

The Social Gospel, Yesterday and Today - Part 1

-Dr. Gary E. Gilley

Southern View Chapel

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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 The Old Covenant would continue to be in force throughout Old Testament history until finally superseded at the dawning of the church age in Acts 2 with the coming of the Holy Spirit at the day of Pentecost.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 gospellers, 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 unbleisable. 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: Eerdmans, 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.

[36] Ibid., p.113.

[37] Ibid., p.223.

[38] Rob Bell, *Velvet Elvis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp.147, 150.

The Social Gospel, Yesterday and Today - Part 2

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In the first part of this study, we examined together the history of the social gospel as it presented itself in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and then documented a resurgence of the social gospel agenda as found at the present time. The original social gospel movement began as an appendage to the emerging liberalism that started in Germany and ultimately swept through the Western church. As the growing liberal movement matured, it left behind most doctrinal distinctives held by earlier Protestants and eventually came to be defined by social action. Today a new wave of social involvement, as a major tenant of church ministry, is flowing through evangelical churches, changing the very nature of church dynamics and outreach. The issue at hand is not whether Christians should be involved with their culture, but to what extent attempting to solve the injustices and problems of the culture is the mission of the church. This has become one of the more hotly debated concerns (some believe the hottest) within evangelism today. Has the church been commissioned to proclaim the gospel of redemption and to disciple converts, or has the church been called to improve society, or both? Liberalism would almost exclusively emphasize social causes. For example, the National Council of Churches states, “The central moral imperative of our time is the care for earth as God’s Creation.”^[1] Postmodern liberalism, as found in the emergent movement, would agree. Emergent leader Brian McLaren believes that Jesus’ message has everything to do with “poverty, slavery, and a social agenda – it is not about justification from sin.”^[2]

Fundamentalism has historically stressed evangelism and discipleship, while a growing number, if not the vast majority, of those within the middle camp of evangelicalism would claim that the church has been given a two-prong

mandate containing both spiritual and social marching orders. Read almost any issue of *Christianity Today* and you will discover that the focus of evangelicalism has shifted. Social concerns are rapidly swallowing up spiritual concerns. Let's briefly examine the rationale behind the latter view and then take a careful look at Scripture.

Support for a Two-prong Mandate

Those who back the concept that the church has been called to both disciple men and women for Christ and improve social conditions on earth do so on the basis of three primary arguments:

Old Testament Israel

When attempting to provide a biblical foundation for social involvement of the church, supporters most often turn to the teaching found in the Old Testament directed to Israel. There are numerous commands and admonishments given to Israel under the Old Covenant that have social implications. For example, we find God's concern for:

Justice: "Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to **deprive the needy of justice**" ([Isa 10:1-2a](#)). The Lord made provision for fair and impartial courts of law, not just for the poor but for all: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly" ([Lev 19:15](#)).

The poor: "Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to deprive the needy of justice and **rob the poor of My people** of their rights" ([Isa 10:1-2b](#)).

The Lord provided several means to help the poor in Israel. One method was to provide the Jewish people with a "Kinsman-redeemer" who was a close relative designated to alleviate their relative's troubles, including poverty. The book of Ruth supplies the best illustration of how this system worked, but in [Leviticus 25:25](#) we read, "If a fellow countryman of yours becomes so poor he has to sell part of his property, then his nearest kinsman is to come and buy back what his relative sold." In [Deuteronomy 15:11](#) the Lord tells Israel, "For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.'"

Widows and orphans: Quoting again from [Isaiah 10:1-2](#) the Lord tells His people, “Woe to those who enact evil statutes and to those who constantly record unjust decisions. So as to deprive the needy of justice and rob the poor of My people of their rights, so that **widows may be their spoil** and that **they may plunder the orphans.**” There is a special place in the heart of God for orphans and widows.

The hungry: One of the characteristics the Lord gives of the fool is “to keep the hungry person unsatisfied and to withhold drink from the thirsty” ([Isa 32:6](#)). Proverbs calls for the Jews to feed even their enemies: “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink” (25:21). And the Lord gives this promise, “If you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday” ([Isa 58:10](#)). Regarding the hungry, the Lord made unique provisions demanding the farmers to leave a bit of their harvest in the fields for the poor to glean: “When you reap the harvest of your land, moreover, you shall not reap the very corners of your field nor gather the gleaning of your harvest; you are to leave them for the needy and the alien. I am the Lord your God” ([Lev 23:22](#)).

These concerns for the needy, which express the heart of God, must be taken seriously, and many are contemplating such instructions afresh. For example, Francis Chan, in his bestselling book *Crazy Love*, sees Jesus’ words at the Olivet Discourse in Matthew 25 as a continuation or application of the Old Testament teachings. Chan believes the actions we take toward the poor have been set by our Lord as the paradigm to determine the validity of our faith. He backs his understanding on verses 34-40 which read,

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me *something* to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me *something* to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me.” Then the righteous will answer Him, “Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You *something* to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite you in? or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?” The King will answer and say to them, “Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, *even* the least of *them*, you did it to Me.”

Chan writes, “Jesus is saying that we show tangible love for God in how we care for the poor and the desperate as if they were Christ himself.”^[3] By way of application Chan continues, “Much of their (the poor) daily hardship and suffering could be relieved with access to food, clean water, clothing, adequate shelter, or basic medical attention. I believe that God wants His people, the church, to meet these needs.”^[4]

Jesus’ Salt and Light Metaphors

In [Matthew 5:13-16](#), Jesus tells his disciples that they are the salt and light of the world. John R. W. Stott is representative of how many people interpret these verses when he writes, “[Jesus] emphasizes the influences Christians ought to have on the non-Christian environment. The distinction between the two is clear. The world, he says, is like rotting meat. But you are to be the world’s salt. The world is like a dark night, but you are to be the world’s light... Then he goes on from the distinction to the influence. Like salt in putrefying meat, Christians are to hinder social decay. Like light in the prevailing darkness, Christians are to illumine society and show it a better way.”^[5] Francis Chan writes, “Non-churchgoers tend to see Christians as takers rather than givers. When Christians sacrifice and give wildly to the poor, that is truly a light that glimmers. The Bible teaches that the church is to be that light, that sign of hope, in an increasingly dark and hopeless world. [Matthew 5:16](#) says, ‘Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.’”^[6] The means by which believers are fulfilling Jesus’ teaching to be salt and light in the world is increasingly seen by evangelicals as being through social and political involvement. As we mobilize the church to meet the needs of the hungry, sick and poor and as we protect the environment and become active in political reform, we are seen by many as living out our salt and light obligations.

The Cultural Mandate

Recently evangelicals have been turning to what they call the “Cultural Mandate” to provide a biblical base for social action. The idea is that the Lord has actually given the church two overall and interrelated callings: The Great Commission ([Matt 28:19-20](#)) in which believers are to go into the whole world and make disciples for Christ, and the Cultural Mandate in which the church is authorized to be directly involved in physical and social issues related to the planet. No true evangelical questions the Great

Commission, but the Cultural Mandate is not so clear. The biblical teaching for the Cultural Mandate is drawn from [Genesis 1:26, 28](#) which reads,

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth”... God blessed them; and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

From this pre-Fall text has been developed the belief that the church retains the mandate given to Adam in the Garden to subdue and rule over the earth. Michael Goheen and Craig Bartholomew wrote *Living at the Crossroads* to promote this thesis. They write,

If redemption is, as the Bible teaches, the restoration of the whole of creation, then our mission is to embody this good news: every part of creational life, including the public life of our culture, is being restored. The good news will be evident in our care for the environment, in our approach to international relations, economic justice, business, media, scholarship, family, journalism, industry, and law. But if redemption were merely about an otherworldly salvation, (as, for example, Moody believed), then our mission would be reduced to the sort of evangelism that tries to get people into heaven.[7]

Nancy Pearcey virtually opens her award winning book *Total Truth* by saying that “Christians are to redeem entire cultures, not just individuals.”[8] Pearcey speaks often of the Cultural Mandate saying,

Our calling is not just to “get to heaven” but also to cultivate the earth, not just to “save souls” but also to serve God through our work. For God Himself is engaged not only in the work of salvation (special grace) but also in the work of preserving and developing His creation (common grace). When we obey the Cultural Mandate, we participate in the work of God Himself, as agents of His common grace. This is the rich content that should come to mind when we hear the word *Redemption*. The term does not refer only to a one-time conversion event. It means entering upon a lifelong quest to devote our skills and talents to building things that are

beautiful and useful, while fighting the forces of evil and sin that oppress and distort the creation.^[9]

Pearcey and company are not content with merely influencing culture or attempting to mitigate injustices. They are desirous of creating culture. In one section Pearcey mentions the social efforts of some Christians who minister to “the poor, the homeless, the addicted” but laments that “none of them attempt to transform social or cultural systems, but merely to alleviate some of the harm caused by the existing system.”^[10] It becomes apparent that many leading evangelicals see the Cultural Mandate as fully in force as it was when first given to Adam and Eve. Christians then have a charge to change culture, transform culture, create culture and subdue creation. This is seen as a duty on par with making disciples, and thus the Great Commission and the Cultural Mandate have joined hands as equal partners in fulfilling God’s mission on earth.

Biblical Examination of the Two-prong Mandate

It is important that we directly critique the three supporting arguments of this two-prong mandate that many now promote, in order to get a comprehensive understanding and lay a foundation for the more positive examination of the New Testament Scriptures on the subject.

How Should God’s Commands to Israel Be Viewed for This Age?

We could ask two questions here: Are Jewish civil laws still applicable to the New Testament church, and if they are how would they function in the church age?

First, we must recognize that the inspired authors of the New Testament express the same concerns as we find in the Old Testament. [James 1:27](#) tells us that “pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.” The early church made provisions to feed orphans and widows in [Acts 6:1-6](#) and later, as the church became more established, widows without other means of support or resources were placed on a list to be given special care ([1 Tim 5:11-16](#)). One of the primary reasons for Paul’s third missionary journey was to collect from the western churches a relief offering to help the poor believers in Jerusalem, “For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the

saints in Jerusalem.” And James calls for justice for the poor: “My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism...” ([James 2:1ff](#)). Without question the social concerns of God in the Old Testament remain the same in the church age.

However, it is often overlooked that God’s commands concerning social issues in the Old Testament were given almost exclusively to Israel, and dealt almost entirely with the needs of those living within the boundaries of geographical Israel and under direct authority of the Mosaic Law. Charles Ryrie notes that the Old Testament “does not command the establishment of justice in the world, nor the care of all the poor and oppressed in the world. It is more ‘isolationist’ than the New Testament. But it does show God’s love for justice and holiness in personal living...”^[11]

Drawing strictly from the Old Testament Scriptures yields a picture of a loving, concerned, caring God who nevertheless focused attention, with almost no exceptions, on the poor and needy living in Israel under the Theocratic kingdom and the Mosaic Law. In the Old Testament no provisions were made for the destitute living throughout the world. No social outreach to surrounding nations can be found. Therefore, to press into service the social program found in the Old Testament as a pattern for today’s global outreach to the needy is to go beyond what the Old Testament teaches. In as Israel cared for the needs of her own poor, it was every poor person who was helped. Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert encourage us to “remember that the ‘poor’ in Scripture are usually the pious poor. They are the righteous poor... The poor God favors are not the slothful poor ([Prov. 6:6-11](#); [2 Thess. 3:6-12](#)) or the disobedient poor ([Prov. 30:9](#)), but the humble poor who wait on God ([Matt. 5:3](#); [6:33](#)).”^[12]

The Meaning of Jesus’ Salt and Light Metaphors.

Jesus’ identification of His disciples as salt and light in the world is straightforward and has been the source of much contemplation throughout the years concerning what the followers of the Lord are to be like. Interpreting what Jesus said in [Matthew 5:13-16](#) in general is not difficult. Most would agree with New Testament scholar William Hendriksen who writes, “Salt, then, has especially a negative function. It combats deterioration. Similarly Christians, by showing themselves to be Christians indeed, are constantly combating moral and spiritual decay...”

Light, on the other hand, has a positive function and shines openly, publicly.”[\[13\]](#)

The specific application is where things get sticky. As noted above, many are interpreting this text to mean that believers are to engage culture through political involvement and social action. Most commentators, who are simply addressing the text with no agenda to push, do not agree. Hendriksen writes,

Now since it is the business of the church to shine for Jesus, it should not permit itself to be thrown off its course. It is not the task of the church to specialize in and deliver all kinds of pronouncements concerning economic, social, and political problems... The primary duty of the church remains the spreading forth of the message of salvation, that the lost may be found ([Luke 15:4](#); [1 Cor 9:16, 22](#); [10:33](#)), those found may be strengthened in the faith ([Eph 4:15](#); [1 Thess 3:11-13](#); [1 Pet 2:2](#); [2 Pet 3:18](#)), and God may be glorified ([John 17:4](#); [1 Cor 10:31](#)).[\[14\]](#)

Respected preacher Martin Lloyd-Jones states, “The great hope for society today is in an increasing number of individual Christians. Let the church of God concentrate on that and not waste her time and energy on matters outside her providence.”[\[15\]](#) A. W. Pink agrees, “Spiritually the world is in darkness ([2 Pet 1:19](#)) and sits in the shadow of death ([Matt 4:16](#))... By their [the believers’] preaching ignorance is to be exposed, that their hearers may be ‘turned from darkness to light’ ([Acts 26:18](#)).”[\[16\]](#) And commentator R. T. France adds,

It is only as this distinctive lifestyle is visible to others that it can have its desired effect. But that effect is also now spelled out not as the improvement and enlightenment of society as such, but rather as the glorifying of God by those outside the disciple community. The subject of this discourse, and the aim of the discipleship which it promotes, is not so much the betterment of life on earth as the implementation of the reign of God. The goal of disciples’ witness is not that others emulate their way of life, or applaud their probity, but that they recognize the source of their distinctive lifestyle in “your Father in heaven.”[\[17\]](#)

I believe these commentators have interpreted and applied the words of Jesus accurately. In the salt and light metaphors the Lord is not calling for His disciples to change society through good deeds but to live in such a way

as to glorify God ([Matt 5:16](#)). Such a lifestyle will have a beneficial effect on society in many cases, but the goal is to magnify the Lord and draw people to Him.

To help us understand this better, it would be good to observe what Jesus did while on earth (a much better question than the popular “What would Jesus do?” is “What **did** Jesus do?” The first question leads to guesswork, the second to certainty). Without doubt He often healed the sick, fed great crowds at times, and ministered to the poor and despised of society. Jesus had compassion on the hurting and rejected and spent time with sinners. But it should also be observed that Jesus spent much time with wealthy people, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He ate in the homes of well-to-do tax collectors such as Zacchaeus and powerful Pharisees. He spent time with notorious sinners such as Mary Magdalene but also with religious leaders such as Nicodemus. The financial status and social standing of people around Jesus did not seem to matter – He ministered to everyone who would listen and challenged (and often condemned) those who would not. In short, Jesus was the perfect embodiment of the command found in Leviticus: “You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly” (19:15).

It is also instructive to note what **Jesus did not do**. He healed some sick, but not all. He healed many in His immediate presence, but He established no hospitals or clinics, nor did He eradicate sickness in Israel, or on earth, although it was in His power to do so. Jesus fed up to 5000 people on occasion but He did not start a soup kitchen or breadline. He paid special attention to the poor but He did not relieve their debt or set them up in small businesses or give them loans. Jesus loved widows and orphans but did not establish a home for either. Whether Christian agencies should be established for these concerns today is another matter, but it would be going beyond both the instruction of Scripture and the example of Christ (or His apostles later in the New Testament history) to claim that we are to do so today because of what Jesus did while on earth. Jesus neither commanded us to do such things nor did He do them Himself.

Is the Cultural Mandate Still in Effect?

Contrary to much common opinion, I do not believe the Cultural Mandate is still in effect today for two reasons. First, it was only given once in Scripture and that before the fall of man. In [Genesis 1:28](#) the Lord

commanded Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” At this stage in human history, mankind was in harmony with creation. They did not battle the elements, weeds, insects or beasts. There was no fear of the animals and the animals did not fear man – they lived peacefully together. Following the Fall, however, both humans and creation were cursed and harmony between man and the physical universe was lost. Never again are humans told to subdue the earth or rule over the animal kingdom, for they are no longer capable of doing so. While man is still the chief of God’s creations and able to control and tame much of the animal kingdom ([James 3:7](#)), he is no longer able, due to sin and the curse, to either subdue the earth nor rule over the animals. The closest thing to the Cultural Mandate in the remainder of Scripture is following the Flood when God commissions Noah and his family. In [Genesis 9:1](#) a portion of the original Mandate is given for Noah’s family to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” (see also verse 7). But rather than repeat the command to subdue and rule the Lord says, “The fear of you and the terror of you will be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky... Every moving thing that is alive shall be food for you; I give it all to you, as I gave the green plant” (9:2-3). Man is no longer living in harmony with the animal kingdom; rather animals will fear man and man will consume animals.

While there will be many other commands and covenants that the Lord gives people as found in Scripture, never does He repeat the Cultural Mandate after the Fall. When we examine the New Testament for God’s directives to the church we do not find anything remotely in common with the instructions given to Adam and Eve; instead the Great Commission to make disciples of Christ is central.

A second reason I reject the Cultural Mandate as incumbent on mankind today is because of the details of the Mandate itself. Adam and Eve are called to “subdue” something. The Hebrew word for “subdue” requires an object. To subdue implies that something needed to be conquered or put in its place. The question in [Genesis 1:28](#) is what needed to be subdued prior to the Fall, since sin had not yet corrupted the human race nor any of physical creation. The only possibility seems to be Satan and the fallen angels, who were at war with God and apparently desired to rule earth. If this is the case, then part of man’s mission was to win the struggle for the earth over demonic creatures. When Adam failed, because he chose to sin,

Satan temporarily won this war and has been promoted to the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4), a role he certainly did not have prior to the Fall. Man, in his fallen state, has no ability to subdue either demonic forces or the earth, both of which will be subdued by the New Adam. The day will come when Christ will create a new heaven and earth (2 Pet 3:13); until then creation groans under the curse of sin (Rom 8:22). The Lord will ultimately subdue and conquer the devil and his followers (Rev 20:10); until that time man is no longer called to subdue demons (he is told to resist – James 4:7) or rule over the animal kingdom. We are called to be light and salt in the world (Matt 5:13) and to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:19-20).

The Church and Social Action

The general drift in evangelicalism, as we have seen, is toward adding the social action agenda to the Great Commission as the two-prong mission of the church. N. T. Wright is certain that

the call of the gospel is for the church to *implement* the victory of God in the world *through suffering love*... God’s ultimate purpose... is to rid the world of evil altogether and to establish his new creation of justice, beauty and peace. And it’s clear from the start that this was not intended simply as a distant goal for which one was compelled to wait in passive expectation. God’s future has already broken into the present in Jesus, and the church’s task consisted not least of *implementing* that achievement and thus anticipating that future. [18]

Yet some of the best thinkers within the conservative Christianity disagree. Here is a sampling:

D. A. Carson writes, “It is hard to ignore the many injunctions of Scripture to do good, to be concerned with matters of justice to show mercy, to care for the poor, to be concerned with matters of justice. [Yet] If all such responsibilities belong to the church *as a church*, to the church *as an institution*, then surely the leaders of the church... should take responsibility for them and direct them. But what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer (Acts 6:2).” [19]

Michael Horton is insightful when he writes, “Terrorism, global warming, and AIDS are problems we need to address as responsible human beings

together with non-Christians in our common life together... However, the Great Commission is not the Great Cultural Mandate... If we could resolve our top ten crises in the world today, we would still have the devil on our back, sin mastering our heart, and everlasting death as the penalty for our mutiny.”[\[20\]](#)

David Wells agrees, “Churches that actually do influence the culture – here is the paradox – distance themselves from it in their internal life. They do not offer what can already be had on secular terms in the culture. They are an alternative to it.”[\[21\]](#) Wells calls for the church to be *sola Scriptura* as opposed to *sola cultura*.[\[22\]](#)

Charles Ryrie writes, “The Christian’s primary responsibilities are evangelism and godly living. Through witnessing he changes people; through godly living he does affect society; and through private and public obedience he honors God.”[\[23\]](#)

Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert in their newly released book *What Is the Mission of the Church?* are concerned “that in all our passion for renewing the city or tackling social problems, we run the risk of marginalizing the one thing that makes Christian mission Christian: namely, making disciples of Jesus Christ.”[\[24\]](#) They maintain the mission of the church is found in the Great Commission passages, “We believe the church is sent into the world to witness to Jesus by proclaiming the gospel and making disciples of all nations. This is our task. This is our unique and central calling.”[\[25\]](#)

And John MacArthur adds, “When people look to the church to end poverty, halt human trafficking, bring drinking water to Africa, or cure AIDS, they are looking in the wrong place. The church is not commissioned to do any of these tasks.”[\[26\]](#)

If the above men have understood the New Testament correctly, and I believe they have, what has the church been commissioned to do?

The New Testament Instructions to the Individual Christian

As we have already demonstrated, Jesus’ general description of the role of His disciples in the world is to be salt and light ([Matt 5:13-16](#)). The debate surrounds the details of how to accomplish this task. In response, Jesus’ example is important and often misunderstood. Jesus showed compassion to the poor and sick and disenfranchised. He ate with these people, healed their

diseases and gave them the gospel ([Matt 9:36-38](#)). But it is important to remember that Jesus healed people primarily as a sign pointing to who He was ([Matt 9:6](#); [John 20:30](#)). And while Jesus showed personal compassion to such people, He also did not set up or authorize any campaigns dealing with injustice, world hunger, orphanages, hospitals, anti-poverty programs, or the like. This was not because He presumably did not care, but because these things were not His mission ([Luke 19:10](#)) and could possibly be a distraction to His followers. Later when Jesus commissioned His disciples, He did not send them forth to heal the world's problems but to make disciples and to teach people to obey God ([Matt 28:20](#)). But this begs the question as to what commandments the disciples were to obey and teach. The best approach to discovering what these commandments are is to examine the examples of the early Christians, especially as found in the book of Acts, and through study of the direct teachings primarily found in the epistles.

In the book of Acts we find the believers coming together for instruction in the apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer, and scattering to evangelize ([Acts 2:41-42](#)). A major task of the early Christians was to establish churches ([13:1-3](#)), but there are no examples of early Christians attempting to transform or create culture, or influence the political system in a direct way. Nor do we find them organizing programs to feed the hungry of the world or to right social injustices. Almost all of their attention was on evangelizing the lost as well as the spiritual life and physical needs of the believing community.

The teachings drawn from the epistles focus on establishing truth, combating error, correcting false living and leading Christians into godliness. The subject of society is seldom addressed, but when it is the emphasis is on being excellent representatives of Christ to the world (salt and light) ([Rom 13:1-7](#); [1 Pet 2:11-15](#); [Titus 3:1](#)). Specifically, Christians were taught to take care of their (Christians') poor ([Acts 6:1-7](#); [I Timothy 5:3-16](#); [1 John 3:17](#); [James 2:15-17](#)), handle their own legal differences ([1 Cor 6:1-8](#)), and discipline their rebellious people (1 Cor 5). But they were not instructed to take care of society's poor, handle its legal issues or discipline its sinners. In addition they were to treat their employees fairly ([James 5:1-4](#)). Passages such as [1 John 3:17](#) and [James 2:15-17](#) could have implications for the treatment of unbelievers, but since the rest of the New Testament instruction is directed almost exclusively toward treatment of believers, it seems best to apply these verses primarily to Christians as well.

Instructions to the Corporate Body—the Church

In the New Testament we find the church as a body (an institution) coming together to worship God, receive the instruction of the Word ([2 Tim 3:16-17](#)) and the Lord's Supper ([1 Cor 11:17-34](#)), and participating in body life (1 Cor 12). The Scriptures are clear that God's people must do good, show mercy, care for the poor, and be concerned with matters of justice in every aspect of society. But there is never any indication that the church as an institution is to see this as its task. If it were to do so, then surely the leaders of the church (elders/deacons) should take responsibility for them and direct them. "But," as Carson notes, "what we find in the New Testament is that the initial leaders, the apostles, were careful to carve out for themselves the primacy of teaching the Word of God and prayer ([Acts 6:2](#)). Even matters of justice within the congregation were in some measure handed over to other Spirit-filled men ([Acts 6:1-7](#)). When the distinctive duties of elders are canvassed, the priority of the ministry of the Word and prayer is paramount,"^[27] not organizing community and social outreaches.

Conclusion:

What this brief overview of the New Testament shows is that the church, as the church, is never given the task of transforming or creating culture. Its sole biblical mandate to the world was, and is, to make disciples. Christians as individuals are to be salt and light in our world which may take many forms. Individual believers may very well be involved, alongside the unbeliever and within biblical parameters, in politics, social action and protecting God's creation. Much variety on the cultural level is allowed by our Lord. But it must not be minimized that the New Testament example and precept is that followers of Christ are to disciple people for Him which includes evangelism and training in obedience.

What then is the mission of the church? This is the question at the root of current evangelical debates about social engagement. Is the mission of the church to address all of the needs of all people, or is it more limited in scope? It is currently popular to understand the mission of the church as that of evangelization, discipleship, meeting the needs of both believers and unbelievers and transforming society. But when we draw our marching orders from the New Testament rather than the culture (*sola Scriptura* rather than *sola cultura* as Wells frames it), it becomes clear that the task of the church is to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, making disciples of all

who come to Christ ([Matt 28:18-20](#)) and caring for the needy who become part of the body of Christ ([1 Tim 5:16](#); [Gal 2:10](#)). Broader social action is not expressly prohibited, and certainly should be of concern for all God's people as citizens of earth, but it should not be equated with these two essential obligations.

Historically, it has proven almost impossible for the church to keep the biblical command of the Great Commission in balance with the Cultural Mandate, once a cultural mandate is accepted as part of the mission of the church. We saw this in part one of this study when in the late 1800s liberal theologians taught that it was imperative for the church to step up and change the social and industrial conditions in the United States. Charlie Sheldon's bestselling book *In His Steps* (1897) reduced Christianity to, "What would Jesus Do?" and was one of the most popular and prominent books of the Social Gospel era. Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) became known as the father of the "Social Gospel" movement. He believed the church should remedy societal ills as the temporary kingdom of God.[\[28\]](#) The Social Gospel of the 1800s swallowed up the church of that day and ultimately gutted the evangelical church of the gospel, turning it into a social agency. Those following this philosophy would abandon the Christ-given mission of making disciples for the task of improving society. Those churches and Christians who saw the error of the Social Gospel continued to center their lives and ministries on the Great Commission. It is the descendents of these very churches and believers who are now being influenced to widen their understanding of the calling of Christ to include a social improving agenda. Unless there is a return to the biblical mandate given in the New Testament, the evangelical church is in danger of repeating the same error of the 19th and 20th century church with predictable results.

[\[1\]](#) Quoted in *Right Thinking in a World Gone Wrong* p. 154.

[\[2\]](#) Brian McLaren, *A New Kind of Christian*, pp. 135,137.

[\[3\]](#) Francis Chan, *Crazy Love* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2008), p. 119.

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 140.

[\[5\]](#) John R. W. Stott, "Salt & Light, Four Ways Christians Can Influence the World," *Christianity Today*, Oct. 2011; pp. 40-41.

- [6] Francis Chan, p. 140.
- [7] Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads*, (Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 2008), p. 66.
- [8] Nancy Pearcey, *Total Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), p. 17.
- [9] *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49 (emphasis hers).
- [10] *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- [11] Charles Ryrie, *The Christian & Social Responsibility* (Tyndale Seminary Press, 2008), p. 38.
- [12] Kevin DeYoung and Great Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church?* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), p. 175.
- [13] William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 1977, pp. 282.
- [14] *Ibid.*, pp. 283-284.
- [15] D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studied in the Sermon on the Mount Vol 1*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 158.
- [16] Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953). 48-49.
- [17] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary of the New Testament, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), p. 177.
- [18] N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), pp 98, 102 (emphasis his).
- [19] D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; 2008), p. 151.
- [20] Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2009), p. 164.
- [21] David Well, *The Courage to be Protestant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), pp. 224.
- [22] *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- [23] Charles Ryrie, p. 69.
- [24] Kevin DeYoung and Great Gilbert, p. 22.
- [25] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- [26] John MacArthur, *Right thinking in a World Gone Wrong* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2009), p. 213.
- [27] D. A. Carson, p. 151.

[28] Christopher Cone, Gen. Ed., *Dispensationalism Tomorrow and Beyond, A Theological Collection in Honor of Charles C. Ryrie*, (Ft. Worth, Texas: Tyndale Seminary Press , 2008), pp. 442-445.