

Think on These Things Articles

The Social Gospel, Yesterday and Today - Part 1



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One of the important issues which the church has always had to address is that of its role in society. In the Old Testament, the Lord chose Abraham to be the father of a called-out race of people. Years later, the Lord would establish the nation of Israel under the Mosaic Covenant. Detailed laws and regulations were given to Israel at the time including how that nation was to be governed, how poverty was to be dealt with, how widows and orphans were to be helped and how injustices were to be corrected. All of these matters were addressed almost exclusively within the context of the nation of Israel, with relatively minor concern for the surrounding nations. The Old Covenant would continue to be in force throughout Old Testament history until finally superseded at the dawning of the church age in Acts 2 with the coming of the Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost. While the Jewish people and the nation of Israel still retain a primary place in the plan of God, and the Lord still has an eschatological plan for Israel, presently we live in what is commonly called the church age. The church, which functions as the chosen people of God for this age, is composed of regenerate people of all nationalities. It is not a nation in an official sense and has not been given laws by which a governmental structure could function. The church, being the people of God scattered throughout the globe, cannot possibly function as the nation of Israel did during the Old Testament times.

Still, most recognize that Christians live as citizens not only of heaven but also of earth and as a result have responsibilities pertaining to life on this planet here and now. What those responsibilities are and how they are to be worked out has been the topic of much debate for almost 2000 years. The pendulum has swung at times from total disinterest in this world to the idea that solving social problems is the primary objective of the church. With the advent of the internet and other rapid forms of communication, a plethora of voices is weighing in on this issue. Most recently the shift toward the social agenda has gained the upper hand in most evangelical circles and is rapidly being given equal status with the proclamation of the gospel message. As a matter of fact, a two-tiered gospel has arisen composed of both the Great Commission and the so-called Cultural Mandate. In this paper I want to try to make some sense of all of this and draw a conclusion which I believe is faithful to the New Testament program for the church. We will begin with a glance at history.

The Social Gospel of the Past

The 1800s proved to be years in which evangelicalism was radically changed, especially in English-speaking societies. As the world moved into the nineteenth century, the effects of the Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield in the 1730s-1740s in America and the Evangelical Revival under the Wesleys in England were largely a memory. Those reading the accounts of these earlier movements of God longed for something similar but, many seemed willing to settle for the outward emotionalism of revivalism^[1] rather than follow the content-oriented approach of their fathers. Thus, when the so-called Second Great Awakening began in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1800, subsequently spreading throughout much of New England and parts of the American South, it had a

very different flavor from what Edwards and his peers experienced. Edwards believed the Great Awakening was a true revival sent by the Lord, but he also knew that there were excesses, pretenders and “false spirits” mingled in. What took place in the first half of the nineteenth century flipped the ratio. While there were undoubtedly true conversions and fervor for the Lord, there was much that was little more than fleshly passion. Nineteenth century people longed for a spiritual experience that the camp revivals and traveling evangelists seemed to provide. A good motivational speaker, such as Charles Finney, could draw huge crowds to hear his messages which often provided sensational, if temporary, results. Churches would be packed during “revivals,” but sadly, after the evangelists had moved on life returned to normal and church attendance did as well. It did not take pastors long to figure out that if they wanted large, enthusiastic meetings they would have to dump their more subdued method of teaching the Bible and offer revival-style services complete with “new means” that were field-tested and handed down by Finney and other lesser-known revivalists. This soon led to a predictable pattern. People would be whipped into emotional frenzies by evangelists and pastors through the use of new and creative techniques which were devoid of solid biblical content. When the emotions subsided, a new round of similar methods was needed to bring back the “revival.” One critic of the Finney-style revivals wrote in 1858, “Singing, shouting, jumping, talking, praying, all at the same time... in a crowded house, filled to suffocations, which led to people having fits and giving their names as converts but, as soon as the excitement was over, falling away.”[\[2\]](#)

This cycle became so common that certain sections of New England, especially the state of New York, became known as the “Burnt-over District” where the fire of revival meetings had swiped so often through some areas that people ultimately had grown resistant to the things of God. To this day, these regions remain perhaps the most spiritually hardened parts of the American landscape. It is interesting, however, that in the mid-1800s many of the standard cults that are prominent today emerged from the “Burnt-over District.” In addition, numerous utopian societies would arise at the same time and place, each offering some form of heaven on earth. All of these things appear to be the direct result of revivalism of the early 1800s which heavily promoted emotional excesses while minimizing the study of the Scriptures.

All these things dovetailed to create much confusion and division within Christian circles. By the mid-1800s, some were seeing a need to push back and establish criteria by which a true evangelical could be identified. In 1846 “the Evangelical Alliance was formed to bring together the Protestants all over the world who were the heirs of the awakening of the previous [18th] century.”[\[3\]](#) The Evangelical Alliance confirmed the standard conservative doctrines of the faith but offered four important hallmarks of an evangelical:

- belief in the inspiration, authority and sufficiency of Scripture,
- acknowledging the centrality of the cross upon which the sacrifice of Jesus provided the way of salvation for men,
- affirming the need for conversion in which by repentance and faith a sinner becomes a new creature in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit,
- and activism in which the child of God is busy presenting the gospel and ministering to those in need.[\[4\]](#)

Those who rejected the doctrinal orthodoxy of the World Evangelical Alliance (as it was also called) attempted to infiltrate it with liberal theology, but when that failed they withdrew in 1894 to form their own organization, The Open Church League, which later was renamed the National Federation of Churches and Christian Workers in 1900. By 1950 the National Federation was reorganized as the

National Council of Churches.^[5] This breaking away by the liberal factions and the forming of their own organization led to the demise of the World Evangelical Alliance. It is noteworthy, in light of the common misunderstanding that conservative Christians are the source of most ecclesiastical disunity, to mention that it was the liberals “who separated from the evangelicals to found their own organizations to promote church union among those who rejected the authority of Holy Scripture.”^[6] Liberals, both in the past and today, desire unity, but do so at the expense of doctrinal purity. They are happy to join hands with any except those who insist on certain essential truths remaining foundational to unity.

The liberal theologians (known as modernist in the late 1800s) were bringing German rationalism into English speaking churches, especially in America. Many in these churches, pastors and laymen alike, had long since abandoned the careful study and teaching of Scripture, making these churches fertile ground for heretical ideas, especially since the liberals often disguised their teachings by using the same words that evangelicals used but giving those words new meanings. Added to these factors was a move from Enlightenment thinking with its preciseness to Romanticism with its impreciseness and emphasis on feeling and experience over theology and Scripture.^[7] Together all of these threads were drawn together during the second half of the nineteenth century to produce a radical makeover in Christianity. The cardinal doctrines held dear by evangelicals since at least the Reformation were now being jettisoned. And with the denial of essential biblical truth came a shift in the focus and purpose of the church. If the incarnation was in doubt, and the Scriptures suspect, and theology itself under attack, then that left social action as the mission of the church. And thus was born what would be called the “social gospel.”

Church historian David Bebbington informs us, “The most characteristic doctrine of the social gospelers, that the kingdom of God was to be realized by social improvement, was derived primarily from the German liberal Albrecht Ritschl.”^[8] However, it is important to realize that the social gospel did not overwhelm the gospel of spiritual salvation all at once. For some time, “There was much agreement in America that the gospel was primarily a matter of spiritual salvation, but that under modern conditions it was also necessary to strive for social reform. In its origins the social gospel movement was in large part a broadening expression of evangelicalism.”^[9]

Perhaps doctrine increasingly took a back seat to social action because of pressure by influential people like George Elliot who taught, as many increasingly do today, that “salvation of the individual soul was not sufficient. Society must be saved as well as Christians.”^[10] Nevertheless, evangelical forces held their ground during most of the latter half of the century, but their front lines began to crumble by the last decade and the war was essentially lost by the turn of the century. Many pockets of resistance remained for a time, but by the twentieth century the liberals could claim virtual victory. And with that victory not only had the great truths of Scripture been undermined but the purpose of the church had been shifted from fulfillment of the Great Commission with its emphasis on evangelism and discipleship to the social gospel and saving society from itself. Probably no one has described the social gospel better than H. Richard Niebuhr who famously wrote, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross.”^[11]

By the early 1900s, most theological liberals had made social concerns central to their understanding of the gospel. Historian George Marsden writes, “While not necessarily denying the value of the traditional evangelical approach of starting with evangelism, social gospel spokesmen subordinated such themes, often suggesting that stress on evangelism had made American evangelicalism too other-worldly... and individualistic... Such themes fit well with the emerging liberal theology of the

day.”[\[12\]](#) The theology of the day was increasing acceptance of Darwinian theories, higher critical attacks on the Bible and Freudian redefining of human nature. In light of these modern challenges to the Bible and conservative evangelical thought, liberal theologians believed Christianity needed to change to survive. That which was unacceptable to modern man, such as the incarnation, the atonement, creationism, inspiration and authority of Scripture, etc., had to be rejected. That which was acceptable and appreciated by the culture was to be retained and emphasized. Western societies had little problem with the social agenda and as time moved forward the church accommodated such thinking. Of course not everyone was in lockstep with the social gospel, but by the turn of the 20th century virtually all the major denominations, schools, seminaries and Christian agencies had been infiltrated by liberal thinking, and by 1920 they had capitulated almost entirely. The test of orthodoxy had shifted from what one believed to how one lived. As Marsden states it, “The key test of Christianity was life, not doctrine.”[\[13\]](#) Drawing from Friedrich Schleiermacher, the father of Christian liberalism, what increasingly mattered was experience and not truth. Renald Showers observes:

Liberal Protestant advocates of the social gospel declared that the church should be concerned primarily with this world. It should divert its efforts from the salvation of individuals to the salvation of society. The church should bring in the kingdom of God on earth instead of teaching about a future, theocratic kingdom to be established in Person by Jesus Christ... the Church was to save the world, not be saved out of it.[\[14\]](#)

Conservatives kicked against the modernistic drift of Christianity through booklets such as *The Fundamentals* and the writings of such men as Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen. Machen, in his classic book *Christianity and Liberalism*, called liberalism a different religion altogether. Machen warned during this turbulent period, “What is today a matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires.”[\[15\]](#) His insight has proven all too sadly to be true. But neither Machen nor other conservatives were able to rescue the denominations and schools, as Princeton itself officially rejected its doctrinal roots and adopted liberalism in 1929. It was left to the conservatives to either stay within their systems and work to redeem them or separate and start new denominations, schools, churches and ministries. Many took this latter route, with Machen himself starting Westminster Theological Seminary in 1929 and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church in 1936. Many others from all denominations would follow suit including the founding of the Independent Fundamental Churches of America, the Conservative Baptists, and the General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. According to Marsden, 26 schools from Bob Jones to Wheaton College were founded during the Great Depression.[\[16\]](#) Seminaries such as Dallas Theological Seminary, mission agencies, and parachurch organizations would soon follow. The conservatives focused on evangelism, theological training and discipleship, while the liberals were increasingly defined by the social gospel accompanied by their view of the kingdom. To the liberals the “kingdom was not future or otherworldly, but ‘here and now.’ It was not external, but an internal ethical and religious force based on the ideas of Jesus.”[\[17\]](#)

The colossal differences between liberals and conservatives were crystallized around the turn of the century with the subsequent division of the two camps occurring in the 1920s and 1930s. At this point the conflict was often referred to as the fundamentalist-modernist controversy, but as the years rolled by, another division was looming, this one among the fundamentalists. By the 1940s the question of cultural and social engagement had arisen within the fundamentalists’ camps. The original fundamentalists, perhaps oversensitive to the social gospel that was at the heart of liberalism, often pushed away from any form of social action. In time, some felt that they had gone too far and needed to become more involved with the culture and improve society, as well as preach the gospel. This ultimately led to a split within the conservative camp in which the fundamentalists would take a

separatist view. That is, they would separate from any who taught false doctrines and, rather than try to infiltrate society, they would live as lights of the gospel calling men to Christ. On the other hand, the opposing position would be termed new (or neo) evangelical. Neo-evangelicals believed that the church had the mandate not only to win and disciple the lost but to engage the culture and make the world a better place to live by changing social structures that cause grief and suffering. Many see 1957 as the official rupture between fundamentalists and neo-evangelicals, for it was that year that the two groups divided over Billy Graham accepting an invitation to conduct a crusade in New York City sponsored by a consortium of conservative and liberal churches. The fundamentalists virtually anathematized Graham while neo-evangelicals made him the face of their movement.^[18] Since that time neo-evangelicals have become better organized, more influential, and more widely funded as they have united over many causes, both spiritual and cultural. Evangelicals, however, have not been without their problems. The movement has continued to spread and broaden theologically to the point that defining the word “evangelical” has become an exercise in futility. Conservatives, Pentecostals, Prosperity Gospel proponents, and even many Roman Catholics are all claiming the title evangelical, although the doctrinal beliefs between these factions differ widely. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, perhaps because of their very nature as separatists, have been increasingly marginalized and content to go about the business of fulfilling the Great Commission.

As we have now made the turn into the 21st century we can look back with some insights and some questions. Liberalism, which seemed to have won the day as the 20th century dawned, has lost most of its steam. Evangelicals make most of the waves today, but in order to do so, they have had to increasingly widen their views and doctrines to include those they would have deemed heretical in the mid 1900s. They seem to be united mostly over social action rather than the Great Commission. Without question, it is the fundamentalists who have been able to safeguard the gospel and the Scriptures, even as they have lost influence in society. As one student of the church has observed, “At root, however, it is a question of how to engage the culture without losing one’s soul. Fundamentalism feared losing its soul and did not engage the culture; evangelicalism feared being different from the culture and is in danger of losing its soul.”^[19]

The Social Agenda of Today

I was in flight from South Africa last October after three weeks of strenuous ministry and travel. I was exhausted and looking forward to sleeping throughout the night, and when I sat down beside two businessmen, I grunted a relatively polite hello and then tried to position myself for rest. The two gentlemen were gracious to my obvious desire to be left alone and began a conversation between them that would continue off and on throughout the flight. The man sitting next to me was returning from one of the interior countries of Africa from what he termed constantly as Christian “ministry.” He had been on a “missions trip” and his ministry, for several weeks, had been to work with a Christian agency to dig wells in various rural areas to provide clean water for the tribal people living there. The man next to him was on a similar venture in another African country, but he was with a social agency funded, I believe, by the Bill Gates Foundation. The two men had much in common and therefore conversation flowed. The only discernable difference that I could gather between the two was that one considered what he did “ministry” while the other considered his involvement an act of social kindness. I listened in vain throughout the night for the man who saw what he did as Christian ministry to mention something about the gospel or teaching anything about God or the Bible. By the time I was alert enough to desire to enter into the conversation I felt I could not do so without inappropriate embarrassment to the Christian man. I wanted to ask how he viewed what he had done any differently from what the Bill Gates-connected man had accomplished. After all, both dug wells for poor people, providing fresh

water (a good thing). And neither man attempted to influence the tribal people with their own views. Yet one had been on a “missions” trip, doing missional work, and the other had bettered the living conditions of tribal people as part of a private social program.

I have thought often of that conversation which I think represents some of the thinking in evangelical circles. I hear endlessly of people going on missions trips around the world, even though many of the ones I know going on such trips are not Christians themselves. On many of these adventures, there is no attempt to present anything of the gospel or provide any form of discipleship. These are purely social missions in which wells are dug, people are fed, buildings are constructed or medical attention is given. All of these are worthy causes with which the conservative evangelical church has been involved throughout the ages. Everywhere true Christianity has gone it has benefited the society which it has touched. But historically, conservative Christianity has always seen social improvement as taking a backseat to the church’s true calling of proclaiming the gospel and making disciples. It has never seen the social agenda as an end in itself – until now. The social gospel became the hallmark of the liberal church, as pointed out above, because the liberals had emptied their message and ministry of biblical truth and were left with no other “good news” than solving physical problems. Sadly, evangelicals today are increasingly adopting the missional, social gospel of liberalism.

However, it would be unfair to say that this is yet a majority opinion or action among true evangelicals. Rather, the more common approach is to espouse a two-tiered gospel which is composed of the biblical gospel of redemption and the social gospel of world betterment. While this is an upgrade from the purely missional model of liberalism it nevertheless lacks biblical warrant and endangers the true gospel of salvation. Let’s take a look.

John R. W. Stott, an early architect of the two-tiered approach, posthumously published an article in *Christianity Today* stating, “We are convinced of the power of the gospel in evangelicalism – that it brings salvation and redemption to those who respond and believe in Jesus. But it isn’t only the gospel that is powerful. All God’s truth is powerful.”^[20] We would not inherently disagree with such a statement but we need to see where it leads. Stott, who has had more influence on the Lausanne Movement^[21] than anyone, has endorsed, if not created, the vision statement of the movement: “The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world.” While this makes for a catchy slogan almost every word has to be examined carefully. Given the high emphasis on ecumenical unity at all three of the Lausanne conferences, including the latest in Cape Town in 2010, it appears that the “whole church” includes virtually all branches and traditions within Christendom including Roman Catholic and Orthodox as well as mainline denominations. The “whole gospel” will be defined by what is meant by the “whole world.” According to the Lausanne website the whole world means “becoming empowered by the Holy Spirit to alleviate world suffering brought about by economic injustice, disease, environment and poverty.”^[22] The “whole gospel” by default includes not only the good news that Jesus Christ has died to provide salvation, but also addresses the social injustices found in our world today. As further evidence of this, we turn to positional papers flowing from Lausanne III (also known as Cape Town 2010). For example, one such document from Lausanne III reads:

Cape Town 2010 must call evangelicals to recognise afresh the biblical affirmation of God’s redemptive purpose for *creation* itself. Integral mission means discerning, proclaiming, and living out, the biblical truth that the gospel is God’s good news, through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, for persons, *and* for society, *and* for creation. All three are broken and suffering because of sin; all three are included in the redeeming love and mission of God; all three must be part of the comprehensive mission of God’s people...

Christians who are working in environmental biology and creation care have a valid missional calling which needs to be recognised, encouraged and resourced by the church, for they model how to integrate the care of creation into what it means to proclaim Jesus as Lord. Caring for creation is an act of fidelity to the whole biblical gospel and the mission that flows from it.... Our missional calling demands more careful and critical consumption, creative production, prophetic denunciation, advocacy for and mobilization of the victims of world injustice. While we stand with the Micah Challenge in holding our governments accountable to their commitments to “make poverty history”, we also dedicate ourselves to “making greed history” in our own lives, churches, communities, countries and world.[\[23\]](#)

It becomes clear from such statements that Lausanne, which represents much of mainstream evangelicalism, is co-mingling a form of the social gospel with the biblical gospel. To be fair, the Lausanne leadership attempts to give evangelism the pre-eminence stating: “Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, **nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty. For both are necessary expressions of our doctrines of God and man, our love for our neighbour and our obedience to Jesus Christ. The message of salvation implies also a message of judgment upon every form of alienation, oppression and discrimination, and we should not be afraid to denounce evil and injustice wherever they exist.**”[\[24\]](#)

This statement goes to the heart of the issue. The question is not if Christians should play a responsible role in society, nor if we should denounce evil and injustice, but whether or not both “evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty,” and if so, to what extent? Later in part two of this study I will try to address this question from Scripture, but for now I would like to document that whatever the intention, the drift of much of the evangelical movement has shifted to social-political involvement at the expense of the Great Commission. As much has happened around the turn of the 20th Century, we are in danger of losing the baby (the true commission of the church) in the bath water of social activism.

First, we need to document that this concern is widespread and contagious. Some of the most popular Christian leaders and authors stress the social agenda. Francis Chan, in his wildly popular book *Crazy Love*, wants Christians to live as simply as possible in order to give more toward the alleviation of “suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America.”[\[25\]](#) I think one of the reasons Chan’s book has been received with such enthusiasm is that he is not telling people anything that our culture is not already saying. When Bill Gates and Warren Buffett pledged much of their vast fortunes toward the same agenda, the world applauded, just as it has for Chan. Chan is concerned about the reputation of the church in America, and not without reason. However, the true church doing the true work of God (calling people to Christ) will never win the world’s approval. Our message is offensive (1 Cor 1:18-25) and once the world catches on to that we are far more likely to be vilified and persecuted than we are to be cheered – as Jesus promised (Matt 5:11-12). We should find it a source of concern, not a reason for rejoicing, when the world likes us, as *Christianity Today* in its lead article in August 2011 affirmed it did.

A similar voice is David Platt’s and his book *Radical*. Platt offers better balance than Chan but still propagates a two-tiered gospel composed of the true gospel of redemption and the social gospel. While Platt is careful to elevate the true gospel, the social gospel of feeding the hungry and giving to the poor is the primary focus of the book and accounts for its popularity.[\[26\]](#) He writes, “As we meet needs on earth, we are proclaiming a gospel that transforms lives for eternity.”[\[27\]](#) The author does not advocate

the social agenda as opposed to true evangelism, as mentioned above, but he does say that caring for the poor is evidence of salvation. As a matter of fact “rich people who neglect the poor are not the people of God.”^[28] However, when we turn to the New Testament, we find that, while Christians are to be loving and generous to all people, they are never told to attempt to remedy the consequences of the sin of unbelieving humanity through social action. Instead, they are instructed to meet the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, something Platt admits in a footnote (p. 225). In fact, the church is never commissioned to rectify injustices by dealing with the symptoms of sins but to “radically” uproot sin itself through the gospel.

Well respected evangelical leader Timothy Keller offers a similar message. In his book *The Reason for God*, which offers many helpful insights, Keller nevertheless promotes the two-tiered gospel. Drawing from N.T. Wright and the “missional” understanding of Christianity, Keller infuses a social dimension into his gospel definition. Keller’s gospel is more than the good news that Christ has come to reconcile us to God; it is also solving the world’s problems of injustice, poverty and healing the troubles of this earth. He quotes N. T. Wright, not Scripture, to support his view: “The message of the resurrection is that this world matters! That the injustices and pains of this present world must now be addressed with the news that healing, justice and love have won... If Jesus Christ is truly risen from the dead, Christianity becomes good news for the whole world... Easter means that in a world where injustice, violence and degradation are endemic, God is not prepared to tolerate such things – and that we will work and plan, with all the energy of God, to implement victory of Jesus over them all.”^[29]

Later Keller makes clear what he means: “The purpose of Jesus’ coming is to put the whole world right, to renew and restore the creation, not to escape it. It is not just to bring personal forgiveness and peace, but also justice and shalom to the world... The work of the Spirit of God is not only to save souls but also to care and cultivate the face of the earth, the material world.”^[30] Scripture knows nothing of such a gospel message. Nowhere in the New Testament will you find such a commission given to the people of God. You will, however, find a similar message in the Emergent church, N.T. Wright’s New Perspective on Paul and those reviving the old “social gospel” agenda.

With this in mind we turn to N. T. Wright himself. In his *What Saint Paul Really Said* he tells us in “older theology, ‘the gospel’ is supposed to be a description of how people get saved,” or how “Christ takes our sin and we his righteousness” or something along that order.^[31] To Wright this is not what Paul meant by the gospel. The gospel instead is “the narrative proclamation of King Jesus;”^[32] [Paul] “is announcing...that Jesus is King, not just of Israel but of the whole world.”^[33] Said with greater clarity, “The gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord – Lord of the world, Lord of the cosmos, Lord of the earth, of the ozone layer, of whales and waterfalls, of trees and tortoises.”^[34] While no thinking Christian would deny the lordship of Christ over all things, nevertheless when the gospel itself becomes the message of lordship rather than the message of redemption and justification, there will necessitate a seismic shift in our understanding of why Jesus came and died and what we are to proclaim as a result. Wright leaves no doubt where he is headed: “As soon as we get this right we destroy at a stroke the disastrous dichotomy that has existed in people’s minds between ‘preaching the gospel’ on the one hand and what used to be called loosely ‘social action’ or ‘social justice’ on the other. Preaching the gospel means announcing Jesus as Lord of the world; and... we cannot make that announcement without seeking to bring that lordship to bear over every aspect of the world... its bringing the whole world under the lordship of Christ.”

Add to the above sources Rick Warren’s PEACE plan. After the success of Warren’s book *The Purpose Driven Life* he developed his PEACE plan for changing the world. PEACE is an acronym for Promote

Reconciliation, Equip Servant Leaders, Assist the Poor, Care for the Sick, and Educate the Next Generation. Originally the first letter of the acronym PEACE stood for Plant Churches and, as such, would be the only thing distinguishing the PEACE plan from any other well-meaning secular program either privately or governmentally funded. The initial idea was to motivate and coordinate churches across the globe to solve the four social problems identified in the rest of the acronym (EACE). Warren's logic is that the church is already present throughout the world and where churches were lacking more could be planted to meet these social needs. But as Warren's focus changed and he wanted to enlarge his influence, he changed the "P" from Planting Churches to Promote Reconciliation, which has removed any Christian uniqueness from the PEACE Plan.

Whether the church is to invest its time and resources in a purely social agenda is another matter altogether, one that will be taken up in the second part of this study. For now it is most interesting to see how quickly a major initiative by a leading evangelical, which attempted to offer both the gospel (assuming that planting churches included the idea of evangelism and discipleship) and social outreach, morphed into purely social betterment. If the lessons from the late 19th and early 20th centuries tell us anything, this should have been expected.

What is unfolding before us is what the Emergent leader Brian McLaren terms "missional." Missional, McLaren tells us, is "*a generous third way, between the conservative "personal Savior" gospel and liberal version of it.*"^[35] McLaren further explains, "My missional calling: blessed in this life to be a blessing to everyone on earth... My mission isn't to figure out who is already blessed, or not blessed, or unbleasable. My calling is to be blessed so I can bless everyone."^[36] He continues, "From this understanding we place less emphasis on whose lineage, rites, doctrines, structures, and terminology are right and more emphasis on whose actions, service, outreach, kindness, and effectiveness are good.... (In order) to help our world get back on the road to being truly and wholly good again, the way God created it to be..."^[37] Rob Bell adds, "For Jesus, the question wasn't how do I get into heaven? But how do I bring heaven here?...The goal isn't escaping this world but making this world the kind of place God can come to. And God is remaking us into the kind of people who can do this kind of work."^[38] The rationale of McLaren and Bell is a mere echo of the original founders of liberalism.

So far I have traced a brief overview of the history, and resulting devastation to the church, of the social gospel that saw its pre-eminence about 100 years ago. I have also attempted to document the rise of a new social gospel which is spreading rapidly within evangelical circles. It remains in part two of this study to examine what the Scriptures have to say on this subject, including the biblical role and mandate for the church.

^[1] Revivalism could be defined as an attempt to orchestrate a spiritual awakening through man-made techniques, and manipulation in contrast to revival which is often defined as a genuine movement of God.

^[2] David W. Bebbington, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism, the Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p.106.

^[3] Ibid., p.21.

^[4] See *ibid.*, pp.22-40.

[5] Robert Lightner, *Church-Union, a Layman's Guide* (Des Plaines, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1971), pp.31-32.

[6] *Ibid.*, p.62.

[7] See Bebbington, p.166.

[8] *Ibid.*, p.247.

[9] *Ibid.*, p.248.

[10] *Ibid.*, p.250.

[11] H. Richard Niebuhr

[12] George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p.29.

[13] *Ibid.*, p.34.

[14] Renald E. Showers, *What on Earth Is God Doing?* (Bellmawr, NJ: Friends of Israel, 2005), pp.79-80.

[15] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), p.137.

[16] *Ibid.*, p.194.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.50.

[18] See *Ibid.*, p.75.

[19] John H. Armstrong, General Editor, *The Compromised Church* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), p.27

[20] John R. W. Stott, "Salt and Light," *Christianity Today*, October 2011, p.41.

[21] The Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization is an Evangelical Christian that grew out of the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization and defines the movement's goals and expresses its commitment to spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was organized in part by Billy Graham and met in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. Some 2,700 participants and guests from over 150 nations meet here to discuss and promote evangelism. One result of this conference was the Lausanne Continuation Committee, which planned to sustain the movement stated at Lausanne.

[22] www.lausanne.org/cape-town-2010/faq-programme

[23] <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/cape-town-2010/1194-twg-three-wholes-condensed.html>

[24] <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html> (emphasis mine).

[25] Francis Chan, *Crazy Love*, (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p.21.

[26] David Platt, *Radical*, (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2010), pp.13-17, 19-21, 76-82, 108-140.

[27] *Ibid.*, p.135.

[28] *Ibid.*, pp.110, 115.

[29] Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*, (New York: Dutton, Penguin Group, 2008), p. 212.

[30] *Ibid.*, p.223

[31] N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1997), p.41.

[32] *Ibid.*, p.45.

[33] *Ibid.*, p.53.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp.153-154.

[35] Brian McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p.105.

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[37] *Ibid.*, p.223.

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