

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."³

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. The Lausanne leadership does try to give evangelism 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."⁴

This statement goes to the heart of the issue. The question is not whether Christians should play a responsible role in society, or whether we should denounce evil and injustice, but whether "evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty," and if so, to what extent?

This concern is widespread and contagious. Some of the most popular Christian leaders and authors stress the social agenda. Francis Chan, in his book *Crazy Love*, wants Christians to live as simply as possible in order to



The Social Gospel of the Past

by Gary E. Gilley

Evangelicalism changed radically in the 19th century. The effects of the Great Awakening in the 1730s-1740s in America and the Evangelical Revival in England were a memory. Many longed for something similar but seemed willing to settle for the outward emotionalism¹ instead of the content-oriented approach of their fathers. Thus, when the so-called Second Great Awakening began in Cane Ridge, Ky., in 1800 and spread throughout much of New England and parts of the American South, it differed greatly from the previous century's revival.

Jonathan Edwards believed the Great Awakening was a true revival, but he also knew that there were excesses, pretenders, and "false spirits" mingled in. While there were undoubtedly true conversions and fervor for the Lord in the 19th century revivals, much of it was fleshly passion. A good speaker, such as Charles Finney, could draw huge crowds. Churches would be packed during "revivals," but after the evangelists had moved on, life returned to its pre-revival state.

Many pastors decided to offer revival-style services. One critic of the Finney-style revivals wrote that in 1858: "Singing, shouting, jumping, talking, praying, all at the same time ... in a crowded house, filled to suffocation," according to a more sober Congregational missionary, led to people having fits and giving in 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 and

the state of New York became known as the "Burnt-over District" where the fire of revival meetings had swept 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 this same area.

By the mid-1800s, some saw a need to 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 century."³ The Evangelical Alliance confirmed the standard doctrines of the faith and offered four hallmarks of an Evangelical:

- Belief in the inspiration, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture.
- Acknowledgement of the centrality of the cross, upon which Jesus' sacrifice provided the way of salvation for men.
- Affirmation of 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.
- 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, tried

to infiltrate it with liberal theology. 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.

The liberal theologians (known as “modernists” in the late 1800s) were bringing German rationalism into English-speaking churches, especially in America. Many in these churches had abandoned the careful study and teaching of Scripture, making these churches fertile ground for heresy.

Added to this was a move from the precise thinking of the Enlightenment to Romanticism and emphasis on feeling and experience over theology and Scripture.⁶ Together all of these threads were combined during the second half of the 19th century to produce a radical makeover in Christianity. Doctrines held dear by Evangelicals were abandoned. 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 the “social gospel” was born.

Church historian David Bebbington wrote:

“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 theologian Albrecht Ritschl.”⁷

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.”⁸

Perhaps doctrine took a back seat to social action because of pressure by people such as George Eliot who taught that “salvation of the individual soul was not sufficient. Society must be saved as well as Christians.”⁹

Nevertheless, evangelical forces held their ground during most of the latter half of the century, but the front lines began to crumble by the last decade and the war was essentially lost by 1900. And with that loss 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 wrote, “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”¹⁰

By the early 1900s, most theological liberals had made social concerns central to their understanding of the Gospel. Historian George Marsden wrote:

“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 otherworldly ... and individualistic ... Such themes fit well with the emerging liberal theology of the day.”¹¹

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give more toward the alleviation of “suffering in the world and change the reputation of His bride in America.”⁵ 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. The Church’s message is offensive (1 Corinthians 1:18-25) and we are far more likely to be vilified and persecuted than cheered — as Jesus promised (Matthew 5:11-12). We should find it a source of concern, not a reason for rejoicing, when the world likes us.

A similar voice is David Platt’s and his book *Radical*. Platt offers better balance than Chan but still propagates a two-pronged gospel: the 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.⁶ He writes, “as we meet needs on earth, we are proclaiming a gospel that transforms lives for eternity.”⁷ The author does not advocate the social agenda as opposed to true evangelism, but he does say that caring for the poor is evidence of salvation. He writes, “rich people who neglect the poor are not the people of God.”⁸

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 try to alleviate the consequences of the sin of unbelieving humanity through social action. Instead, they are told to supply the needs of brothers and sisters in Christ, something Platt admits in a footnote.⁹ In fact, the Church is never commissioned to rectify injustices by dealing with the symptoms of sin, but to “radically” uproot sin

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.

The test of orthodoxy had shifted from what one believed to how one lived. As Marsden stated, "The key test of Christianity was life, not doctrine."¹² Drawing from Freidrich Schleiermacher, the father of Christian liberalism, what increasingly mattered was experience and not truth. Renald Showers observed:

"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."¹³

Conservatives fought back with booklets such as *The Fundamentals* and the writings of such men as Princeton professor J. Gresham Machen. Machen, in his book *Christianity and Liberalism*, called liberalism a different religion altogether. He warned, "What is to-day matter of academic speculation begins tomorrow to move armies and pull down empires."¹⁴ But neither Machen nor others 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.¹⁵ 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 ideals of Jesus."¹⁶

By the 1940s the question of cultural and social engagement arose within fundamentalism. The original Fundamentalists often pushed away from any form of social action. In time, some believed that they had gone too far. This 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 also 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 excommunicated Graham while Neo-evangelicals made him the face of their movement.¹⁷

Since that time Neo-evangelicals have become better organized and wealthier. Evangelicals, however, have not been without their problems. The movement has continued to broaden theologically to the point that Conservatives, Pentecostals, prosperity gospel proponents, and even Roman Catholics claim the title "Evangelical."

Liberalism today has lost most of its steam. Evangelicals make most of the waves today, but have had to increasingly widen their views and doctrines to include those they would have deemed heretical 60 years ago. They seem to be united mostly over social action rather than the Great Commission. Without question, Fundamentalists have safeguarded the Gospel and the Scriptures even as they have lost influence in society. As one student of the Church has observed, "Fundamentalism feared losing its soul and so did not engage the culture; evangelicalism fears being different from the culture and is in danger of losing its soul."¹⁸

Endnotes:

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, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2005, pg. 106, ellipsis in original.
3. *Ibid.*, pg. 21.
4. See *ibid.*, pp. 22-40.
5. Robert P. Lightner, *Church Union, A Layman's Guide*. Des Plaines, Ill.: Regular Baptist Press, 1971, pp. 31-32.
6. See *The Dominance of Evangelicalism*, op.

cit., pg. 166.
 7. Ibid., pg. 247.
 8. Ibid., pg. 248.
 9. Ibid., pg. 250.
 10. H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*. New York: Harper and Row, 1959, pg. 193. This statement is also cited in "H. Richard Niebuhr" on Wikipedia. Document accessed at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H._Richard_Niebuhr.
 11. George M. Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*. Grand

Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1991, pg. 29.
 12. Ibid., pg. 34.
 13. Renald E. Showers, *What on Earth Is God Doing?* Bellmawr, N.J.: Friends of Israel, 2003, pp. 79, 80.
 14. Machen cited in George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, pg. 137.
 15. Ibid., pg. 194.
 16. Ibid., pg. 50.

17. *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, op. cit., pg. 73.
 18. David F. Wells, "The Word in the World." Document accessed at: www.the-highway.com/wordworld_Wells.html. This online article originally appeared in John H. Armstrong, General Editor, *The Compromised Church: The Present Evangelical Crisis*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1998. The quotation is on page 27 of the book.



EDITORIALS

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- There, too, may be within the seeker a deep dissatisfaction with life in general or in one's own life that creates great feelings of vulnerability.
- There also may be a desire for spiritual meaning and direction.
- Many have a desire for a cause to live for.
- Added to that, there may be a total ignorance of group manipulation.
- There often is also a desire to be accepted and loved. This is usually encountered in the cult's courtship phase (called "love-bombing"), but not sustained by the group over the long haul. Once in, it is all work and no play.
- The cult leader can also push our greed button with the aforementioned promises of hundredfold (or even a thousandfold) in return for our investment. It is sometimes called "sowing your seed." The old nature loves to gamble. This is one of the crafty schemes that has been working for many years. The cult leader gets the "seed" and we are left with an empty plot.

Now we can understand at least a little bit of the tricks men play and how they prey. Memorize Ephesians 4:14. Be aware of the "cunning and craftiness of men." We have been warned.

—GRF

NEWS UPDATES

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Despite his believing that people have turned to the Bible because of his erroneous and, as he admits, sinful predictions, Camping fails to see how much damage his false predictions have done, including causing an unbelieving world to scoff at the idea that Jesus will return again, as He promised to do. Christians and the Bible are mocked and ridiculed because of Camping's failed predictions.

—JGS/MKG

A RIVER OF RED INK

More than a decade following the last service of the famed "Pensacola Revival," the church staff and membership of the Brownsville Assembly of God are still feeling reverberations from this so-called spiritual outpouring. The meetings reportedly drew 5,500 people four nights a week and lasted six years. Yet the results — or more correctly, the aftermath — of the revival left the church on the brink of financial collapse; a fact little known outside the church family according to a recent Associated Press report.

By the time the revival, called "A River is Flowing," dried up, it had amassed \$11.5 million in debt. That figure has been reduced to \$6.5 million after the sale of property and expense reduction. The Rev. Evon Horton, the church's current pastor, hopes to wipe out the remaining debt through a donation campaign which he claims God gave to him in a dream. "We can be debt-free if just 7,000 of the millions of people who attended the revival help out" by giving \$1,000 each toward the debt removal, Horton said.

The AP article indicated that the "paid staff is down to six from around 50." Also it said Sunday attendance at the church's two services was between 800 and 1,000, and that "most pews go empty in the 2,200-seat sanctuary."

At the height of the revival services, it was more than Holy Ghost power that was flowing at Brownsville — large amounts of cash were flowing as well. Following months of investigative work, the *Pensacola News Journal* published a series of articles which included the financial benefits acquired by the revival's leadership. The newspaper estimated that for 1997, "the total revival revenue was between \$4.3 million and \$5.4 million for that one year." It reported that the offerings from the Friday evening services — said to be a weekly amount of \$20,000 — were given directly to the revival's evangelist Stephen Hill. The church's pastor, James Kilpatrick, as well as the revival's "theologian," Michael Brown, were also harvesting their own fiscal fortunes, purchasing homes and property in the hundreds of thousands of dollars. The church itself began buying homes adjacent to its campus, then razing them for parking. Horton told the AP "he's still unsure what happened to all the money."