



# A THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

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## FOREWORD

IN April, 1917, I had the honour of delivering four lectures on the Nathaniel W. Taylor Foundation before the Annual Convocation of the Yale School of Religion. These lectures are herewith presented in elaborated form.

The Taylor Lectures are expected to deal with some theme in Doctrinal Theology, but the Faculty in their invitation indicated that a discussion of some phase of the social problem would be welcome. I have tried to obey this suggestion and still to remain well within the original purpose of the Foundation by taking as my subject, "A Theology for the Social Gospel."

Of my qualifications for this subject I have reason to think modestly, for I am not a doctrinal theologian either by professional training or by personal habits of mind. Professional duty and intellectual liking have made me a teacher of Church History, and the events of my life, interpreted by my religious experiences, have laid the social problems on my mind. On the other hand, it may be that the necessity of approaching systematic theology from the outside may be of real advantage. Theology has often received its most fruitful impulses when secular life and movements have set it new problems.

Of the subject itself I have no cause to speak modestly. Its consideration is of the highest importance for the future of theology and religion. It bristles with intel-

## FOREWORD

lectual problems. This book had to be written some time, and as far as I know, nobody has yet written it. I offer my attempt until some other man comes along who can plough deeper and straighter.

I wish to assure the reader who hesitates in the vestibule, that the purpose of this book is wholly positive and constructive. It is just as orthodox as the Gospel would allow. I have dedicated it to an eminent representative of the older theology in order to express my deep gratitude for what I have received from it, and to clasp hands through him with all whose thought has been formed by Jesus Christ.

My fraternal thanks are due to my friends, Professor James Bishop Thomas, Ph.D., of the University of the South, and Professor F. W. C. Meyer of Rochester Theological Seminary, who have given a critical reading to my manuscript and have made valuable suggestions.

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# A THEOLOGY FOR THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

## CHAPTER I

### THE CHALLENGE OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL TO THEOLOGY

WE have a social gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it.

This is the main proposition of this book. The first three chapters are to show that a readjustment and expansion of theology, so that it will furnish an adequate intellectual basis for the social gospel, is necessary, feasible, desirable, and legitimate. The remainder of the book offers concrete suggestions how some of the most important sections of doctrinal theology may be expanded and readjusted to make room for the religious convictions summed up in "the social gospel."

Some of my readers, who know the age, the tenacity, and the monumental character of theology well, will smile at the audacity of this proposal. Others, who know theology still better, will treat this venture very seriously. If theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die. Many now regard it as dead. The social gospel needs a theology to make it effective; but theology needs the social gospel to vitalize it. The work

attempted in this book is doomed to futility if it has only the personal ideas of the author behind it. It is worthy of consideration only if the needs of a new epoch are seeking expression in it, and in that case its personal defects are of slight importance.

The argument of this book is built on the conviction that the social gospel is a permanent addition to our spiritual outlook and that its arrival constitutes a stage in the development of the Christian religion.

We need not waste words to prove that the social gospel is being preached. It is no longer a prophetic and occasional note. It is a novelty only in backward social or religious communities. The social gospel has become orthodox.

It is not only preached. It has set new problems for local church work, and has turned the pastoral and organizing work of the ministry into new and constructive directions. It has imparted a wider vision and a more statesmanlike grasp to the foreign mission enterprise. In home missions its advent was signalized by the publication, in 1885, of "Our Country" by Josiah Strong. (*Venerabile nomen!*) That book lifted the entire home mission problem to a higher level. The religious literature uttering the social gospel is notable both for its volume and its vitality and conviction. The emotional fervour of the new convictions has created prayers and hymns of social aspiration, for which the newer hymn books are making room. Conservative denominations have formally committed themselves to the fundamental ideas of the social gospel and their practical application.



The plans of great interdenominational organizations are inspired by it. It has become a constructive force in American politics.

This new orientation, which is observable in all parts of our religious life, is not simply a prudent adjustment of church methods to changed conditions. There is religious compulsion behind it. Those who are in touch with the student population know what the impulse to social service means to college men and women. It is the most religious element in the life of many of them. Among ministerial students there is an almost impatient demand for a proper social outlet. Some hesitate to enter the regular ministry at all because they doubt whether it will offer them sufficient opportunity and freedom to utter and apply their social convictions. For many ministers who have come under the influence of the social gospel in mature years, it has signified a religious crisis, and where it has been met successfully, it has brought fresh joy and power, and a distinct enlargement of mind. It has taken the place of conventional religion in the lives of many outside the Church. It constitutes the moral power in the propaganda of Socialism.

All those social groups which distinctly face toward the future, clearly show their need and craving for a social interpretation and application of Christianity. Whoever wants to hold audiences of working people must establish some connection between religion and their social feelings and experiences. The religious organizations dealing with college men and women know that any appeal which leaves out the social note is likely to meet a listless audience. The most effective evangelists for these two

groups are men who have thoroughly embodied the social gospel in their religious life and thought. When the great evangelistic effort of the "Men and Religion Forward Movement" was first planned, its organizers made room for "Social Service" very hesitatingly. But as soon as the movement was tried out before the public, it became clear that only the meetings which offered the people the social application of religion were striking fire and drawing crowds.

The Great War has dwarfed and submerged all other issues, including our social problems. But in fact the war is the most acute and tremendous social problem of all. All whose Christianity has not been ditched by the catastrophe are demanding a christianizing of international relations. The demand for disarmament and permanent peace, for the rights of the small nations against the imperialistic and colonizing powers, for freedom of the seas and of trade routes, for orderly settlement of grievances,—these are demands for social righteousness and fraternity on the largest scale. Before the War the social gospel dealt with social classes; to-day it is being translated into international terms. The ultimate cause of the war was the same lust for easy and unearned gain which has created the internal social evils under which every nation has suffered. The social problem and the war problem are fundamentally one problem, and the social gospel faces both. After the War the social gospel will "come back" with pent-up energy and clearer knowledge.

The social movement is the most important ethical and spiritual movement in the modern world, and the social

gospel is the response of the Christian consciousness to it. Therefore it had to be. The social gospel registers the fact that for the first time in history the spirit of Christianity has had a chance to form a working partnership with real social and psychological science. It is the religious reaction on the historic advent of democracy. It seeks to put the democratic spirit, which the Church inherited from Jesus and the prophets, once more in control of the institutions and teachings of the Church.<sup>1</sup>

The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul that comes to him. But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it. It has not evoked faith in the will and power of God to redeem the permanent institutions of human society from their inherited guilt of oppression and extortion. Both our sense of sin and our faith in salvation have fallen short of the realities under its teaching. The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience. It calls on us for the

<sup>1</sup> In his "Social Idealism and the Changing Theology," embodying the Taylor Lectures for 1912, Professor Gerald B. Smith has shown clearly the discrepancy created by the aristocratic attitude of authority in theology and the spread of democracy in modern ethical life, and has insisted that a readjustment is necessary in theology at this point to conform it to our ethical ideals. Professor Smith expresses the fear that our critical methods by themselves will lead only to a barren intellectualism. That feeling has been one motive in the writing of the present book.

faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.

Now, if this insight and religious outlook become common to large and vigorous sections of the Christian Church, the solutions of life contained in the old theological system will seem puny and inadequate. Our faith will be larger than the intellectual system which subtends it. Can theology expand to meet the growth of faith? The biblical studies have responded to the spiritual hunger aroused by the social gospel. The historical interpretation of the Bible has put the religious personalities, their spiritual struggles, their growth, and their utterances, into social connection with the community life of which they were part. This method of interpretation has given back the Bible to men of modernized intelligence and has made it the feeder of faith in the social gospel. The studies of "practical theology" are all in a process of rejuvenation and expansion in order to create competent leadership for the Church, and most of these changes are due to the rise of new ideals created by the social gospel. What, then, will doctrinal theology do to meet the new situation? Can it ground and anchor the social gospel in the eternal truths of our religion and build its main ideas into the systematic structure of christian doctrine?

Theology is not superior to the gospel. It exists to aid the preaching of salvation. Its business is to make the essential facts and principles of Christianity so simple and clear, so adequate and mighty, that all who preach or teach the gospel, both ministers and laymen, can draw

on its stores and deliver a complete and unclouded Christian message. When the progress of humanity creates new tasks, such as world-wide missions, or new problems, such as the social problem, theology must connect these with the old fundamentals of our faith and make them Christian tasks and problems.

The adjustment of the Christian message to the regeneration of the social order is plainly one of the most difficult tasks ever laid on the intellect of religious leaders. The pioneers of the social gospel have had a hard time trying to consolidate their old faith and their new aim. Some have lost their faith; others have come out of the struggle with crippled formulations of truth. Does not our traditional theology deserve some of the blame for this spiritual wastage because it left these men without spiritual support and allowed them to become the vicarious victims of our theological inefficiency? If our theology is silent on social salvation, we compel college men and women, workingmen, and theological students, to choose between an unsocial system of theology and an irreligious system of social salvation. It is not hard to predict the outcome. If we seek to keep Christian doctrine unchanged, we shall ensure its abandonment.

Instead of being an aid in the development of the social gospel, systematic theology has often been a real clog. When a minister speaks to his people about child labour or the exploitation of the lowly by the strong; when he insists on adequate food, education, recreation, and a really human opportunity for all, there is response. People are moved by plain human feeling and by the instinctive convictions which they have learned from Jesus

Christ. But at once there are doubting and dissenting voices. We are told that environment has no saving power; regeneration is what men need; we can not have a regenerate society without regenerate individuals; we do not live for this world but for the life to come; it is not the function of the church to deal with economic questions; any effort to change the social order before the coming of the Lord is foredoomed to failure. These objections all issue from the theological consciousness created by traditional church teaching. These half-truths are the proper product of a half-way system of theology in which there is no room for social redemption. Thus the Church is halting between two voices that call it. On the one side is the voice of the living Christ amid living men to-day; on the other side is the voice of past ages embodied in theology. Who will say that the authority of this voice has never confused our Christian judgment and paralysed our determination to establish God's kingdom on earth?

Those who have gone through the struggle for a clear faith in the social gospel would probably agree that the doctrinal theology in which they were brought up, was one of the most baffling hindrances in their spiritual crisis, and that all their mental energies were taxed to overcome the weight of its traditions. They were fortunate if they promptly discovered some recent theological book which showed them at least the possibility of conceiving Christian doctrine in social terms, and made them conscious of a fellowship of faith in their climb toward the light. The situation would be much worse if Christian thought were nourished on doctrine only. Fortu-

nately our hymns and prayers have a richer consciousness of solidarity than individualistic theology. But even today many ministers have a kind of dumb-bell system of thought, with the social gospel at one end and individual salvation at the other end, and an attenuated connection between them. The strength of our faith is in its unity. Religion wants wholeness of life. We need a rounded system of doctrine large enough to take in all our spiritual interests.

In short, we need a theology large enough to contain the social gospel, and alive and productive enough not to hamper it.

## CHAPTER II

### THE DIFFICULTIES OF THEOLOGICAL READJUSTMENT

ANY demand for changes in Christian doctrine is sure to cause a quiver of apprehension and distress. Religious truth is the truth our souls live by and it is too dear to be scrapped and made over. Even to grant the possibility of the need of change means a loss of assurance and certitude, and that hurts. The passionate interest of many in the beliefs which have been the food of their spiritual life for years creates a social resistance to change in religious thought. Every generation tries to put its doctrine on a high shelf where the children can not reach it. For instance, the Methodist Church will not be charged with sitting on the clock, but its creed has been put beyond the reach even of the highest body of the Church. Its "Articles of Religion" were an adaptation of the Thirty Nine Articles of the Church of England by John Wesley; to-day they seem to have the better of the starry universe, for they can never change: "The General Conference shall not revoke, alter, nor change our Articles of Religion, nor establish any new standards or rules of doctrine contrary to our present existing and established standards of doctrine."

I have entire sympathy with the conservative instinct which shrinks from giving up any of the dear possessions



which have made life holy for us. We have none too much of them left. It is a comfort to me to know that the changes required to make room for the social gospel are not destructive but constructive. They involve addition and not subtraction. The social gospel calls for an expansion in the scope of salvation and for more religious dynamic to do the work of God. It requires more faith and not less. It offers a more thorough and durable salvation. It is able to create a more searching sense of sin and to preach repentance to the respectable and mighty who have ridden humanity to the mouth of hell.

The attacks on our inherited theology have usually come from the intellectuals who are galled by the yoke of uncritical and unhistorical beliefs brought down from pre-scientific centuries. They are entirely within their right in insisting that what is scientifically impossible shall not be laid as an obligatory belief on the neck of modern men in the name of religion. But the rational subtractions of liberalism do not necessarily make religion more religious. We have to snuff the candle to remove the burnt-out wick, but we may snuff out the flame, and all the matches may prove to be damp. Critical clarifying is decidedly necessary, but power in religion comes only through the consciousness of a great elementary need which compels men to lay hold of God anew. The social gospel speaks to such a need, and where a real harmony has been established it has put new fire and power into the old faith.

The power of conservatism is not all due to religious tenderness and loyalty. Some of it results from less worthy causes. Doctrinal theology is in less direct contact