

THE NEAR-DEATH OF CHARITY IN THE WISCONSIN SYNOD AT THE HANDS OF
THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

BY

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ABSTRACT

This paper, titled "The Near-Death of Charity in the Wisconsin Synod at the Hands of the Social Gospel," investigates the conflict between the Wisconsin Synod (WELS) and the Social Gospel, asserting that the Synod's reaction effectively killed charity in the Wisconsin Synod for decades. The Social Gospel redefined sin as selfishness and demanded social activism and charitable works for salvation, arguing that a salvation confined to the soul was imperfect. Beginning in the mid-1930s, the WELS vigorously countered this movement, rightly defending the essential gospel truth of justification against doctrines that denied original sin and materialized the kingdom of God. However, in avoiding this false teaching, a profound hesitancy toward social programs and charity emerged. While core doctrines were preserved, this overreaction caused the Synod to abandon its duty to provide for both physical and spiritual needs. The paper concludes that while the WELS's commitment to sound doctrine was commendable, a more nuanced approach to social concern was needed. ¹

1. ChatGPT was used to aid the creation of this abstract, the final product was edited and arranged by the author.

INTRODUCTION

Across the United States of America, there has been an open question about the role that religious organizations play in supporting society. This issue is not unique to the United States of America but rather a question that seems to have permeated the centuries. There are accounts and instances of charity and social welfare dating back to the origins of man (Gen 18).² Naturally, when we observe an action occurring, we often wonder about its motivations. What can cause a mother to starve to provide for her children? What can cause neighbors to raise barns for each other without payment? What can cause parents to open their homes to orphans? As humans, we see these deeds as acts of love. They are poured out from the kindness of one's heart. Yet not all motivations come from places of love. Where charity and love abound, so often those who wish to abuse them follow close behind. Where adoption is largely practiced out of kindness, there are stories of fraud and neglect. Seemingly noble causes can be fraught with malicious or misguided intentions. Social programs and charities are not exempt from this reality. One of the most recent examples of accusations against a charitable organization for suspected fraud just so happens to be a Lutheran organization.³ It is clear from recent history that religious organizations are not exempt from these accusations and motivations. So, the question remains for organizations and institutions alike: what is their operating motivation?

2. All Bible passages in this paper, unless otherwise noted, are NIV 2011

3. Dominik Dausch, "Elon Musk and a South Dakota Lawmaker Are Attacking a Lutheran Charity for Resettling Refugees. Here's Why," *The Public Opinion*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.thepublicopinion.com/story/news/2025/02/06/south-dakota-lutheran-social-services-elon-musk-refugee-resettlement-groups-attacks/78210296007/>.

Religious institutions in the United States have historically offered charitable programs and social welfare in the spirit of Christian love. Yet today, Americans are divided on whether or not religion does more harm than good. A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that the majority of Americans believed that religious organizations either did equal amounts of harm and good or more harm than good.⁴ Americans from religious and non-religious backgrounds are becoming increasingly skeptical of religious organizations. While there are surely a multitude of factors that could help explain why, the motivations of these organizations play a part. According to Pew's research, one branch of Protestant Christianity appears to be most interested in the service and betterment of society: Evangelicals. This branch of Protestant Christianity has been on the rise over the past few decades, and its focus on social outreach is palpable in the communities these churches serve. While this growth has had a positive impact on Christianity's reputation, the damage lurking beneath the surface on its own members is just as influential. A key part of their motivation for charity is not simply service out of love, but another movement called the Social Gospel. The Social Gospel movement slowly infected churches with a heroic mission, masking a slavish motivation: churches exist only to do good for those around them, and their salvation is directly correlated with their works of charity for strangers. This motivation produces individuals who rely on themselves and their church's existence for salvation. Once again, a new source of external piety emerges and corrupts the gift of forensic justification.

The Social Gospel began to catch the attention of church bodies across America as early as the 1930s. During this time frame, a small Lutheran synod in Wisconsin began to write about this new fad theological movement. "The social gospel is not satisfied with finding justification

4. Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study: Religion's Role in Public Life," Pew Research Center, February 26, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2025/02/26/religious-landscape-study-religions-role-in-public-life/>.

of the individual sinner before the holy God, but it wants the ethics of Jesus enforced by social legislation so that bad men will be compelled to do good; then will the Kingdom of God be established on earth.”⁵ In 1935, the dangers of this teaching were well known and spoken against. The Wisconsin Synod was ready to distance itself from this movement and remained complacent in this persuasion for years to come. Yet, in their desire to avoid false teaching, a chasm seemed to form that excluded social programs and charity. In the great desire to avoid all false teachings, hesitancy toward charity grew. Decades passed, and the Social Gospel waxed and waned in popularity, yet remained hidden in the shadows; its impact endures in our minds and practices. The claws of the Social Gospel's history stick in our ideology and guidelines, its influence undeniable throughout our history. Just what impact it has had on us and on our own personal ideological theories on social work and charity is not fully known, but by researching the Wisconsin Synod's reaction to the Social Gospel movement, we will be able to conclude that the Social Gospel effectively killed charity in the Wisconsin Synod for decades. To support this assertion, there will be a full investigation into the *Theology of the Social Gospel*. Then an array of written reactions and guidance penned by the leaders of the Wisconsin Synod will be distilled to summarize their response. Finally, this study will evaluate that guidance in light of Scripture and the foundational principles for compassion ministry contained therein.

5. H. C. Nitz, “Another Gospel: An Essay on the Social Gospel,” *ThQ* 32 (1935): 252.

LITERATURE AND DOCTRINE REVIEW

To fully evaluate the impact of the Social Gospel on the Wisconsin Synod, the terminology needs to be defined and proven. To understand the conversation's terminology, a few key concepts will be evaluated, along with a brief history where needed.

Theology of the Social Gospel by Walter Rauschenbusch

The Theology of the Social Gospel by Walter Rauschenbusch is the book that started it all, according to many outside theologians who lived concurrently with the movement. Although Rauschenbusch writes in the introduction to his book, “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.”⁶

The true origins of this movement are unclear. Yet before it even gets a theological textbook, it is clear that the Social Gospel begins to thrive. Rauschenbusch points to another text as the beginning of the Social Gospel among home mission efforts: *Our Country* by Josiah Strong.⁷ The unclear inception of the Social Gospel, however, is not an issue for the followers of this movement. Instead, its validity is found in its existence and widespread practice, which is encouraged, if not mandated, as the right thing to do. Regarding its inception, Rauschenbusch asserts, “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.

6. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 2.

7. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 2.

Therefore, it had to be.”⁸ Thus, the Social Gospel was born, and with it came his book to provide a rough theological landscape. Today, many theological textbooks reflect the influence of the Social Gospel, but there has not been a single work written since Rauschenbusch to update the *Theology of the Social Gospel*. Therefore, this work will be the basis for understanding the entire movement.

The Social Gospel may be summed up in this one statement, akin to a mission statement, from Rauschenbusch: “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 faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.”⁹ This is the chief desire of the new movement. To provide for the coming and changing times and to bring Christianity along with it, how do we update the old theology’s teachings to address modern morality?

Sin

To begin to address this, Rauschenbusch first takes on the problem of sin. Definitions are important for the Social Gospel. The desire of Rauschenbusch is to come to a joint definition of sin to be able to communicate with the “old theology.”¹⁰ Rauschenbusch begins by accusing the old theology of using the doctrine of the fall to minimize the severity of sin:

The Traditional doctrine of the fall has taught us to regard evil as a kind of unvarying racial endowment, which is active in every new life and which can be

8. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 5.

9. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 5–6.

10. This is terminology that Rauschenbusch used to denote the popular Christian church, including Protestant and Catholic denominations. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 56.

overcome only by the grace offered in the gospel and ministered by the Church. It would strengthen the appeal of the social gospel if evil could be regarded instead as a variable factor in the life of humanity, which it is our duty to diminish for every young life and for every new generation.¹¹

With this in mind, Rauschenbusch asserts that the members of the old theology have taken the sting out of sin through their thorough insistence on the doctrine of the fall. All classes of sin are considered equal, and therefore none of them bears a severe guilt and becomes meaningless — since sin is inherited by Adam, the emphasis on personal responsibility and guilt is gone. The implications of the doctrine of the fall then become impractical as it ceases to hold power over man to curb sin, since sin is inescapable.¹² Rauschenbusch desires the doctrine of sin and guilt to be practical as the Social Gospel is, “above all things practical.”¹³ In the pursuit of practicality and to be in line with the “Hebrew prophets and Jesus himself,” the definition of sin needs to change to adapt and address “the present and active sources of evil, ... leaving the question of the first origin of evil to God.”¹⁴

Sin is difficult to define because it is as elastic and complicated as life itself.¹⁵ Because the doctrine of the fall cannot possibly hold the theological weight that has been placed upon it,¹⁶ we must search for another doctrine to stabilize the definition of sin. Rauschenbusch looks to the corrupt nature of man to expose this doctrine and to determine that sin only “becomes guilt in the

11. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 43.

12. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 42.

13. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 42.

14. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 44.

15. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 45.

16. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 44.

full sense in the degree in which intelligence and will enter.”¹⁷ Man cannot be held accountable for his own nature but rather for his intention and disposition to sin. Thus, “the accepted definition of sin as selfishness is therefore wholly in line with the social gospel. But the social gospel can contribute a good deal to socialize and vitalize it.”¹⁸

To revitalize the definition of sin and its true meaning, Rauschenbusch suggests stripping the monarchical flavor that theological definitions have and democratizing the conception of God to make the definition more realistic.¹⁹ To do this, Rauschenbusch begins to break down the two tables of the law and dismisses the first table because functionally idolatry and misuse of God’s name are no longer prominent sins in the modern era. The second table of the law, however, has surged in the modern era. This second table becomes the focus because of the mystic union in which God is present in every man, according to Rauschenbusch.²⁰ God works through every man to accomplish his will, and as a result, our sin impedes God’s will, destroys and blocks the reign of God, which in turn blocks God from revealing himself.²¹ Sin has the power to retard the progress of mankind and to retard the revelation of the glory of God; it is therefore our sin against humanity that is key because it prevents and destroys God’s will. The climax of all sin is therefore not a man who swears or denies the Trinity, but a man who has left peasant laborers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights.²² “Sin is essentially selfishness.”²³

17. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 46.

18. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 47.

19. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 48.

20. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 49.

21. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 49.

22. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 50.

23. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 50.

Rauschenbusch will go on to discuss in depth modern examples of selfishness and how these are truly examples of severe sin. He will point to corruption, exploitation, and neglect as the real issues that need to be addressed and leave one's relationship with God to be based on his action against these sins. He defends the doctrine of original sin and defines its new purpose, the church's new purpose, and our new purpose as a body of believers in his concluding remarks on original sin: "There is the more inducement to teach clearly on the social transmission and perpetuation of sin because the ethical and religious forces can really do something to check and prevent the transmission of sin along social channels, whereas the biological transmission of original sin, except for the possible influence of eugenics, seems to be beyond our influence."²⁴

Sin's definition of selfishness is expanded to include a lack of social activism and community influence, both within and outside one's household. This is the new definition of sin, and now the new definition of grace must be expanded, too.

Salvation

The Social Gospel sees salvation as truly important for individuals and systems alike.

Rauschenbusch describes the new thing that the Social Gospel has to offer concerning the doctrine of salvation:

The new thing in the social gospel is the clearness and insistence with which it sets forth the necessity and the possibility of redeeming the historical life of humanity from the social wrongs which now pervade it and which act as temptations and incitements to evil and as forces of resistance to the powers of redemption.... If our exposition of the superpersonal agents of sin and of the Kingdom of Evil is true, then evidently a salvation

24. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 67-68.

confined to the soul and its personal interests is an imperfect and only partly effective salvation.²⁵

Salvation in the Social Gospel presents a fresh perspective on understanding one's conversion. Since a salvation confined to the soul and its personal interests is an imperfect salvation, there must be a more perfect salvation. The Social Gospel presents an ongoing regeneration where the believer is made and is making themselves and the world around them more holy to usher in the kingdom of God.²⁶ Salvation cannot be limited to the individualistic view just as sin itself cannot be limited to the individualistic view as Rauschenbusch points out, "In the same way (as sin) the terms and definitions of salvation get more realistic significance and ethical reach when we see the internal crises of the individual in connection with the social forces that play upon him or go out from him."²⁷ Salvation necessitates involvement in a social setting to be complete. The process of regeneration is key here as the sinful individual converts from his old sinful ways to the new reality of Christ. This is an active conversion which entails a willing rejection of the old sinful ways and an acceptance of Christ. The more action that is taken in this process, the more that "Jesus Christ becomes dominant in us, and the more does the light and life of God shine steadily in us, and create a religious personality which we did not have. Life is lived under a new synthesis."²⁸ Thus, this term of salvation is not a finite event but a complex experience that can last a lifetime. Perhaps, Rauschenbusch most clearly states salvation

25. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 95.

26. See suggested reading for a paper dealing with the kingdom of God according to the Social Gospel and the Lutheran approach to this concept. In short, the kingdom of God is a doctrine that the Social Gospel asserts that the mission of the church is to make the world a more holy place. Ultimately, through organizations implementing societal pressures to follow God's law, we will create a utopia on earth where all is shared and exploitation and greed are forever banished.

27. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 97.

28. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 100.

as “an attitude of love in which he would freely coordinate his life with the life of his fellows in obedience to the loving impulses of the spirit of God, thus taking his part in a divine organism of mutual service.”²⁹ This definition impacts what it means to have faith and what sanctification is. A brief explanation will follow.

Faith

Faith is trusting, as the Hebrew prophets did, in the prophetic future of a good world and a righteous and fraternal social order.³⁰ “Faith is an energetic act of the will, affirming our fellowship with God and man, declaring our solidarity with the Kingdom of God, and repudiating selfish isolation.”³¹ Faith, by these definitions, is then a synergistic work and confidence in a future kingdom of God or a utopian future.

Sanctification

Sanctification is recognized according to its standard definition, provided it is understood that the outcome produces ethical fruits. “The social gospel takes up the message of the Hebrew prophets, that ritual and emotional religion is harmful unless it results in righteousness. Sanctification is through increased fellowship with God and man. But fellowship is impossible without an exchange of service.”³² Ultimately, sanctification cannot be attained through idleness

29. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 98.

30. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 102.

31. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 102.

32. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 102.

but rather through service to one another. This is the true nature of Christianity, according to the Social Gospel, that Christians would approach through sanctified living of love for mankind and inclusion of all, pure Christianity. A true Christian will have a sense of solidarity with his fellow man because Christ can be found in all men.³³

Lutheran Doctrinal Position

For each of these topics, there is a Lutheran parallel. To understand the Wisconsin Synod's position in this conversation, a brief explanation of the terminology used by the Wisconsin Synod will follow. The primary source document for this evaluation will be *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics* by Adolf Hoenecke, a recognized Wisconsin Synod theologian whose work is widely accepted and dispersed in its circles.

Sin

Hoenecke begins his section on sin with a simple definition of sin: "Sin is deviation from the law of God."³⁴ Sin is simple in its categorization according to Hoenecke because it is any act, thought, or deed that is contrary to the will and law of God: Sin is lawlessness.³⁵ Sin is a reality for all of humanity due to the fall or original sin. Hoenecke could rightly be categorized alongside the old theologians, according to Rauschenbusch, because Hoenecke's explanation of

33. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology of the Social Gospel*, 109.

34. Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Milwaukee, Northwestern, 1999), 339.

35. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:339. & 1 John 3:4

sin does not hold individuals accountable. Humanity is guilty of not keeping the law of God, of being lawless, and therefore is guilty and deserving of divine punishment. Guilt is a stain on the sinner himself and is not removable by the sinner themselves.³⁶ The method of accountability for humanity consists of recognizing this guilt, which is built into us by God himself. Each individual is given a natural knowledge of the law of God and a conscience to accuse him when he deviates from this law. Hoenecke quotes Quenstedt and alludes to Romans in explaining this concept: “‘Law is the universal rule which commands and forbids. But the conscience test itself against that rule’ The conscience is the consciousness of God as the God who reveals himself as holy in the moral law and demands holiness.”³⁷ This is the essence of being in a state of sinfulness: a man is morally corrupt, guilty, and accused, afraid of divine punishment, and in need of salvation. While Hoenecke’s doctrine of original sin³⁸ explains the origin of this state, the guilt is not derived solely from the status but from the persistent failure of humanity to be obedient to the law of God.

Salvation

Salvation is addressed by Hoenecke as a threefold act of God and his work alone. It is a change in personal relationships for sinners, and yet it is offered fully and freely, regardless of one's work. Salvation is offered to humanity and does not require any conditions to be met, as Rauschenbusch suggests. Hoenecke defines the three foundations of God's salvation as: “the love

36. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:349.

37. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 2:355.

38. Referred to both as original sin and the doctrine of the fall by Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch distinguishes the two, where Hoenecke does not.

of God the Father for the world, the sacrifice of God the Son for the world, and the activity of God the Holy Spirit appropriating salvation to the world.”³⁹ These wholly encompass the loving heart of God as he desires “all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth”(1 Tim 2:4). Salvation has no conditions but rather is a free and full gift as the individual receives the gift of faith with nothing to offer a loving God. This gift, given by grace, is received through faith and results in a change in the status of an individual from death to life. This instantaneous distribution of the grace of God is called conversion. Hoenecke explains what conversion is and how it works: “Conversion is that activity of appropriating the grace of the Holy Spirit by which he transfers a spiritually dead person from the state of sin and wrath into the state of grace and faith in order to make him participate in eternal life.”⁴⁰

Faith

Faith is a gift, given at the instant moment of conversion. “Faith is confident trust in God’s Word and especially as justifying faith it is trust in the pledge of forgiveness of sins in Christ.”⁴¹ Faith is not dependent on a person’s good deeds or work, but on the object of his faith. Chemnitz speaks about this fact, “It seems that faith should see justification in that object, for it sets before us the promises of life. But Paul specifically explains this question. For he says that the law promises life not to believers but to the doers.”⁴² Here we see the big distinction between faith in

39 Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Milwaukee, Northwestern, 1999), 5.

40. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:257.

41. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:303.

42. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:304.

the Social Gospel and in Lutheran teaching: faith is a law to be followed, a departure from all selfish ambition, and a conscientious action in the Social Gospel. Whereas faith, according to the Lutheran teaching, is a trust and confidence in the work Christ has done already, in his justification of all people, which provides certainty and assurance.

Sanctification

Hoenecke addresses sanctification as a post-conversion process. It is fully separate, in the narrow sense, from the instant act of conversion as mentioned above. Sanctification is a process in which the love of Christ is demonstrated in an individual's outward actions. "Sanctification is that activity of the appropriating grace of the Holy Spirit by virtue of which the justified person day by day lays aside the sinful nature still clinging to him, and day by day is renewed according to God's image and lives for God in holiness and righteousness."⁴³ While this definition may seem to indicate that one may attain a more righteous state, Hoenecke is quick to quell this idea: "The essence of sanctification... The converted and reborn man, whom God regards as holy for Christ's sake, is not free of sin; sin is not purged from him but clings to him all his life; and insofar as he is still corrupted by sin, he is called flesh. The reborn man ... does not live according to the flesh ... but has the flesh in him."⁴⁴ It is clear that man cannot attain a more pure Christianity through this living nor bring about the kingdom of God. The purpose instead is to use the ability given to us by the Holy Spirit to do good for the glory of God.

43. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:395.

44. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:396.

According to Hoenecke, there is a way of furthering sanctification: “The cross is a means of furthering sanctification in that it serves both to take off the old Adam and to put on the new man.”⁴⁵ The cross is the suffering a Christian endures for the sake of the gospel in the same way that Christ suffered at the expense of his mission to save sinners from their sins. The cross is given to all believers who seek to follow Jesus as he invites his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Matt 16:24). The benefits of the cross, according to Hoenecke, are:

(1) to keep the believers in knowledge of their sins (Jer 30:11; 1 Pe 4:17). The believers are kept from thinking lightly of sin, since God reminds them in a fatherly way of the offensiveness of sin through disciplining them. Connected with this as a further goal is (2) the crucifixion of the flesh and the increase of good fruits, thus the furthering of sanctification (1 Pe 4:1,2; Jn 15:2). Paul calls the effect of his cross (2 Co 4:8) the killing of his outward man (2 Co 4:16). But as the flesh is to be mortified through the cross, so the renewal of the Christian is to be furthered, since (3) the cross brings testing and proving of faith.⁴⁶

Sanctification is not merely a pleasurable and charitable life but rather a difficult one filled with sacrifice for the sake of the gospel and for the sake of Christ.

45. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:402.

46. Hoenecke, *Dogmatics*, 3:406.

CHARITY ACCORDING TO THE SOCIAL GOSPEL AND LUTHERANISM

The terminology above influences its application, and the application of these principles in the sphere of charity is our focus. The Social Gospel has been seen to do wonderful things for humanity in terms of its outward deeds. As a bystander looking at the modern impact of this historical movement, its influence is undeniable. If its influence is so powerful, what is its teaching, and how did it impact Lutheran teaching on charity?

Social Gospel's Position on Social Action and Charity

The Social Gospel's position on Christian charity is one of necessity. For the salvation of the world, it is necessary that Christians regularly practice charity in order that they would usher in the kingdom of God. God's kingdom cannot coexist with sin, and organizations that encourage sin are in conflict with it as well. Therefore, the role of the believer is to practice charity to prove they are an active and pure Christian, so they can aid in the ultimate will of God. Sin, which is selfishness, is the way that we hinder and block the implementation of the will of God in our lives. Humans are not only the instruments to do God's will but also the active instrumentation in hindering it. Charity is the ultimate proof of ushering in the will of God because it is a lack of selfishness, a lack of sin, and a desire to love all people.

The necessity and burden of both proof and furthering the kingdom of God are not limited to individuals. People are not the only entities held responsible for their selfishness, and therefore, in need of promoting charity. As individuals, we form communities that can exercise our will. The will of the masses is then held responsible, as it exists to make large-scale change. The moral behavior of individuals outside this community is not yet in view; rather, as systems

of individuals, we are responsible for the acts of others within this community. Once the community's moral behavior is under control, it has a responsibility to influence other communities. The scale continues to grow and grow until it reaches its natural end: perfection. This is the motivation behind social action for Christians everywhere. There is an individual responsibility and impact on one's personal faith based on the systems they participate in and those that surround them. There is a motive here for the kingdom of man to mix itself with the kingdom of God. Citizens who live beneath governments that are abusive, corrupt, and negligent are called to curb and reform the government in order that the kingdom of God may be ushered in. Employees who work under a capitalist system that profits from the exploitation of others and the existing system of corruption are called to resist this system and change it from the inside, in order to be called good Christians. Citizens of states and communities whose morality is loose and protected by law are called to advocate for change and to align these laws to be in line with God's laws. Then the kingdom of God will come on earth, and paradise will be realized. All of the true Christians will participate because all will be true Christians. That is the duty of a Christian beneath the yoke of the Social Gospel: a life of constant advocacy and charity to ensure salvation.

The Wisconsin Synod Position on Charity and Social Action

The Wisconsin Synod is known for its strict adherence to the Bible as the only source of truth and being one of the more conservative doctrinally in Lutheran circles.⁴⁷ The position on charity,

47. Mark Ward, "A Helpful Guide to Lutheran Church Denominations," Logos, June 23, 2023, <https://www.logos.com/grow/lutheran-church-denominations/>.

as with other doctrinal positions, comes straight from the Bible. Christ calls us to a new command in John 13:34–35, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The Wisconsin Synod does not have an official doctrinal statement on charity specifically because it is a fruit of the Christian life, which is wrapped into sanctification. Charity is a necessary inevitability of faith because the Christian wants and yearns to show the love that has been shown to them. There is no law that enforces charity nor a condition of salvation, but a yearning to be obedient to the King who has so graciously saved. When it comes to social action, the Wisconsin Synod practices a practical pastoral care with a Christocentric focus. Matthew Steinfeldt, in his thesis concerning the Social Gospel, offers a comprehensive look at the key issues of the Social Gospel and the Lutheran response. He clearly states the role of the church in public welfare and charity:

If people’s physical well-being became the church’s mission, it might eventually become its only mission. Countless governmental agencies exist in the United States for the very purpose of helping the poor and suffering, yet this work is never-ending. Meanwhile, the church has work that is not just never-ending but is also life-saving. Therefore, the Augsburg Confession clearly states that the church’s role is “to preach the gospel, to forgive and retain sins, and to administer the sacraments. . . . For not bodily things but eternal things, eternal righteousness, the Holy Spirit, eternal life, are being given.”[AC XXVIII: 5–6, 8–9] Regarding the church’s primary concern, Jesus leaves no room for doubt: “What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?” (Matt 16:26).⁴⁸

While the Wisconsin Synod may not have written an official doctrinal statement on charity, there is a history of practice and action. The action has ebbed and flowed over the years, influenced by various factors, but has remained present. Therefore, one may deduce, based on

48. Matthew Steinfeldt, “A Proper Lutheran Response to the Pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism Concerning the Roles of the Church and the Christian in Society” (MDiv thesis, Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, 2021), 27, <http://essays.wls.edu:8080/xmlui/handle/123456789/5914>.

other applicable teachings concerning good works, that the teaching concerning charity in the Wisconsin Synod is one of acceptance and measured importance. Because the Wisconsin Synod has no official teaching, apart from the clear teaching of the Bible and the confessions, one must derive its position on charity and the Social Gospel from the actions of its churches and the published writings of its pastors.

THE REACTION OF THE WISCONSIN SYNOD TO THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

As early as the mid-1930s, just eighteen short years after the publication of *The Theology of the Social Gospel* by Walter Rauschenbusch, the Wisconsin Synod was publishing articles in its quarterly book of essays addressing this new gospel movement. Its presence was noted during that time as a prevalent movement, but not as invasive as it would soon become. As the years went on, various pastors would come to their local district meetings and present articles about this movement to keep it fresh in people's minds. Slowly, it became more pervasive in the neighboring churches in the communities of the Wisconsin Synod, and pastors began to field questions and concerns from members about this movement. Local districts began to call synodical leaders and seminary professors to come and present on these issues and to make recommendations. Literature began to be produced in mass about this topic in a semi-official capacity.⁴⁹ The Wisconsin Synod was seeking direction on how to address the Social Gospel and its draw on members. The impact of this movement can be traced throughout the literature produced. To see this effect, a study of thirty-year segments will be evaluated, starting with the first documents produced in the mid-1930s to the 1960s, followed by district papers presented in the 1960s to the 1990s, and culminating with the theological papers in districts and at the seminary in the 1990s to the present day.

49. Semi-official capacity means that it is not produced on the official website of the Wisconsin Synod but is included in published literature in the Seminary's essay file. This is direction from synodical leaders and not expression of doctrine.

The First Documents Produced: 1935–1960

There are two main documents in this time period for our consideration: “Another Gospel” by H. C. Nitz and “Social Problems and the Gospel” by E. E. Kowalke.

“Another Gospel”

The earliest document produced was “Another Gospel” by H. C. Nitz in the *Theologische Quartalschrift* in 1935. This article was originally prepared for the twenty-third biennial convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States. Its purpose is to address this new shift and confusion of the separation of church and state. At this time, the Social Gospel had motivated churches to preach politics from the pulpit and to lobby from the pews. This article seeks to refute the Social Gospel on six fronts: The denial of original sin, the denial of the gospel as the only force for real-world betterment, the ridicule of the kingdom of God, the confusion of Church and State, the ignorance of the divine purpose of tribulation, and the denial of God’s sole intention to end the world in destruction.⁵⁰ For our purposes, we will focus on the denial of the gospel as the only force for real-world betterment, and on the despiritualization and materialization of the kingdom of God.

50. H. C. Nitz, “Another Gospel: An Essay on the Social Gospel” (Essay, New Ulm, 1935), 246.

Denial of the Gospel as the Sole Force for Real World Betterment

Nitz identifies in this section an active shift from theism, in which God is the center of our faith and the object of our hope, to humanism, in which man takes that place.⁵¹ The Social Gospel then takes biblical principles and applies them as it sees fit. Nitz reflects on this truth:

The social gospel uses the Bible freely, makes much of the ‘law of Christ,’ of the Golden Rule, of the Sermon on the Mount, of the ‘social ethics’ of the Carpenter of Nazareth, of the ‘social justice’ of the Lowly Nazarene, but has the audacity to warn against the ‘peril of worshipping Jesus.’ It credits Luther and the Reformation with bringing about a social upheaval, but regrets that Luther reformed the Church only to the extent of rediscovering the Pauline doctrine of Justification by Faith. The social gospel is not satisfied with finding justification of the individual sinner before the holy God, but it wants the ethics of Jesus enforced by social legislation so that bad men will be compelled to do good; then will the Kingdom of God be established on earth. ⁵²

In this age, Nitz writes about the active confusion of what the law and gospel are and the role the church plays in politics. The concept that ethics should be pursued and enforced to achieve a purer Christianity and to compel others to follow God’s law is not for the church to influence or decide. Nitz discusses this in the conclusion of this section, where he quotes an article from the *Chicago Tribune*. It seems that even a secular organization can identify the problematic evolution of preachers attempting to make their churches agencies of political action. The Tribune concludes, “By bringing political, economic and social problems within the doors of the church they are insuring discord where there should be harmony and justified revolt where there should be obedience.”⁵³ It is evident that the Social Gospel's insistence on influencing ethical laws is seen as harmful to the Wisconsin Synod.

51. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 252.

52. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 252.

53. Chicago Tribune, March 10, 1935 quoted by Nitz on pg. 255

Despiritualization and Materialization of the Kingdom of God

The quotes and description by Nitz in this section are curious for a multitude of reasons. It is seemingly contradictory to a few of the tenets of the Social Gospel espoused earlier by Rauschenbusch. For example, Nitz quotes a Social Gospel preacher who says:

The 'hospital' conception of the church, which has so disgraced Protestantism, should be given up. The primary business of the church is not to heal the physically or spiritually sick or to give spiritual or physical comfort to its members. Such a conception makes the work of the church individualistic and selfish; and such individualism and selfishness in religion is hostile to the spirit of Christianity and perpetuates paganism in the church. The ministry of the church to the individual is incidental to its main work, which is that of the establishment of the kingdom of God among men.⁵⁴

This seems contradictory to the mission of the Social Gospel, yet a closer examination points us again to the collective and societal impact of the church. This critique is less about the healing work of the church and more about how that notion is too individualistic and is not community-focused. Healing is slow, but browbeating into submission and passing legislation to punish the wrongdoer is fast. Nitz accuses these individuals of materialism,⁵⁵ even though it would seem antithetical to the core tenets of the Social Gospel; the materialism that Nitz is focusing on is the purification of the nation for the kingdom of God. In the modern context, materialism may mean something akin to seeking ultimate wealth as the source of value,⁵⁶ but the definition in focus here is “a doctrine that economic or social change is materially caused.”⁵⁷ Nitz demonstrates his argument by saying, “The social gospel is timed for this earth only, and deals

54. Nitz “Another Gospel”, 256. quoted originally *The Reconstruction of Religion*, Chas. A. Ellwood, Prof. of Sociology, Univ. of Mo., pg. 282

55. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 252.

56. A doctrine that the only or the highest values or objectives lie in material well-being and in the furtherance of material progress. “Materialism,” Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/materialism>.

57. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 252.

only with creature comforts. It fails to see that ‘the Scriptures never call the Church of the universe the Kingdom of God.’ It ignores the fact that the Kingdom of God is restricted, as used in the Gospels and Epistles, ‘to that dominion of God which is exercised by the Gospel,’ that is the ‘power of salvation’”⁵⁸ The true danger that Nitz sees is, as demonstrated, the materialistic cause of the kingdom of God even though the Bible does not discuss the kingdom of God in materialistic terms but in heavenly terms. A perfect example of what Nitz says earlier: the Social Gospel uses the Bible freely to warn against the peril of worshipping Jesus.⁵⁹

“Social Problems and the Gospel”

In this excursus on the social problems of the world, Professor E. E. Kowalke opens the discussion of how these problems came to be. This Wisconsin Synod leader demonstrates that the fall is responsible for the present suffering that exists in this world, citing the words of the Genesis account.⁶⁰ For the problems of relationships in humanity, the underlying cause is the curse placed on Eve, and for the natural problems, such as drought and famine, the underlying cause is the curse placed upon Adam. This is the reality in which we live, but there is discord among preachers in the country as to what the cause of these problems truly is. Kowalke sees this as a threat more than a disservice, “There is hardly another error in all of theology that is so productive of heresy, confusion, and of misconception of everything that Christ and His Gospel

58. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 259. Quoting Schaller in Biblical Christology 193

59. Nitz, “Another Gospel”, 256.

60. E. E. Kowalke, “Social Problems and the Gospel”, 51.

teach as the failure to accept The complete spiritual impotence and death of natural man.”⁶¹

Kowalke continues to discuss the innate desire in man to attempt to achieve the lost perfection through science, social efforts, and laws. This is reminiscent of the Social Gospel, but Kowalke lumps in the same camp Marxism, socialism, prohibition, fascism, etc. The problem, however, remains that man is sinful and that these imperfections are a result of man’s condition. This “cause will remain and continue to produce social problems all the days of man’s life,” says Kowalke, before moving to his second argument of the gospel’s role in the social problems of man. The gospel does not prevent man from experiencing social problems; in fact, it may worsen them. Kowalke points to Christ’s invitation to his disciples to take up their cross and follow him. (Matt 16:4) What the gospel does instead for individuals is “nullify for the believer in Christ the death sentence that followed man’s sin.”⁶² The gospel assures believers that no matter the social problem, they are God’s dear children who are clothed with Christ in a robe of righteousness. The source of this righteousness is Christ and is not found in “humane working conditions in the establishment of peace among nations, nor in any ideal social order that men’s ingenuity will be able to devise.”⁶³ Kowalke clearly states here that these are works of the law, not the God-saving gospel that alone can save man. Kowalke then addresses the Social Gospel without naming it by saying, “The suggestion that a betterment of social ills is an establishment of the kingdom of God is such a deviation and is therefore not of God but of the devil.”⁶⁴ Kowalke moves on to define the term kingdom of God as heaven itself or also as “God’s omnipotent rule over all

61. Kowalke, “Social Problems”, 52.

62. Kowalke, “Social Problems”, 56.

63. Kowalke, “Social Problems”, 56.

64. Kowalke, “Social Problems”, 57.

created things as Creator, Preserver, and Judge.”⁶⁵ These two explanations have biblical bases, whereas the preferred definition of paradise on this unchanged earth does not. The desire of individuals is to create for themselves a utopian future, and Kowalke points to Christ feeding the five thousand.⁶⁶ The point of this account is revealed after the crowd leaves, for they have rejected the spiritual truths of Christ’s kingdom. The whole notion of Christ and Christians fixing social problems is thrown out. In the last section, though, Kowalke begins to acknowledge the role of charity, clearly stating that a gospel motivated individual will produce fruits of faith that seek to help the lowly and feed the hungry. Yet, according to Kowalke, that is not the ultimate calling or goal; it is merely a tangible distraction that butters up Christians and tricks them into feeling a sense of pious accomplishment. Kowalke ultimately lands on the simple fact that the Church should not have a responsibility in keeping political forces in check because that would be forsaking our sacred duty: to call sinners to repentance. If a Christian feels inclined to do so, then let them use their power to vote and run for office to influence political and societal issues. Clergy, however, have a responsibility to the gospel above all else, and Kowalke's encouragement is to leave social problems to resolve themselves in time, because the message we have is timeless.

65. Kowalke, “Social Problems”, 57.

66. This biblical account (Matt 14:13–21) is frequently used by proponents of the Social Gospel to prove that Christ cared for the physical needs of individuals, yet Kowalke takes it head-on in his paper, demonstrating that Christ's intention was not to be a bread king at all. If Christ had wanted to be a bread king, that is what he would be, but this was not Christ’s goal.

A Resurgence of Interest: 1960-1990

The interest in the Social Gospel didn't die per se from the 1930s to the 1960s, but it does seem to have been less prevalent in these intervening years, for a multitude of reasons. The most likely factor was the Second World War. If the Social Gospel's mission is peace and harmony through legislation and social outcry, the Second World War might be the antithesis of this movement. Hundreds of thousands of young men are being shipped off to war to see some of the worst devastation known to man at this time. Believing in a core tenet of the Social Gospel that man is good and just needs to be encouraged and guided through social structure to what is right cannot harmonize with the Third Reich. It makes sense, then, that there is a noticeable gap in the Wisconsin Synod's literature on this topic during the active war years and afterwards. Shortly thereafter, though, the Social Gospel will make a resurgence and become just as popular, if not more. The first article we will evaluate picks up the discussion of the Social Gospel in 1970 in a paper entitled "Serving the Whole Man". Following this, we'll proceed to "The Church's Social Concerns: Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations" whose precise date is unknown but likely written approximately in the late 1970s⁶⁷ by Armin. Schuetze.

"Serving the Whole Man"

This essay was presented at a district level to the pastors in Florida on 3 September 1970. It addressed a broad range of topics related to ministering to an individual's physical needs. We see here an entire paper devoted to this ideology, which is a stark contrast to the 1930s. As Rev. L.

67. Date estimation made in part by evaluating the publication date of the sources cited in the essay and its edition to the third volume in a collection titled *Our Great Heritage* by Northwestern Publishing House.

G. Zwieg begins his exposition, he addresses the historical mindset of the Christian church and its disposition to serve the physical needs of others. The first time the Social Gospel is mentioned in this paper may be in a more peripheral way, as Zwieg opens the conversation about serving the whole man and its connotations in the church during his time. He references this movement as the potential inception of the issue currently facing his time: serving the whole man. This ideology revolves around the same ideology that the Social Gospel espouses when preaching on Jesus as the bread of life; that a man who is hungry will not get as much out of that discourse because of his natural hunger eating away at him due to starvation. The refrain arose that we need to serve the whole man and not just a disembodied soul. Immediately, this ideology is identified as a spawn of Social Gospel. Social Gospel is then vilified as the proverbial ditch in which a person could err if they care for the whole person and do not preach the gospel. The example is given by Zwieg:

Mission work in the inner city is often done in this way—food and clothing and physical necessities are supplied to those in want in the name of Christianity, but the recipients are not given the benefit of the knowledge that they also need Christ or why. Because of this, the recipients never realize that, if in no other way, they are like the givers in the fact that they too are sinful and need a Savior. Therefore the recipients are not only robbed of the saving knowledge of Christ but often are not the least bit appreciative of the help given because they cannot understand the love from which it comes.

This example of a pitfall of the Social Gospel is then linked with the idea that the Social Gospel is the abandonment of materialism and the acceptance of peace and love, which is consistent with Rauschenbusch's above, but the following line of argumentation is provided:

In this argument, there is a basic flaw. One cannot be Christian without having accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior. One cannot accept Jesus Christ unless he realizes his sinfulness. Morality does not necessarily mean Christianity, and the morality which is pointed to today is often nothing more than an attempt to meet the demands of the natural

law written in man's heart at creation. Contemporary consciousness is simply not what it is made up to be.⁶⁸

After this line of discussion, Zwieg ceases to mention the Social Gospel for the rest of his argument, but he takes issue with its ideology throughout, to the extent that his conclusion adapts the terminology of "serving the whole man" to fit the relationship between a pastor and a congregation. His conclusion mentions nothing about the physical needs of an individual specifically, but does use blanket statements that could be applicable: love and care. He does conclude that starting a board for social ministry, which would entail more than serving physical needs, is a dangerous endeavor that may lead to a church within a church.⁶⁹

"The Church's Social Concerns: Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations"

In this paper, respected Seminary Professor and President Armin Schuetze discusses the two-fold social aspects of social concern: first, the individual person's temporal well-being in society (social ministry); and second, concern for changing and improving the patterns, structures, and institutions of society (social action).⁷⁰ President Schuetze maintains an emphasis on the church's primary work of preaching, teaching, and administering the sacraments in light of this conversation before delving into biblical direction on social ministry and social action. He identifies the main motivation for social action and social ministry in the Wisconsin Synod, as has been a constant among previous theologians: love for others because Christ first loved us. Yet where others stopped and dared not go farther, President Schuetze pushes, saying, "Failure

68. Larry G. Zwieg, "Serving the Whole Man" (1970), 3.

69. Zwieg, "Serving Man", 6.

70. Armin Schuetze, "The Church's Social Concerns: Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations" 1.

to help reveals a heart void of love for God. This the church must teach.”⁷¹ President Schuetze expounds upon Scripture's teaching for social concern and implores others to teach it as well. This is the biblical principle that others have been hesitant to espouse. The conversation then naturally flows to the application of this teaching. President Schuetze identifies two clear errors: doing nothing at all, and doing so much that the work of Christ becomes a secondary priority, overshadowed by social concerns and actions. If those two ditches are successfully avoided, then the biblical teaching is in place; historically, however, abuses have been prevalent, and President Schuetze provides one from the Wisconsin Synod's long-lost brother, the Missouri Synod. The Missouri Synod resolved that the ministry of the word and the social ministry were to be considered equals. This abuse was strongly cautioned against and may have led to some hesitancy in the modern era. With a few more warnings and encouragements, President Schuetze's warnings about social concern come to a close, and he picks up social action. This section quickly begins to take up the doctrine of the two kingdoms, which is outside the purview of this paper but is addressed in the first appendix. President Schuetze gave a thorough biblical defense and framework for those who were hesitant about social concern to assume confidence. But the hooks of the Social Gospel persist up to the modern era.

Modern Era: 1990-2025

In the modern era, a renewed practical concern has presented itself. Churches are seeing a renewed interest in social concern and social action. Different church bodies have begun to implement practices from the Social Gospel without explicitly crediting the Social Gospel:

71. Schuetze, “The Church's Social Concerns”, 2.

Compassion ministry is one term that encompasses this ideology, another might be Americanism, and a third even Christian Nationalism. In modern times, hesitancy has seemingly remained in the minds of the Wisconsin Synod, and to address the hesitancy in 2022, a symposium was held on the campus of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary to address a few of these concerns. We will survey two papers from this symposium to examine the new encouragements offered by the synod. The first paper will be a historical survey with a few encouragements, and the second paper will help aid the conclusion of this paper through its modern guidance.

“Christian Compassion Through the Centuries”

Professor Glen Thompson from Asia Lutheran Seminary was tasked with writing a historical overview of compassion ministry throughout the centuries. He began at AD 312, and for the purposes of this paper, we will focus only on his relevant conclusion for our more modern time frame. He begins with a section dealing with Compassion Ministry in Modern America.

Professor Thompson glosses over the variety of movements but stresses a key tenet of the Social Gospel and notes the change in America that begins the Social Gospel movement. “The church’s goal was changed from re-establishing the sinner’s spiritual relationship with God to helping God’s creatures live a fulfilling life on earth. The theological argumentation that supported this shift became known as the Social Gospel, and it contrasted itself to the burgeoning fundamentalist movement that grew out of the Second Great Awakening.”⁷² This is the inception of the Social Gospel, but we see the fruits of its labor as Professor Thompson highlights charity

72. Glen L. Thompson, “Christian Compassion Through the Centuries” (paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, Mequon, WI, September 19, 2022), 21.

after charity and educational system after educational system, all encouraged by the Social Gospel movement. The Red Cross is formed during this time, education booms, and the protestant mission society is churning out hospitals and schools. In the Wisconsin Synod, there is a plethora of missions getting started in the early twentieth century, care for those overseas, care for the developmentally disadvantaged, and an orphanage in our home missions.⁷³ While all of this mission work continued to thrive in the Wisconsin Synod, as Professor Thompson notes, “Like other conservative denominations, we shied away from most other forms of compassion ministry to the poor out of fear that we would be sucked into the whirlpool of the Social Gospel.”⁷⁴ With all of the great mission work being done and care being provided for those who were unable to function, the Wisconsin Synod was afraid to continue to pursue compassion ministry because of the stigma the Social Gospel held. The hesitancy still exists to this day, and the next paper helps provide some context for that.

“Cultivating a Culture of Compassion”

Pastor Ryan Kolander wrote the capstone paper for this symposium on the modern implications of this ministry for the Wisconsin Synod as a whole and in response to the hesitancy left by the Social Gospel. Pastor Kolander submits that the Wisconsin Synod suffered from the following type of response:

As a response against the Social Gospel movement, theologically conservative churches dug in. Pastors of our own church body in several essays over decades past wrote against the Social Gospel to keep its principles from creeping into our churches and work. In various ways, several of these essays stated the work of the church is not to alleviate suffering in the world, although compassion ministry might serve as a sort of “bridge to

73. Thompson, “Christian Compassion”, 24.

74. Thompson, “Christian Compassion”, 25.

the gospel.” Rather, the church’s mission and marks are the pure preaching of the gospel and administration of the sacraments. Through solid preaching, the gospel will motivate God’s people to carry out acts of love in their vocations. Again, it seems that this desire to keep God’s Kingdom “not of this world” was the response to the Social Gospel trying to make God’s Kingdom “of this world.”⁷⁵

Pastor Kolander noted the historic response of the Wisconsin Synod as one of hesitancy, in the best construction, or of obstinacy in the worst construction. While Pastor Kolander makes this point and then proceeds to discuss the fears surrounding compassion ministry, he mentions the potential of an overreaction to the Social Gospel as an explanation for the Wisconsin Synod’s thoughts but not for its fears and its emotionally charged defensiveness. The connection exists, but the final nail lies stray, waiting for someone to state the painfully obvious.

75. Ryan D. Kolander, “Cultivating a Culture of Compassion: The Opportunity Is Ours” (paper presented at the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Symposium, Mequon, WI, September 20, 2022), 5.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

What does this all mean? The Social Gospel, from its inception, undermined basic doctrinal principles, and so the Wisconsin Synod was quick to publish two articles, given the scarcity of time and resources to adequately address this topic. The world climate changes, and so do many of the focuses, but as soon as the Social Gospel begins to rear its head again, the Wisconsin Synod leaves no pen in its holder and begins a second prolific wave of writing against the modern twists of the Social Gospel. It takes until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries for some of the most intelligent minds to begin questioning whether the Wisconsin Synod overreacted to the Social Gospel movement as a whole. As the Wisconsin Synod holds itself to the standard of the Bible, let us evaluate its position against this standard.

Biblical Evaluation of the Wisconsin Synod's Opposition to the Social Gospel

There is clear merit in the early works of the Wisconsin Synod for speaking against the Social Gospel as articulated by Walter Rauschenbusch. The doctrines purported in that book had little to nothing to do with the Bible itself. There was almost no evidence given for the various principles offered from the Bible, and when there was, the verse was often taken out of context. Nitz and Kowalke both did a commendable job defending the essential gospel truth according to Gal 1:6–9:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let them be under God's curse!

The insistence on holding to this biblical principle was rightly founded and commendable, but their reactions seem to have helped set into motion a different conviction: there is no good way to advocate for the poor, the meek, and the lost while adhering to biblical principles. In the following years, the hesitancy to implement programs to care for the poor and needy was in full swing, and as the paper by Pastor Zwieg noted, there seems to be only danger in caring for the entire person sitting in your pew, as it can only end in decision theology. Knowing the training this individual received, he would never seek to contradict Scripture, but I cannot harmonize his excursus and Gal 6:9–10, “Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.” I also cannot seem to harmonize the overall hesitation to show mercy and kindness to those inside and outside of the church with Matt 25:34–40:

Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation 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, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit 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? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’ “The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

These passages can be difficult to digest, but they explain the position that Jesus wants organizations and individuals to have. Where the Wisconsin Synod was hesitant at home, God calls forth individuals to act in love and service, to stand up for justice and mercy (Zech 7:9–10). It has been known to happen by both authors in the modern era that the Wisconsin Synod had a

tendency to overreact.⁷⁶ The reaction upheld the most important truths of justifications and salvation but did leave some things to be desired. The words of 2 Tim 4 come to mind when faced with these situations,

Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situations, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, discharge all the duties of your ministry.

76. Kolander, “Culture of Compassion”, 5. Pastor Kolander notes in this essay that the overreaction presented itself in the form of quietism. The only acceptable form of social action was in the effort of a “bridge to the Gospel.”

Thompson, “Christian Compassion”, 25. Doctor Thompson saw this overreaction present as well in the lack of action. Doctor Thompson even goes as far as to say that often conservatives (in context, not a political term, but more addressing the religious spectrum) have “at times fallen into the trap of being upholders of conservative social and economic systems and viewpoints as well.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Wisconsin Synod is known for its biblical adherence and strong opposition to false doctrine. They take the Bible literally, according to its genre, but are also made up of fallible men. As the Social Gospel came on the scene, the desire was there, rightly so, to react to it in order to provide guidance to our synod by learned individuals who could be trusted. The Social Gospel was a threat to the gospel in more ways than one, but when it came to social concern and social action, a more nuanced approach was needed. The first approaches by the Wisconsin Synod definitely erred on the side of abandoning their duty to love and provide for the lost in physical needs as well as spiritual ones. It is no secret that many Wisconsin Synod churches are known today for fervently supporting home and foreign missions that provide real care and service to the lost, both physically and spiritually, in countries throughout the world. As early as the 1950s, we saw mission work, orphanages, and huge amounts of charity and compassion for the poor and lowly in areas outside the heartland. That is not to say that there is conclusive evidence that no programs existed in Wisconsin; that would be a clear overstatement of the issues at play. Rather, the proportion of ministries in the Wisconsin Synod that have historically supported their local communities and reached out physically to build relationships, and then had the opportunity to reach out spiritually, is lower than we would like to admit. The issue of the Social Gospel, or social concern or compassion ministry, is still a relevant issue because we have yet to finish discussing it. It has been a part of our history for close to 100 years, and it isn't going anywhere. The roots from 100 years ago still produce hesitancy in pastors who are actively serving and being called into the Wisconsin Synod. It is time to take a deep, reflective look and see that hesitancy, based on a noble pursuit to preserve the gospel, is no longer fruitful for service in the kingdom of God.

I do not pretend to know, with my limited life experience, how the Wisconsin Synod will remedy this situation. However, the conversation begins with recognizing the roadblocks in our minds. Our history is marked by protecting the doctrine and faith of our people through strong, definitive statements. These statements, though, have proven themselves to get us to fall into one ditch or another. The goal is to walk the narrow Lutheran road in the conversation around compassion ministry and social concern. It has been 100 years since *A Theology for the Social Gospel* was published, and after the dozens of papers written concerning this subject, we have the tools to educate ourselves and our people. Now the question remains: how does one accomplish this goal? To answer that question, I leave the reader in the ever-capable hands of Pastor Kolander. Read his paper for a more thorough guide and aid on how compassion ministry can look in one's life. Whatever the reader decides to do, be recognized by his love for others. Be a person whose fruits are evident and whose life and actions make people wonder what it is that makes you tick. Enjoy the difficult task ahead of him and drag others along to grapple with the reality that is self-sacrificial love for people who don't deserve it.⁷⁷ Finally, hear the encouragement of Paul to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:32–35:

Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'

77. Multiple services including Artificial Intelligence and Grammarly were used to aid the formatting and proofreading of this document. The content remains the author's original ideas unless otherwise cited.

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SUGGESTED READING

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