

Andrews University  
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary

THE SOCIAL GOSPEL MOVEMENT AND ADVENTISM IN LATE  
NINETEENTH TO EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY IN  
THE UNITED STATES

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Michelet William

## **Abstract**

The Social Gospel is a religious social-reform movement prominent in the United States from about 1870 to 1920. Advocates of the movement interpreted the Kingdom of God as requiring social as well as individual salvation and sought the betterment of industrialized society through application of the biblical principles of charity and justice. The Social Gospel is rooted in American Protestant liberalism, which was largely influenced by the ideologies of the Progressive Era during late nineteenth century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, while distancing itself from the Social Gospel mainly due to theological reasons, had fought for social issues of its time by implementing a form of social welfare programs as part of the gospel rather than replacing it. Adventists' primary focus had been on the salvation of the soul of individuals, drawing on the belief that total social redemption is possible only with God who will fulfill it at the Second Coming of Jesus Christ.

## Introduction

The Social Gospel is a religious social-reform movement prominent in the United States from about 1870 to 1920. Advocates of the movement interpreted the Kingdom of God as requiring social as well as individual salvation and sought the betterment of industrialized society through application of the biblical principles of charity and justice.<sup>1</sup> Orchestrated by Christian modernists, the movement borrowed familiar biblical symbols and identified them with socialist program of radical changes in late nineteenth-century society. It aims at “building the kingdom of God and ushering in a millennium of peace and justice through the reorganization of social patterns.”<sup>2</sup> The Social Gospel applied Christianity to social issues in contemporary society, calling Christians to apply the moral precepts embedded in Jesus’ life to a “broader array of social issues relating to industrialization, urbanization, and capitalism.”<sup>3</sup>

This paper attempts to help understand the reticence of the Seventh-day Church toward the Social Gospel movement. It gives a historical overview of the movement, identifying the major influences on its emergence, and discusses through the writings of Walter Rauschenbusch, a prominent figure of the Social Gospel, its theological presuppositions, especially with regards to soteriology, ecclesiology, missiology, and eschatology.

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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Social Gospel – American Religious Movement,” (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Social-Gospel>). Accessed October 4, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions*, vol. 1 (Farmington Hills, MI: GALE, 2017), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Cara Burnidge, “Protestant Liberalism,” *Encyclopedia of Religion in America* 1:1786.

## Historical Development

### Theological and Philosophical Context

The formation of American Protestant liberalism,<sup>4</sup> which became a full-fledged doctrine in the nineteenth century, was influenced by Europe with several movements. A first influence came from Arminianism, or Arminian theology. Jacob Arminius (1559/60–1609) “rejected the Calvinist notion of predestination and stressed individualism and free will.”<sup>5</sup> Arminians believed that individuals played a role in obtaining their salvation, and many American Protestants who embraced liberalism used Arminian theology to critique Calvinist ideas. A second influence came from the European Enlightenment with philosophers such as John Locke (1632–1704) who argued that “humans received knowledge through their ability to reason rather than from God.”<sup>6</sup> Other scholars such as Sir Isaac Newton (1642–1727) “challenged the dominant Christian conceptions of the universe by explaining nature through physical laws rather than revelation.”<sup>7</sup> American liberalism was further influenced by “Enlightenment values of intellectual inquiry, religious toleration, and the use of reason and empiricism.”<sup>8</sup>

Protestant American liberalism developed into a distinctive movement with the

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<sup>4</sup> Burnidge “Protestant Liberalism,” 1:1783. “In religion, *liberalism* refers not to a political paradigm but to philosophical and religious positions with social, economic, and political implications. Unlike conservative Protestants, Liberal Protestants display an interest in adapting Protestant thought and practice to modern challenges. Unlike secular humanism, liberal Protestants prefer to work within existing social, economic and political structure.”

<sup>5</sup> Burnidge, 1:1783.

<sup>6</sup> Burnidge, 1:1783.

<sup>7</sup> Burnidge, 1:1783.

<sup>8</sup> Burnidge, 1:1783.

emergence of Unitarianism in the early nineteenth-century. Unitarians distanced themselves from other Protestants on the basis of their “denial of the Trinity, the notion that God exists in the three forms: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Major proponents of Unitarianism are William Ellery Channing (1780–1842)—who insisted to use reason when reading the Bible, and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1838)—who challenged the historicity of Jesus’ miracles, “insisted that supernatural beings were not necessary for revelation because humans could pursue and find religious truth,” and founded a “loosely knit intellectual and literary movement known as transcendentalism.”<sup>9</sup>

Alongside the consolidation of Protestant liberalism among Unitarians and transcendentalists, liberalism also had a presence among evangelicals. Main figures, collectively known as “Princes of the Pulpit,” included Episcopalian Philips Brooks (1885–1893), Congregationalists Horace Bushnell (1802–1876), Henry Ward Beecher (1813–1887), and Lyman Abbott (1835–1922). They “rejected orthodox Calvinism and its strict adherence to the doctrine of original sin and determinism,” while they “embraced biblical criticism, science, and scholarship.”

Liberalism moved toward maturity following the Civil War and the rapid industrialization and urbanization, when American scholars began to follow trends among European intellectuals who “dramatically departed from traditional approaches to Christian thought and history.”<sup>10</sup> Under the influence of German theologians such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889), Adolf Von Harnack (1851–1930), there had been a greater

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<sup>9</sup> Burnidge, 1:1784.

<sup>10</sup> Burnidge, 1:1785.

focus on both “redemption of sin and regeneration of society for the kingdom of God,” and “critical examination of historical texts,” especially the Gospels, which, according to Harnack, “did not require metaphysics, dogma, or even institutions.”<sup>11</sup> Comparative religion became a field of study in higher education, with Max Mueller (1823–1900) promoting the “scientific” study of religion. The field of social science emerged in the early twentieth century as an empirical study of formally “moral” topics such as economic, politics, and society.<sup>12</sup> Scholars, mainly Protestant liberals could not help bringing their philosophical worldviews to their scientific science. Thus, social science and theology merged with the academic study of Christian ethics. “University courses that addressed Christianity’s approach to public issues such as poverty, capitalism, and unionization became common place.”<sup>13</sup> Thus was born another form of Protestant liberalism, the Social Gospel.

#### Socio-economic context

In 1873 Mark Twain in collaboration with the journalist-editor Charles Dudley Warner wrote a novel, which they titled *The Gilded Age: A Tale of Today*. The title was inspired by one of William Shakespeare’s plays, the *Life and Death of King John*, describing the life of John, the king of England (1166–1216), in particular a stance in Act 4, Scene 2, in which one baron, Lord Salisbury, replies to king John:

*To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,  
To throw a perfume on the violet,  
To smooth the ice, or add another hue*

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<sup>11</sup> Burnidge, 1:1786.

<sup>12</sup> Burnidge, 1:1786.

<sup>13</sup> Burnidge, 1:1786.

*Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light to seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,  
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.*<sup>14</sup>

Thus, Twain and Warner saw their own era as a gilded age,

“an epoch of excess, of consumption not merely conspicuous but pornographic. . . It was an age of robber barons and political bosses; of obscene wealth acquired and disposal of in total disregard to ‘how to other half lives’; an age of industrial expansion at the expense of the land; an age of American imperial adventurism culminating in the Spanish-American War, annexation of the Philippines, and annexation of Hawaii, all in 1898. . . . An amoral epoch of exuberant political cynicism and chronic political mediocrity.”<sup>15</sup>

The Social Gospel emerged in a period of great prosperity and indecent social disparity in the United States. It was the American period between the Civil War and the Dawn of the twentieth century.<sup>16</sup>

Nell Irvin Painter reported that by the end of the nineteenth-century, steel production soared to such an extent that United States of America (USA) had exceeded the combined outputs of its two rivals, Great Britain and Germany, and could boast to become the “granary of the world.”<sup>17</sup> In 1919, the USA has outproduced the rest of the world in agriculture, manufactured goods and credits, with the help of technological innovation. New inventions helped harness electricity, causing a revolution in industrial production and bringing the gift of light to millions of homes. In fast-growing cities, subways and street railroads allowed people to live miles away from their work.

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<sup>14</sup> Allan Axelrod, *The Gilded Age: 1876 – 1912 Overture to the American Century* (New York, NY: Sterling, 2017), 3.

<sup>15</sup> Axelrod, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Axelrod, 2.

<sup>17</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), xvii.

Automobiles became a popular symbol of progress. Ford Company adopted the moving assembly line in 1914 and was able to produce nearly a quarter of a million cars per year. The gross national product (GNP), reckoned in current prices, rose from about \$11 billion in the mid-1880s to \$84 billion in 1919.

However, wealth was not distributed evenly.<sup>18</sup> Here is how Painter describes the picture:

The wealthiest 1 percent of families in 1890 owned 51 percent of the real and personal property; the percent of families at the bottom owned only 1.2 percent of all the property. Together, the wealthy and well-to-do (12 percent of families) owned 86 percent of the wealth. The poorer and middle classes, who represented 88 percent of families, owned 14 percent of the wealth.<sup>19</sup>

Andrew Carnegie, a famous prosperous businessman during the Gilded Age period, praised and justified the social inequality of his days. He exposed his philosophy of “Wealth” in an article he published in June 1889 in the *North American Review*. For Carnegie, the USA owes its wonderful material progress to the law of competition, which needs to be sustained at all costs, and even if it is “sometimes hard on the individual, it is best for the race, because it insures the survival of the fittest in every department.”<sup>20</sup> He further states that “We accept and welcome great inequality of environment; the concentration of business, industrial and commercial, in the hands of a few; and the law of competition between these, as being not only beneficial, but essential to the future

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<sup>18</sup> Painter, xix.

<sup>19</sup> Painter, xx.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Carnegie, *The Gospel of Wealth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1962), 16.



progress of the human race.”<sup>21</sup> He insists that this “intense Individualism,” despite its negative social effects, is the foundation upon which civilization rests.

The Social Gospel had come as an answer to the Gospel of Wealth that was propounded by Andrew Carnegie.<sup>22</sup>

### **Main Proponents of the Social Gospel**

The Social Gospel was especially promulgated among liberal Protestant ministers, including Washington Gladden and Lyman Abbott, and was shaped by the persuasive works of Charles Monroe Sheldon (*In His Steps: “What Would Jesus Do?”*, 1897) and Walter Rauschenbusch (*Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 1907).<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the leading advocate of the Social Gospel Movement in the United States was Washington Gladden. Beginning in the 1880s, Gladden served as the minister of the First Congregational Church in Columbus, Ohio. Gladden encouraged his congregants to play an active role in community life by attacking immorality in their fellow citizens and government officials.<sup>24</sup> C. George Fry and Joel R. Kurz dedicate an entire book to him, entitled *Washington Gladden as a Preacher of the Social Gospel, 1882–1918*. Fry and Kurz describe him as “a modern Isaiah and [was] the prophet calling for justice in industry, for

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<sup>21</sup> Carnegie, 16–17.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Hiebert, *The Theology of the Social Gospel and the Seventh-day Adventists* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University, 1971), 5.

<sup>23</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Social Gospel – American Religious Movement,” (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Social-Gospel>). Accessed October 4, 2018.

<sup>24</sup> Ohio History Central, *Social Gospel Movement* (nd). ([http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Social\\_Gospel\\_Movement](http://www.ohiohistorycentral.org/w/Social_Gospel_Movement)). Accessed October 4, 2018.

he observed the increase and the concentration of wealth.”<sup>25</sup> Washington Gladden had understood Christianity as “something that was to be part of every aspect of life, and would realize the establishment of the kingdom of God in this world.”<sup>26</sup>

Walter Rauschenbusch, was as clergyman and theology professor who led the Social Gospel movement in the United States. Reinhold Neibuhr calls Rauschenbusch “the real founder of social Christianity in this country. . . . Its most brilliant and generally satisfying exponent.”<sup>27</sup> Rauschenbusch brought a harsh critique against systemic theology for its limitation in helping the minister assist the people on the social level.

Rauschenbusch and Gladden “saw great possibilities in combining forces against the social evils such as poverty, disease, and educational needs.”<sup>28</sup>

## **The Theology of the Social Gospel**

### Soteriology

The Social Gospel movement is usually associated with liberal theology. However, Dorrien observes that many theological liberals of the Progressive Era were not social gospellers.<sup>29</sup> He states that “The distinguishing feature of the social gospel was not its theological liberalism or its political reformism, but rather its emphasis on social

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<sup>25</sup> C. Georges Fry and Joel R. Kurz, *Washington Gladden as a Preacher of the Social Gospel, 1882–1918* (Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>26</sup> Hiebert, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Cover page of the book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*.

<sup>28</sup> Hiebert, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Notable examples theological liberals who distanced themselves from the Social Gospel include: Borden Parker Browne, Charles A. Briggs, Philipps Brooks, Frank Hugh Foster, Georges Harris, Albert C. Knudson, Theodore Munger, and Arthur C. McGiffert (Dorrien, 102).

salvation.”<sup>30</sup>

Rauschenbusch rejected what he calls the “old theology” that stresses on the “power and guilt of sin,” and awakens the “sense of responsibility of the individual.”<sup>31</sup> The Social Gospel theology rather concentrates on “questions of public morality, on wrongs done by whole classes or profession of men, on sins which enervate and submerge entire mill towns or agricultural states.”<sup>32</sup> Rauschenbusch considers the doctrine of the fall based on the Genesis account as “the product of speculative interest mainly, and that the most energetic consciousness of sin can exist without drawing from this doctrine.”<sup>33</sup> Sin is not rebellion of a man against God as theology defines it. “Sin is not a private transaction between the sinner and God.”<sup>34</sup> Rauschenbusch invites to “democratize the conception of God; then the definition of sin will become more realistic.”<sup>35</sup> Here is his definition of sin:

Sin is essentially selfishness. That definition is more in harmony with the social gospel than with any individualistic type of religion. The sinful mind, then, is the unsocial and anti-social mind. To find the climax of sin we must not linger over a man who swears, or sneers at religion, or denies the mystery of the trinity, but put our hands on social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into private property of a small class, or have left the peasant labourers cowed, degraded,

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<sup>30</sup> Garry Dorrien, “Social Salvation: The Social Gospel as Theology and Economics,” in *The Social Gospel in American Religion*, ed. Christopher Evans (New York, NY: New York University, 2017), 102.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1917), 36.

<sup>32</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1917), 36.

<sup>33</sup> Rauschenbusch, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Rauschenbusch, 48.

<sup>35</sup> Rauschenbusch, 48.

demoralized, and without rights in the land. When we find such in history, or in present-day life, we shall know we have struck real rebellion against God on the higher levels of sin.<sup>36</sup>

Since sin has been defined in social terms, salvation is social as well.

Rauschenbusch calls groups or communities<sup>37</sup> “super-personal forces,” which are immeasurably more potent and enduring than individuals.”<sup>38</sup> A group has “a psychology of its own, which can be systematically studied.”<sup>39</sup> Groups or organizations “count in the moral world not only through their authority over their members, but through their influence in the general social life.”<sup>40</sup> While they are created with good intentions, they often “drift into evil under sinister leadership, or under the pressure of need or temptation,”<sup>41</sup> and when this happens, they become super-personal forces of evil.

The Kingdom of Evil is not formed of evil spirits, with Satan at their head. Instead, it is “the laws, institutions, doctrines, literature, art, and manners,” which, manipulated by selfish leaders, “have been social means of infection which have bred

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<sup>36</sup> Rauschenbusch, 50. See also Richard D. Knudten, *The Systematic Thought of Washington Gladden* (New York, NY: Humanity Press, 1968), 70. “Social problems are products of sin expressed in selfishness. ‘It isn’t the trusts; it isn’t the corporations; it isn’t the trades unions; it isn’t the tariff; it isn’t capitalism—these are only symptoms: it is the rampant and riotous selfishness in human hearts; it is the disposition to look out for ourselves, to get what we can, and have a good time, and not care much what becomes of the hindmost.’”

<sup>37</sup> “High school fraternities; any college community; a trade union; the I. W. W.; the Socialist Party; Tammany Hall; any military organization; an officers’ corps; the police force; the inside group of a local political party; the Free Masons; the Grange; the legal profession; a conspiracy like the Black Hand” (Rauschenbusch, 71).

<sup>38</sup> Rauschenbusch, 71.

<sup>39</sup> Rauschenbusch, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Rauschenbusch, 71–72.

<sup>41</sup> Rauschenbusch, 71.

new evils for generations.”<sup>42</sup>

Rauschenbusch does not deny the need for personal salvation. He states that “If sin is selfishness, salvation must be a change which turns a man from self to God and humanity.”<sup>43</sup> Conversion is not only a break with our own sinful past, but “in many cases it is also a break with the sinful past of a social group,”<sup>44</sup> and sanctification is obtained, not through individual mystical experience, but “through increase fellowship with God and man.”<sup>45</sup>

However, what the Social Gospel considers of highest importance is the redemption of the “super-personal forces,” the social groups that dominate individuals, assimilating them to their moral standards, and enforce them by the social sanctions of approval or disapproval.<sup>46</sup>

The salvation of the super-personal beings is by coming under the law of Christ. The fundamental step of repentance and conversion for professions and organizations is to give up monopoly power and the incomes derived from legalized extortion, and to come under the law of service, content with a fair income for honest work.<sup>47</sup>

### Ecclesiology and Missiology

What is the functions of the Church in salvation? Rauschenbusch argues that the

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<sup>42</sup> Rauschenbusch, 81.

<sup>43</sup> Rauschenbusch, 97.

<sup>44</sup> Rauschenbusch, 99.

<sup>45</sup> Rauschenbusch, 102.

<sup>46</sup> Rauschenbusch, 110.

<sup>47</sup> Rauschenbusch, 117.

Church is “the social factor in salvation.”<sup>48</sup> As a super-personal being, it needs to be “organized around Jesus Christ as its impeding power,” and should have “for its sole or chief object to embody his spirit in its life and to carry him into human thought and the conduct of affairs.”<sup>49</sup> He states that “the saving power of the Church does not rest in its institutional character, on its continuity, its ordination, its ministry, or its doctrine. It rests on the presence of the Kingdom of God within her.”<sup>50</sup>

Rauschenbusch sees the Church and the Kingdom of God as distinct and differing in the spheres of interest and emphasis. The church is for worship, while the kingdom of God is for righteousness, or the area of practical application of what has been learned in the Church. The Church deals primarily with believers, and the kingdom with mankind as a whole.<sup>51</sup> The Kingdom of God becomes the field of labor for Christians, and “this kingdom includes rich and poor, and all classes are to be saved through the Social Gospel, as the Kingdom of God is restored to its fullness.”<sup>52</sup>

### Eschatology

The idea of a millennial hope was seen as a force of benefit to mankind, along with the social Gospel.

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<sup>48</sup> Rauschenbusch, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Rauschenbusch, 120.

<sup>50</sup> Rauschenbusch, 129.

<sup>51</sup> Hiebert, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Hiebert, 4.

It was crude in its form but wholly right in its substance. The duration of a thousand years is a guess and immaterial. . . . But the ideal of a social life in which the law of Christ shall prevail, and in which its prevalence shall prevail, and in which its prevalence shall result in peace, justice and a glorious blossoming of human life, is a Christian ideal. . . . Our chief interest in any millennium is the desire for a social order in which the worth and freedom of every least human being will be honoured and protected; . . . and in which the spiritual good of humanity will be set high above the private profit interests of all materialistic groups.<sup>53</sup>

However, regarding the way this Christian ideal will be fulfilled, Rauschenbusch urges to “shift from catastrophe to development” terminology. He sees the coming of the Kingdom of God in all ethical and spiritual progress of humankind. In other terms, we must refrain from speaking of eschatology in apocalyptic terms—destruction, catastrophes, fires<sup>54</sup>—as expounded in Old and New Testament books, particularly the books of Daniel and Revelation, since we have “no obligation to accept the mythical ideas and cosmic speculations of the Hebrew people, their limited geography, their primitive astronomy, their historical outlook of the book of Daniel, or the Babylonian and Persian ideas which flowed into their religious thought.”<sup>55</sup> He urges to follow the lead of the fourth gospel—the Gospel of John, in which the future is translated in the present tense:

There are many antichrists now present; the coming of the Comforter takes the place of the parousia; the judgment takes place when men accept or reject the light; the spiritual transformation into eternal life takes place now. Eschatology is dissolved in Christology. The Kingdom of God gives way to the Church.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Rauschenbusch, 224.

<sup>54</sup> See Washing Gladden, 117. “Christ’s presence let Gladden to ignore futuristic eschatology.”

<sup>55</sup> Rauschenbusch, 217.

<sup>56</sup> Rauschenbusch, 218. Note however that Rauschenbusch does not confine the Kingdom of God to the single institution of the Church (see page 225).

## **The Impact of the Social Gospel**

Labour reforms—including abolition of child labour, a shorter workweek, a living wage, and factory regulation—constituted the Social Gospel’s most prominent concerns. During the 1930s many of these ideals were realized through the rise of organized labour and the legislation of the New Deal by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.<sup>57</sup>

Followers of the Social Gospel Movement implemented numerous reforms to help other people. One of their most important contributions to society was the creation of settlement houses. Settlement houses provided numerous opportunities for less fortunate people, including access to education, free or low-cost health care, free or low-cost housing, and innumerable other benefits.

The Social Gospel movement may be credited for the aid of churches like the Presbyterians, Baptists, Congregationalists and others to uplift the lower classes. Hiebert reported that in May of 1908 the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church gave expressions of support in a social creed which concerned mainly the welfare of the industrial labor class. He further noted that in December of the same year, a similar statement was released by the Federal Council of Churches:<sup>58</sup>

“Great attention was devoted to the relations between capital and labor, and the movement influenced the shortening of the working day. . . . Courses on social ethics were added to seminary curricula, and denominational departments of social action were founded under social Christian influence. . . . many institutional churches to bring social services to the urban masses were erected. The social

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<sup>57</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica*, “Social Gospel – American Religious Movement,” (<https://www.britannica.com/event/Social-Gospel>). Accessed October 4, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Hiebert, 7.



emphasis was strongly felt on the mission field, where agricultural, medical, and educational missions were expanded.”<sup>59</sup>

For Gary Dorrien, “It was the Social Gospel movement of the Progressive Era that created the ecumenical and social justice agencies that remain the heart of modern social Christianity.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Critique of the Social Gospel by Reinold Neibuhr**

Former defendant of the Social Gospel, Reinold Neibuhr, questions its importance. Alongside Rauschenbusch, Neibuhr used to view sin as social phenomenon and capitalism as immoral, but after witnessing the two World Wars, he changed his mind against the concepts of the Social Gospel. He found that the Social Gospel was unrealistic in its outlook, and that it contradicts the Bible and its concept of man.

Although the Social Gospel was socially concerned, it was essentially nonpolitical and it had no understanding whatever of the nature and uses of power. It assumed, just as did evangelical revivalism, that social transformation could be accomplished through moral crusades—through voluntary, nonlegal, noninstitutional methods.<sup>61</sup>

Neibuhr was skeptical about the idea that a perfect world could be established in the present corrupt world, as the leaders of the Social Gospel pretended. Neibuhr

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<sup>59</sup> Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1959), 518.

<sup>60</sup> Dorrien, 102.

<sup>61</sup> “religion,” *Great Issues in American Life. A Conspectus, Vol. II: The Annals of America: A History* (Chicago: Wm, 1968), 434.

described the Social Gospel as “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgement through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross”<sup>62</sup>

### **Social Gospel Theology and Seventh-day Adventists**

Arthur Hiebert, an Adventist theologian, criticized the Social Gospel, arguing that “the foundation of its theology was not balanced, and would therefore not be able to endure.”<sup>63</sup> He observed that Adventists were not blind nor indifferent to the conditions of laboring classes and the poor for whom the future had little or nothing to offer. Ellen White wrote, “Light has been given me that the cities will be filled with confusion, violence, and crime, and that these things will increase till the end of this earth’s history.”<sup>64</sup> She added, “The conditions that face Christian workers in the great cities, constitute a solemn appeal for untiring effort in behalf of the millions living within the shadow of impending doom.”<sup>65</sup>

Reflecting on Ellen White’s statements above, Hiebert invites the Adventist church to find in them “more of realism than either pessimism or optimism.”<sup>66</sup> The social gospel of the Seventh-day Adventists “was not at all inclusive but rather a part of a

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<sup>62</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God of America* (Chicago, IL: Willett, Clark & Co., 1937), 77.

<sup>63</sup> Hiebert, 5.

<sup>64</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. VII (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 84.

<sup>65</sup> Ellen G. White, *Present Truth and Review and Herald Articles*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Review and Herald), 27.

<sup>66</sup> Hiebert, 10.

greater gospel.”<sup>67</sup> Concern for the unfortunate lower classes of the cities can easily be overlooked while stressing so many other areas at the same time. Thus, White encourages the people in these terms, “There is to be a working of our cities as they never have been worked. That which should have been done years ago is now to be done speedily. The work will be more difficult to do now than it would have been years ago; but it will be done.”<sup>68</sup>

Adventists believed that the main object in working with people was to be the conversion of men and women to Christ. A transformation of the heart brings remedy to the problem at its root, and when this objective has been reached, the person would be on his way to become independent of others, and able to work for Christ toward the salvation of others<sup>69</sup>

Neibert calls for balance in every part of the work. He warns those who would use their own judgement and go to the extremes, and invites them to heed the counsels that Ellen G. White gave to the church: “We talk and write much about the neglected poor; should not some attention be given also to the neglected rich?”<sup>70</sup> In order to avoid any misunderstanding by going to the extreme of neglecting the poor, she would later write in 1890:

Let none receive the idea that the poor and unlearned are to be neglected. Right methods of labor will not in any sense exclude these. It was one of the evidence of

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<sup>67</sup> Hiebert, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ellen G. White, *Loma Linda Messages in Science of Metropolitan Medical Missionary Evangelism*, ed. W. A. Westerhout (Loma Linda: Loma Linda University, 1969), 3.

<sup>69</sup> Hiebert, 10, 11.

<sup>70</sup> Ellen G. White, *Evangelism* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1946), 555.

Christ's Messiahship that the poor had the gospel preached to them. We should study to give all classes an opportunity to understand the special truths for this time.<sup>71</sup>

Other important considerations in Adventist social welfare include the distinction between those poor who have caused their own poverty and those who came into that situation of distress without being able to control the circumstances. Adventists should focus to the latter group, and while helping them, it is of utmost importance to restore their self-respect and dignity. Rather than keeping them in a state of dependency, they should be given opportunities to be of benefit to others. Ellen White states that "Instead of encouraging the poor that they can have their eating and drinking provided free or nearly so, we should place them where they can help themselves. We should endeavor to provide them with work, and if necessary teach them how to work."<sup>72</sup> Another way to build their self-esteem is to encourage the poor to have a part in giving to God: "The poor are not to be excluded from the privilege of giving."<sup>73</sup>

Hiebert gives a synopsis of the Adventist Church's overall attitude in the context of the rise of the Social Gospel movement in late eighteenth to early nineteenth century:

The main goal of the Adventist movement was to restore men to his proper relationship to God, yet various areas of need were taken care of. Examples of this includes the work of J. H. Kellogg who trained medical workers to take care of the sick, but also "provide the funds for the education of many young people,

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<sup>71</sup> White, *Evangelism*, 555.

<sup>72</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. VI (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 278.

<sup>73</sup> Ellen G. White, *Welfare Ministry* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1952) 203.

virtually rearing 40 boys and girls, and adopting many of them.”<sup>74</sup> Mrs. Haskell built a home for orphans near Battle Creek, Michigan, to take care of the need in that area. Another remarkable action is the work of J. E. White in 1893. He initiated a floating mission station on the Mississippi River called “The Morning Star” for the benefit of the negro people.<sup>75</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The Social Gospel is rooted in American Protestant liberalism, which was largely influenced by the ideologies of the Progressive Era during late nineteenth century. The Seventh-day Adventist Church, while distancing itself from the Social Gospel mainly due to theological reasons, had fought for social issues of its time by implementing a form of social welfare programs as part of the gospel rather than replacing it. Adventists’ primary focus had been on the salvation of the soul of individuals, drawing on the belief that total social redemption is in the hands of God who will fulfill it at the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>74</sup> Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. IX (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 41.

<sup>75</sup> Hiebert, 13.

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