Rise of the "Social Gospel"

It's not about
building basketball courts and coffee bars
to attract the non-affiliated to our church

Baptist minister

Rauschenbusch did not understand Jesus' death as an act of substitutionary atonement; rather, he came to believe that Jesus died "to substitute love for selfishness as the basis of human society." Rauschenbusch wrote that "Christianity is in its nature revolutionary" and tried to remind society of that. He taught that the Kingdom of God "is not a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."

"Jesus did not in any real sense bear the sin of some ancient Briton who beat up his wife in B. C. 56, or of some mountaineer in Tennessee who got drunk in A. D. 1917. But he did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins."

WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH
1861–1918

Rauschenbusch enumerated six sins, all of a public nature, which combined to kill Jesus. He bore their crushing attack in his body and soul. He bore them, not by sympathy, but by direct experience. Insofar as the personal sins of men have contributed to the existence of these public sins, he came into collision with the totality of evil in mankind. It requires no legal fiction of imputation to explain that "he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities."

These six "social sins" which Jesus, according to Rauschenbusch, bore on the cross:
- Religious bigotry,
- The combination of graft and political power,
- The corruption of justice,
- The mob spirit [being "the social group gone mad"] and mob action,
- Militarism,
- Class contempt

A Theology for the Social Gospel, Walter Rauschenbusch, 1917

Christians must be like God who became man in Jesus Christ, who was with "everyone equally and considered people as a subject of love and service"
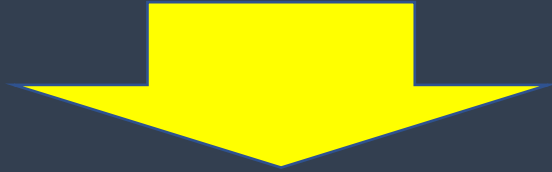
"The individualistic gospel has made the sinfulness of the individual clear, but it has not shed light on institutionalized sinfulness...It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion."

Basic Premise of the "Social Gospel" Movement

- Especially prominent in the life and work of Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, and Methodists in the North-Eastern US

"Social Gospel" Movement

- Individual sinners
  - Sin that Jesus' cross addressed is individual choice
  - My sin invariably generates harmful individual and social consequences
  - Jesus' death was to take away individuals' sins
  - Individual repentance ameliorates consequences, both individual and social

The Shift in Focus
Underpinning the "Social Gospel" Movement

- Institutional sinners
  - Sin that Jesus' cross addressed is "systemic" choice
  - Systemic sin invariably generates harmful social consequences
  - Jesus' death was to take away systemic sin
  - Only systemic repentance ameliorates consequences

The contributions made by Christianity to the working efficiency and the constructive social abilities of humanity in the past have been mainly indirect. The main aim set before Christians was to save souls from eternal woe, to have communion with God now and hereafter, and to live God-fearing lives. It was individualistic religion, concentrated on the life to come. Its social effectiveness was largely a by-product. What, now, would have been the result if Christianity had placed an equally strong emphasis on the Kingdom of God, the ideal social order?

(Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus*, pp. 73-74)

- Social settlements
  - Generally located in poor urban areas, in which volunteer middle-class "settlement workers" would live, hoping to share knowledge and culture with, and alleviate the poverty of, their low-income neighbors.
  - Most notably Hull House in Chicago operated by Jane Addams, where people from different economic backgrounds lived together
  - They were designed help the poor and immigrants improve their lives.
  - Settlement houses offered services such as daycare, education, and health care.

Practical Effects of the "Social Gospel" Movement

- YMCA/YWCA/Salvation Army/Rescue Missions
  - The YMCA was created originally to help rural youth adjust to the city without losing their religious faith, but became a powerful instrument of the Social Gospel
  - The Salvation Army, begun by a Methodist preacher, William Booth and his wife Catherine, official mission statement reads:
    - "The Salvation Army, an international movement, is an evangelical part of the universal Christian church. Its message is based on the Bible. Its ministry is motivated by the love of God. Its mission is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ and to meet human needs in His name without discrimination."
  - Gospel rescue missions (GRMs) or missions are faith-based organizations that work primarily with those experiencing homelessness by providing shelters, transitional housing, treatment programs, and outreach services. Missions are often differentiated from non-faith-based organizations because of their faith-based approach to these services.

Practical Effects of the "Social Gospel" Movement

- Church architecture changes

  Rubel Shelly tells the Woodmont Hills church in Nashville, Tenn. their new facility is not so much "a church building" as "a place to feed and house homeless people," a place for "community service to take place all day, every day" (Love Lines, 15 Feb. 1989).

- Facilities were built for childcare, abandoned women, schools, and summer vacations for the needy.

- Church architecture shifted from providing a place for the spiritual work of teaching and worship to accommodate the explosion of new services and programs.

Practical Effects of the "Social Gospel" Movement

- Preacher-training/seminary curriculum changes
  - Courses added in social ethics replacing Biblical studies
  - Departments of "Social Action/Responsibility"

    The Social Gospel "was always chiefly concerned to find out the truth about society, and on the basis of that knowledge to chart programs for ameliorating the country's social woes" (Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People [New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1972], p. 796).

Practical Effects of the "Social Gospel" Movement

- It perverts the nature of the mission of Christ.
    - Christ came into this world to save man from his sins Matthew 1:21; I Timothy 1:15
    - The only way man could be saved from his sins was through the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ.
    - Redemption of mankind refers to saving mankind from his sirs (Ephesians 1:7), not saving him from social ills.
    - To save mankind from his social problems does not demand the shedding of Jesus' precious blood.

- Hence, the concept of the social gospel, in which the works of Jesus is viewed as God saving mankind from the social ills of the world through Jesus Christ, destroys. the heart of the gospel message.

Response to the "Social Gospel"

It is true that society will be improved as a by-product of the preaching of the gospel in the same manner as saw dust is produced at a lumber mill. This, however, does not justify a lumber mill in sawing timber just to produce saw dust.

One man made this following comparison: "A man who made a living for his family as a blacksmith found that, as a by-product, he developed a strong right arm.

Finding a way to sit at home and build up his right arm while relaxing in a rocking chair would not make provision for his family." Neither does the fact that the by-product of preaching the gospel is beneficial to society justify church involvement in the social gospel.

Response to the "Social Gospel"

Further Reading

- A lecture delivered by David Edwin Harrell as a part of the Florida College lectures that has been reproduced in the Gospel Guardian and is available at https://www.wordsfitlyspoken.org/gospel_guardian/v12/v12n15p1,12-14a.html

- *The Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866*, David Edwin Harrell, available at https://digitalcommons.acu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=acu_library_books