

Does The Social Gospel Really Work?

I suppose people can really get tricked into believing that the social gospel approach in a church really works. When one surveys the attendance garnered by all the free meals, hay rides, retreats, gymnasiums, counseling centers, day cares, birthday parties and anniversary parties, one would naturally conclude that the social gospel approach is the sure-fire method for church growth in the twenty-first century.

Setting the obvious question of its lack of authority aside for a moment, let's ask the question, "Does the social gospel really work?" That is, does it really make an enormous difference in the congregation which chooses to use the Lord's money for catering to the "outer man"?

I would like to suggest that one very vital measure is the number in attendance in services other than the Sunday morning worship service. Now I know this is not the perfect measurement, but it is useful. The number of people who come back on Sunday evening and Wednesday evening demonstrate the strength of a congregation's membership. If this is a large percentage, the church will be strong in general because it will be made up of members who are really dedicated to the Lord. This is supposedly the purpose of all the fellowship halls and dinners, gymnasiums, retreats, etc.

For example, in most conservative, sound congregations, the percentage of the Sunday morning attendance who return on Sunday evening and Wednesday evening is 75-90%. The attendance percentages for the Loop fall right in that range. In churches that use the social gospel approach, one would assume the percentages are higher, right? Yet, most "social gospel" congregations have percentages of around 50-60% of those that return for other services.

Surprising? It might be to you, but in a way, it should not come as any surprise. Do you think that the reason this great difference exists is because of the conflicting message those at "social gospel" congregations hear? On the one hand, they hear watered-down "sermons" which are full of broad references to God's love and grace, and on the other hand they hear how great and wonderful it is to focus on more physical and carnal matters. The net result is perhaps larger numbers, but a very weak membership spiritually.

Congregations that do not espouse the "social gospel" theory are stronger simply because their emphasis is on the gospel and its ability to change and reform a life of sin. Following God's ordained pattern is the only way to develop strong, faithful churches. Paul wrote, *"But speaking the truth in love,*

may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16). Brethren, keep preaching the gospel, for that is what will make strong churches!

Kyle Campbell