

## Cash and Conscience

### What do Christians owe the poor?

An excerpt from Smalling's book,  
**THE NEW EVANGELICAL SOCIAL GOSPEL**

A young lady, professing faith in Christ although still living in fornication, was applying for church membership.

“Can you imagine?” the pastor exclaimed. “A church elder was passing judgment on that girl although he himself has two Lexus’ in his driveway!” He paused for effect, evidently expecting the large audience to respond aghast. Most of us did not respond at all, so he repeated the illustration with greater detail, having assumed we misunderstood.

We were waiting for a punch line. We saw nothing wrong with an elder suggesting the church board postpone receiving into membership a young lady living in fornication. What the two Lexus’ had to do with it was lost on us.

Not lost on the pastor, though. For him, wealth mitigated the right to evaluate others, even when the need to do so is inherent in the ordained office.

Few social gospel advocates would endorse such an illustration, though all would understand the mindset that provoked it. In the thinking of this movement, economic inequality is an *ipso facto* evil. Affluence is therefore a sin. Without this assumption, the pastor’s two Lexus’ illustration makes no sense.

This presupposition made no sense to most of us in the audience, so we did not respond to it. Knowing it is also a fundamental assumption in most new social gospel thinking, we will not respond to it in that context either.

#### **Is inequality a bad word?**

The supposition that inequality is a *de facto* evil permeates liberalism. It is the old saw, *profit is a dirty word*. Socialism itself is based on this assumption.

No new social gospel teacher labels himself a socialist and few are socio-politically liberal. Yet the mindset has filtered down from Rauschenbusch, who was an avowed socialist. Much of his thinking had its roots in socialist theory and the last chapter of his book extolls the wonderful potential of communism. This was written in 1907 well before the horrors of socialism in its Nazi and communist forms and its subsequent failures today.

The idea within the new social gospel movement of a fight for social justice is really an odd syncretism between a liberal socio-political mindset and evangelical Christianity. Some call themselves “progressives,” a term borrowed from liberal politics.

## **Equality versus equity**

The social gospel mind, like most liberals, confuses equality with equity. Equality means everyone having the same or being the same. Equity means everyone having what they have earned. Taking money from someone who has earned it and giving it to someone who has not earned it is robbery. Ironically, it is the liberal who is promoting injustice.

## **American Christians**

The new social gospel message is clear. American Christians must bear the brunt of responsibility for poverty alleviation in the world.

If you are a North American Christian, the reality of our society's vast wealth presents you with an enormous responsibility, for throughout the Scriptures God's people are commanded to show compassion to the poor. In fact, doing so is simply part of our job description as followers of Jesus Christ (Mt.25:31-46).  
**(WHEN HELPING HURTS, P.13)**

In context, the writers are referring to disparity between America and other nations, not just within the United States.

The bottom line is that the commitment of American Christians, the wealthiest Christians in all history, are making to the world is just about 2 percent of 2 percent— actually about five ten-thousandths of our income. **(THE HOLE IN OUR GOSPEL, P.217)**

Why American Christians owe more than that to the world remains unclear. In fact, why they owe anything at all is equally unclear. For some new social gospel teachers, the mere fact of economic disparity is sufficient justification for attributing guilt or responsibility.

We must attack the materialism of our culture and the maldistribution of the nation's wealth and services.<sup>1</sup> **(CHICAGO DECLARATION, EVANGELICALS FOR SOCIAL ACTION)**

## **What do we owe the poor?**

The refrain among liberal Christians is that we owe support to the poor. This confuses the difference between charity and debt. The Bible teaches the virtue of charity to those in need but never calls it a debt owed.

It could only be a debt if we had robbed the poor of something they had earned. This would be justice, not charity. The socialist and liberal mind seems incapable of making this distinction.

## **The importance of inequality**

Inequality is not necessarily a bad thing nor equality good. The Bible itself makes this emphatically clear.

In the parable of the talents, Matthew 25, Jesus describes how a master put money into the hands of servants to invest for gain. It is the one who did not make a profit who got punished.

While this parable is a lesson in faithfulness, not economics, it nevertheless shows prospering through investment is not inherently evil.

If we wanted to stretch this it a bit, we could say it indicates a Christian who fails to become unequal when he has the opportunity to do so, is unfaithful to his master. In such a case, economic equality would deserve reproach.

A talent was a lot of money in those days. For the servant who earned five talents, it was a lot of profit. Not getting rich would have been a sin for him. So inequality is not, in and of itself, an issue.

## **A sound of freedom**

A new sound of freedom rings through the New Testament that challenges the new social gospel mindset regarding the Christian and his money. We see this in Peter's encounter with Ananias and Sapphira.

*Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? 4 Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? Acts 5:3*

By the words "*belong to you*," Peter acknowledged the right of Ananias and Sapphira to own property and do with it as they pleased. They could contribute or not. God would have said nothing if they had kept it for themselves. Liberty of conscience in personal belongings was a given in the mind of Peter.

We underestimate how truly free we are in Christ. We have the freedom to give or not give according to our conscience and without reproach from God or man.

Paul makes this point very clear in his teaching on the law of sowing and reaping. In the context, he is talking about the Christian and money.

*Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. 7 Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. 8 And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all*

*things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. 2Cor.9:6-8*

Paul never commands anybody to give anything. Nor does he suggest God will punish if they give nothing. He merely elaborates a godly principle. If we sow money for God's work, we will be a blessing to believers in need and be blessed ourselves.

We are free to refrain from sowing if we wish. We are also free to not reap a harvest, either. That is our choice and God will honor it. We are truly that free.

The new social gospel movement seems to want to impose moral laws from the Old Testament, though the New Testament makes them matters of personal conscience.

### **The right to enjoy it**

Paul's instructions to the wealthy merit a series of sermons of their own. An often-overlooked principle is found here.

*Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

*Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. 19 In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life. 1Tim.6:17-19*

Besides his warnings to the rich to avoid arrogance and be generous, he also tells them this: Enjoy your wealth to the full! ...*God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

### **Entitlement**

The concept of entitlement is central to the mindset of the prevailing liberal culture today. We see it in politics all the time. We resent a person poorer than we suggesting he is entitled to part of what we have on the sole grounds we have more. We resent it even further when a politician tells us he is right.

The ultimate comes when a preacher declares the poor and the politician are both right because as a Christian I owe it. The cherry is put on the top when the preacher says I owe double because I am an American.

This is a pervasive spirit in our age, seeping into the church from the surrounding culture. Ironically, some absorb this influence and then say Christians must influence the culture. Who is influencing whom?

Are you prosperous and want to take a nice vacation? Go right ahead. God does not require you to add up the cost and make sure you have spent an equivalent amount on the poor. You are free to make such a calculation if you wish, or not. Let no one say you must.

**From this chapter we learn...**

- The new social gospel assumes economic inequality is the product of social injustice and America must bear a large part of the burden of guilt for this disparity. Christians are duty bound to work toward rectifying this inequality.
- The above assumptions are unbiblical. The Bible shows legitimate ways to prosper.

Wealthy Christians have a right to enjoy their prosperity within certain limits proscribed by the Apostle Paul.

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i Quoted in **HUMANITARIAN JESUS**, p.35, from a Chicago forum of 50 evangelical leaders in 1973. This was a declaration of Ron Siders, *Evangelicals for Social Action*.