Il. is interested in how students define social justice. However, she first gives the textbook definition of social justice as "involving the recognition of the existence of social injustices based upon being a member of a non-dominant or marginalized social group." In addition to this definition, Torres-Harding also gives another definition of social justice as "a value or desire to increase access of power, privileges, and socioeconomic resources to people from socially marginalized groups." In her observations and polling of students, Torres-Harding found that they were willing to volunteer for a number of activities advocating for social justice to include political activism, conducting social justice research, volunteering for an organization that advocates for social activism, advocating for persons from disadvantaged groups, and talking to family members and friends about social justice. Moreover, students defined social justice as "Addressing injustices in equality and promoting opportunity, rights, fairness and acceptance of everyone, including people from diverse backgrounds." (10)

In the 20th and 21st centuries, Barbara Hemphill observes other definitions from a global perspective. One definition of social justice from a global perspective is "the way in which human rights are manifested in the everyday lives of people at every level of society." Furthermore, she offers a 2006 United Nations definition of social justice as "the fair and compassionate distribution of the fruits of economic growth." Hemphill further states that in the present day United States, there is not a clear definition for social justice although there are three competing views: (a) maximizing welfare, (b) respecting freedom, and (c) promoting virtue. In these global definitions, we are concerned not only because there is a socialist overtone of redistributing wealth which leads to a centralized government, but also because there is no emphasis on the spiritual redemption of man that we believe only comes from a relationship with Jesus Christ. (7)

We are concerned about administering social justice from a socialist perspective because this will inevitably cause social destruction and fail to address the root cause of the depravity of man.



CONTRASTS BETWEEN SECULAR SOCIAL JUSTICE AND CHRISTIAN SOCIAL JUSTICE

In contrast to these global and secular campus perspectives of social justice, a Christian conception of social justice is holistic in that it addresses not only the physical needs of a person but also the spiritual aspect as well. The natural result of the dispensing of social justice from a Christian perspective is that the underprivileged or oppressed person will be cared for, supported, and also encouraged to enter into relationship with God. After beginning this relationship with God, a Christian will strive to follow Jesus over the span of their lives taking part in the sanctification process where a sincere believer becomes more like Jesus. This will result in a follower of Christ who is more obedient to the commands and teachings of Jesus. In turn, Christians will naturally help the poor, comfort the hurting, and take care of the needy. As Christians grow stronger in their relationships with Jesus Christ, they will help meet others needs (physical, emotional, spiritual); but giving them a hope that is grounded *not* in this world, but the world to come. In Romans chapter 8 Paul explains that our hope is not in what is seen.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience (Romans 8:18-25).

We are concerned that instead of engaging the entire person, a secularist and liberal agenda appears to be the motivation for much of what passes as the social justice movement today. Moreover, it appears that some activists of this ilk will use the noble aim of social justice to attack their political enemies. Additionally, in redefining social justice divorced from Biblical mandates, we are concerned that secularist and liberal ideologs will seek to ostracize those who support traditional and established sexual gender roles. Instead of being concerned about the views of all persons, we are concerned that “progressive” social justice advocates will target those who advocate for monogamy within the bounds of marriage between a man and a woman. We see this as an authentic expression of sexuality that is healthy for all.

We currently live in a society where many would say that love requires affirmation (specifically of behavior). Yet many examples would demonstrate otherwise. Consider a parent correcting the behavior of children or the family and friends of a loved one coming together to have an intervention for their substance abuse. These examples show that we understand there are times (perhaps many times) where love requires that we challenge and work to correct someone’s behavior. To not do so would actually be unloving and show we do not desire the good for that person and would rather not inconvenience ourselves or risk offending them. Generally speaking, Jesus practiced transformational love not affirmation love. Or as some have stated, transformational inclusion rather than affirmational inclusion.

Just because most conservatives advocate for this traditional perspective does not mean that they will badly treat those from non-traditional perspectives. Rather, Christians are compelled to love their neighbor as themselves (Matt. 22:39) regardless of their political ideology or religious background. So, Christians can love and value someone who disagrees with them. This value is inherent within an authentic view of Christianity and stands in opposition to what is observed in the liberal social justice movement where Christians are often targeted.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL MESSAGE?

The term "gospel," literally means "good news." It is this message, according to the Apostle Paul, that is the power of God for salvation and is included in the passage below:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile. For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith (Romans 1:16-17).

The validity of the gospel message is further affirmed by the Apostle Paul in the passage below:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve (1 Corinthians 15:1-5).

In these verses, Paul passes along the gospel message that he, himself, received. Moreover, these passages are in creedal form for easy memorization. The origin of this creed is dated to within two to three years of the death and resurrection of Christ as recognized by both evangelical and critical scholars.

Consider the following statement from critical scholar Bart Ehrman.

Paul came to know about Jesus within just a year or, at most, two of his death. Paul too preserves traditions that stem from the early period of his Christian life, right after his conversion around 32-33 CE. [...] Paul claims to have visited with Jesus's closest disciple, Peter, and with his brother James three years after his conversion, which is around 35-36 CE. Much of what Paul has to say about Jesus, therefore, stems from the same early layer of tradition that we can trace, completely independently, in the gospels. (4)

WHY IS THE GOSPEL MESSAGE SO IMPORTANT?

The gospel message is so important because it maps out how we fell out of relationship with God and then how that relationship with God can be restored. First, we have all sinned against a Holy God and are deserving death. Because we cannot save ourselves, we are in desperate need of a rescue mission. God sent His only Son Jesus Christ, who lived a sinless and perfect life, to take the penalty of sin upon Himself by willingly dying on the cross. On the third day after He was killed and buried, He physically rose from the grave defeating both sin and death. Then for a span of forty days, he was witnessed in his physical body by many people until He ascended into Heaven where He currently sits alive and well at the right hand of the Father until the day when He will return to judge both the living and the dead.

In order to be saved, one responds to the gospel message by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ. This results in putting faith and trust in Him alone for salvation. Evidence of this can be seen in a sincere effort to repent or turn away from a rebellious lifestyle. This means we acknowledge our guilt before God as sinners and turn away from the evil influences around us. One who believes in Jesus will also receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, will be forgiven of their sins, will stand righteous before God on the final judgment day (Jesus's righteousness is credited to the believer), and will be in fellowship with God forever!

Moreover, it is important to know the gospel message so we can share it, reflect it, grow in it, and defend it. There really is no other way to influence people for eternity outside of the gospel message as noted in the New Testament passages included below.

*And the world is passing away along with its desires,
but whoever does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:17).*

*For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who beholds the Son and believes
in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (John 6:40).*



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, in recent centuries, there has been a Christian response to the many social ills present in our society. Many, in these early days of the “social gospel” era took their motivation to help the oppressed and disadvantaged in American culture from the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. However, even in these early days there were those who advocated a brand of “Christian socialism” where the government would be the driving force to bring about this needed change. During the era after the world wars, a renewal of the SG is observed under the leadership of C. Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar. They observe a weakness in North American evangelicalism of preaching the gospel only and not ministering to all aspects of a person. Additionally, a brief analysis was conducted of both the Old and New Testament to investigate whether God is truly interested in social justice. This probe revealed that God is not only interested in social justice, but also in spreading the message of the salvation of mankind through a relationship with Him. God expects that all should be concerned and active in advocating for and taking care of the needy. We also noted our concerns regarding liberals/progressives who use the social justice movement to attack political and religious conservatives for their traditional values. After our brief look into the “social gospel” and social justice movements, we know that these movements are not wholly beneficial unless the gospel message of Jesus Christ is front and center. We believe that generosity towards and concern for the underprivileged is a natural outcome of authentic Christianity in a social context. Thus, authentic Christians should strive to share the hope that endures even in the worse circumstances this world can bring while serving as “Jesus’ hands and feet.”

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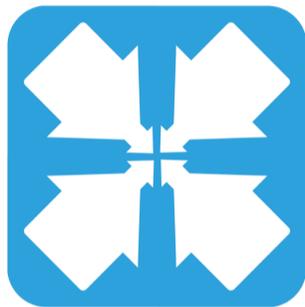
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R.G. Crouse (2007:771) defines postmillennialism as "emphasizing the present aspects of God's kingdom, which will reach fruition in the future. They [postmillennialists] believe that the millennium will come through Christian preaching and teaching...the new age [millennium] will not be essentially different from the present and it will come about as more people are converted to Christ."

Torres-Harding (2015) reported examples of activities the students engaged in to include participating in marches, protests, other direct social actions for economic or social change, acting in a short film advocating acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, providing clinical assistance for children with developmental disabilities, and volunteering at community/religious organizations that were aiding those who were experiencing poverty related issues.

A recent example of this occurred on the UNCG campus where two Christian students groups were targeted by a UNCG socialist student group for their stance that views authenticity in sexual relationships as being between a husband and a wife. After the Christian group's announcement of this meeting to advocate for traditional marriage as opposed to homosexual relationships, the socialist student group disrupted the Christian group's meeting and also sent a letter to its sister ministry accusing it of "contributing to a negative climate that causes discrimination, murders, and rapes of LGBTQ people..." This is an example of one group using "social justice" to harass a group that has a different perspective than its own.

Michael Licona (2004: 52-53) In addition to Ehrman's perspective, Gary Habermas and Michael Licona recognize very early attestation for the facts of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christi to the timeframe just after the events themselves



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