

# The "Social Gospel"

**Introduction.** No greater price has ever been paid for anything than what was paid to purchase the church. Jesus paid the purchase price with His blood (Acts 20:28). He built it (Matthew 16:16-18). He has all authority over it (Matthew 28:18-20; Ephesians 1:22-23). He has commanded His disciples not to go beyond His doctrine (2 John 9). Today, some say the church ought to branch out into other areas, or use carnality to enhance the gospel. We want to examine if it is the church's duty to "serve the whole man."

God has a plan of action, a mission for His church. Submission to God means accepting His purposes as our own. It is the noblest of all efforts. It is too important to brush aside and substitute other activities, no matter how "good" or "wholesome" those other activities may be.

## I. ***What Is The "Social Gospel"?***

A. This movement began recently.

1. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines the "social gospel" as "a movement in American Protestant Christianity, esp. in the first part of the twentieth century to bring the social order into conformity with Christian principles."
2. Its direct purpose is to improve living conditions and cure social problems. The church becomes the tool to reach this goal. Instead of using only the gospel to appeal to man's inner being to make him better spiritually, they, along with the gospel, appeal to man's physical or carnal nature.
3. The "social gospel" movement transforms the business of the church to providing secular education, medical treatment, housing, food, recreation, job training, environmental activism, political activism, entertainment, etc. in an effort to "serve the whole man."

B. Although it may be argued that the "social gospel" has good motives, we will see that the "social gospel" is a bad and erroneous idea because it involves the church in more than its intended mission.

C. Jesus' mission has always been and still is to seek to save souls (Matthew 18:11; 20:28; Luke 19:10), not to "serve the whole man," but to save the eternal part of man, his soul.

## II. ***Examples Of The "Social Gospel"***

A. The extent to which churches have participated in the "social gospel" is staggering.

1. A recent Google search (in the "News" section) of the word "church" resulted in the following headlines:

- a) Church To Participate In Christmas Open House -- Building on the success of last year's event, Sutter Creek Methodist Church is planning to provide a festive and religious dimension to the festivities (Sacramento Ledger Dispatch).
  - b) Durham Church Plans Fair Trade Bazaar -- All sales will assist in improving the quality of life for people half a world away ([www.seacoastonline.com](http://www.seacoastonline.com)).
  - c) Church To Hold Holiday Tea -- Mark your calendar and call for your reservations for the annual Holiday Victorian Tea and Boutique to be held at the Presbyterian Church in Garden City (Garden City News).
  - d) Yummm! Annual Pie Social And Church Fair Set For December 1-2 -- On the second floor in the Education Wing, a Kid's Fair is held offering kids the chance to play a game, do a craft or get their nails painted (Tewksbury Advocate).
  - e) Church Leaders Plan To Build Family Center -- Two long-time city churches have merged and will build a multimillion-dollar family center on U.S. 19 that is expected to draw new parishioners from throughout Pinellas County (Pinellas Park Beacon).
  - f) Ham And Beans On The Menu At Church Supper -- The Union Congregational Church of Madbury will sponsor a ham and bean supper on Saturday, Nov. 18, at the Madbury Town Hall ([www.seacoastonline.com](http://www.seacoastonline.com)).
  - g) Contrast the preceding activities: Open house, Bazaar, Tea, Pie Social, Family Center and Church Supper, with the actions of the first century church (Acts 2:42). While the first century Christians enjoyed each others company, it was an individual thing, as Christians broke bread "from house to house."
2. Sadly, churches of Christ have not been immune to this trend.
- a) Within the last several years, the Madison Church of Christ has sponsored an attempt to set a world record for the largest tug-of-war, including activities such as an old-fashioned picnic, relay races, kickball, volleyball, horseshoes, clowns, and pony rides. The church also recently sponsored a modern day Noah's ark being constructed around the exterior of the church's gymnasium. The gym's interior was set up to look like an ark with live animals donated by the Nashville Zoo. The church has also been involved in fund-raising campaigns for the construction of a teen center and a playground on their property.
  - b) In 1990, the Central Church of Christ sponsored a Halloween party for inner city children.
  - c) Several churches of Christ in the area sponsor the Stones River Manor, a nursing home located in Murfreesboro.

- d) The Harpeth Hills Church of Christ in Brentwood recently sponsored classes on interior design, estate planning, anxiety, and dieting and health. Many other churches are opening individual, family, and marital counseling centers, including North Boulevard Church of Christ in Murfreesboro.
  - e) The Restoration Foundation publishes the book *The Special Contribution*, detailing how to raise one-time contributions in churches of Christ.
  - f) The Tusculum Church of Christ in Nashville sponsored a Financial Peace Seminar with financial guru Dave Ramsey.
  - g) The Cuyahoga Falls Church of Christ in Ohio sponsors an ongoing ministry to Senior Citizens and teenagers, Christian Family Theater, Music Ministry (including choruses), Singlesation, and various organized recreational activities including basketball teams and open gym night. Their motto is, "We are here to serve you!"
- B. The church is referred to as the fullness of Christ, the new creation of God, the body of the reconciled, God's household and holy temple, the manifestation of God's wisdom and bride of Christ. But it ceases to be this when it ceases to be what God made it.
- 1. A lady, who was not a member of the church, called and wanted to know if the church could help her pay her electric bill.
  - 2. Where did she get the idea that churches can do this? It is from the modern concept of the work of the church, not from the Bible

### III. ***The Problem Of The "Social Gospel"***

- A. What is the purpose of enticements and gimmicks?
- 1. Appealing to the carnal nature of man, trying to give him a fleeting moment of joy, laughter, and fun, is done for two reasons.
    - a) To draw crowds from among those who would not otherwise be attracted by the simple and pure gospel of Christ. They think that if they can make people happy, they will accept their doctrine and join their church.
    - b) To prevent their congregation from losing current members. Sadly, if someone is drawn in by carnality, most of the time they can only be kept by carnality.
  - 2. Does it work? Many times yes. You can fill a church building with people who would not otherwise be there.
    - a) However, the current "social gospel" trend would make a mockery out of Noah being a "preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5).
    - b) With the "social gospel," if no one were listening, Noah might put a ping-pong table on the ark, Noah's wife would prepare coffee

and doughnuts, and Noah's sons would dress up as clowns and entertain the people. The end result might be more people on ark, but no real repentance for sin. Would the ark have floated?

B. Is this pleasing to God?

1. The "social gospel" cannot be pleasing to God because it is a problem of carnality. This was the same problem the Corinthian church faced (1 Corinthians 3:1-3; 11:17, 20-22, 34). The answer to the problem of carnality was not to plunge the church into it but to raise it out of it! The place for social entertaining is the home.
2. Throughout history men and women have sought to take the spiritual matters God has given us and make them more appealing to the flesh (cf. Romans 15:17). But food and drink is part of the home, not part of the kingdom (Romans 14:17).
3. Jesus specifically taught against the "social gospel" concept.
  - a) Jesus taught the people to not seek the food which perishes, but "food" which endures to eternal life (John 6:27).
    - (1) One "liberal preacher" said, "We feed the people because Christ went about feeding the people."
    - (2) Yes, Jesus fed the people, but Jesus did a lot that we cannot do. He fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fish.
  - b) He taught lessons from the birds and lilies to cause us to think about right priorities (Matthew 6:19-20, 33).
    - (1) Yes, food and drink were discussed in the context of the passage.
    - (2) But the responsibility to provide this to the world was not in the church.
  - c) He instructed Martha to not be overly concerned about irrelevant, carnal matters, but to choose the good part which will never be taken away (Luke 10:38-42).

C. There is no power in the "social gospel" to make men better.

1. Providing food, recreation, and entertainment, in the final analysis, will only introduce worldliness into the church (cf. James 4:4; 1 John 3:15-17).
2. Bemoaning the fact of slow growth, a denominational preacher wrote, "Maybe it would not be out of order to stop cooking in our church kitchens; stop playing in our athletic buildings; and call for an old-fashioned prayer meeting, get back to God, back to the Bible, on fire with real love in our hearts for lost souls."

D. On the other hand, the gospel of Christ makes men better.

1. There is power in the gospel to make men better (Psalm 19:7-11; Acts 20:32; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; Hebrews 4:12). It improves and perfects one's character (2 Peter 1:3-11). It seeks internal reform (Romans 12:2).

- a) The "social gospel" has given churches the idea of pushing social reform by means of political involvement and civil government.
  - (1) For example, homosexuals are very active in using civil government, not just for tolerance and equality, but to force their lifestyle on others.
  - (2) Gay activists say they want tolerance. They claim that everyone has the right to his own beliefs. But when Tufts Christian Fellowship (TCF) at Tufts University near Boston denied a leadership position to a young lady who holds that homosexuality is not a sin, a position contrary to that taken by TCF, she pressed charges of discrimination against the group which is now being told to rewrite its constitution to make it congenial to homosexuals.
- b) Slavery was very prevalent when the gospel was first delivered, but there are no passages which demand the abolishment of slavery.
- c) However, there are many passages which teach men to love and to do good to one another (Romans 13:8; Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1).
  - (1) When men's hearts are changed, social reform will take care of itself without aggressively pushing an agenda that violates the will of God.
  - (2) Someone once said, "Jesus did not come to get the people out of the slums, but the slums out of the people."
- 2. The church provides Bible classes for all ages so that we feed on spiritual food and grow spiritually. When Paul told the elders to "feed" the flock, to what kind of food was he referring (Acts 20:28)?
- 3. The gospel of Christ is concerned with the true joy and happiness that comes from within and is lasting. Joy comes from a right relationship with God (John 17:13; Romans 5:11; 15:13; 1 John 1:1-4).

#### IV. ***What Did Jesus Build?***

- A. When Jesus promised to build His church, He was making an important announcement (Matthew 16:16-18).
  - 1. "Church" is a collective noun, much like "flock," "herd," or "group." It is a collection of people redeemed by the blood of Christ and assembled together as "stones" in a spiritual "building" (1 Peter 2:5) or "members" in a spiritual "body" (1 Corinthians 12:12).
  - 2. In a local sense (and the only sense in which the church is organized to work) the church consists of members who have banded together to do the work which God gave the church to do (Romans 16:16; 1 Corinthians 1:2).

B. What is the mission of the church?

1. The church is authorized to support the preaching of the gospel, only the gospel, and nothing but the gospel (2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 1:5). You cannot find any authority in the Lord's book for the local church to preach or teach something else, such as landscape painting, CPR, or tax planning seminars.
2. The church is authorized to edify itself. In the New Testament, this procedure always involves offering its members spiritual guidance (1 Corinthians 14:26; Ephesians 4:12). You cannot find any authority in the Bible for any other type edifying.
3. The church is authorized to aid saints in need (Acts 4:32-35; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-32; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8-9). You cannot find any authority in the Lord's book for the local church to be involved in general benevolence.

C. It is important to respect the purpose for which Jesus built His church. We are His servants, not His co-designers!

**Conclusion.** Perversions of the gospel will not save men's souls, but will condemn them to hell (Galatians 1:6-9). If anyone can produce scriptural authority for churches to get involved in social pursuits, then we need to involve ourselves in them to submit to God's will. If not, then we must urge them to get back to the business God gave the church to do, and stand firmly against the error of these modern-day corruptions. Anyone who has money can put an old man in a new suit, but only Christ can put a new man in an old suit (2 Corinthians 5:17).