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Stuart L. Love
slope@pepperdine.edu

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Why the Social Gospel Is Essential



Stuart L. Love



Before exploring the question, Why is the social gospel essential? some readers of *Leaven* may ask, What is the social gospel?

Historians of Christianity in America identify the “social gospel” as the quickening of social conscience among both Protestants and Roman Catholics, one of the moral consequences of the rapid growth of American industry after the Civil War. For example, by 1890 1 percent of the families in America owned more than half of the wealth of the country,¹ but the urgent need of laboring people for improved working conditions and just wages was largely ignored on the grounds that God, the good Creator, undergirded human relations with beneficent principles and that if only humanity would avoid interfering with those principles, everything would work out for the best (a social interpretation of Darwin’s doctrine of the survival of the fittest).

This expression of exaggerated individualism was resisted by a number of theologians, ministers, and others through an increased awareness of the social implications of the kingdom of God. Perhaps the best-known writing of the time was Charles M. Sheldon’s *In His Steps* (1896), a story of significant changes that occurred in a small community when Christians in one congregation decided to live for one year in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. Probably the most significant theologian of the period was Walter Rauschenbusch (1861–1918), who, especially in his book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, attempted to “clothe the social gospel with passion and a sense of destiny” through an exploration of the social meaning of the kingdom of God in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke).²

The intention of this brief article is not to revisit the nineteenth century, but to explore social dimensions of the great saving acts of God seen in the Exodus event in the Old Testament and then in Jesus’ teachings and his embodiment of God’s rule and reign as set forth in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. To do so, I will draw upon biblical themes to demonstrate how God’s mighty redemptive deeds are essentially social, as well as individual, in character. To deny the social implications of the gospel is really to negate the good news of God’s saving deeds for our dying world as we hope for the realization of God’s new creation in Christ.

The Exodus

The first step is to ask about the kind of God that is clearly depicted in the story of the Exodus. For example, in Exod 2:23–25 we are told that when Israel’s cry of suffering “came up to God,” God *heard* his people’s groaning; *remembered* his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; *saw* the people of Israel; and *knew* their plight. When God *hears*, it means that he listens actively in the sense of heeding and responding (Exod 3:7; 6:5). When God *remembers*, it means that he is attentive with a sense of obligation to his prior commitment to his people (Gen 17:4–8). When God *sees*, it signals movement by God toward Israel with compassion (Exod 3:7, 9; 4:31). When God *knows*, Terence Fretheim writes, it is “to share an experience with another” to the degree that “the other’s experience can be called one’s own.”³

In a second passage (Exod 3:7–10) we are told the direction God’s redemption takes. As in the previous text, we are reminded that God observes the affliction of his

people, hears their cry on account of their taskmasters, and knows their sufferings (3:7). But then the Lord says, “I have come down to deliver” the people from the Egyptians (3:8). The expression “I have come down” describes the extent to which the Lord enters intimately into Israel’s sufferings. God does not choose the safe approach, that is, God does not operate from a heavenly throne room. Israel’s God is not Pharaoh. He does not respond to vital social issues through a top-down monarchical bureaucracy or from some distant palace window. To the contrary, the Lord knows Israel’s oppression by personally entering into his people’s burdens and making them his own.

Israel’s God *knows* suffering. Like the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, the Lord is a person of sufferings and one who knows grief.⁴ The God of the Exodus is a social God—he delivers “his people” and acts in judgment against Pharaoh, royal monarch and god of the land of Egypt. The cry of suffering from a host of Israelite slaves is a social cry. The oppression of Pharaoh is social tyranny.

A social consequence of the Exodus is that Israel learns to interpret itself as a community of God’s people, a community that shares a common salvation and a common commitment to follow the will of God (Joshua 24). The ethical demands of being God’s people are specific and numerous. For example, a creditor is to see a debtor as his “brother” and grant the remission of his debt in the seventh year (Deut 15:1–6). The intent of this law is to redress economic imbalances within Israelite society that result from usury and debt slavery.

A rich description of social attitudes concerning the sabbatical year of remission follows (Deut 15:7–18). For example, concerning the poor the same passage states, “If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns . . . , do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor” (15:7). Why? Because “there will never cease to be some in need on the earth; I therefore command you, ‘Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land’” (15:11).

In similar fashion, the freed slave is not to leave a household empty-handed. “Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the Lord your God has blessed you” (15:14). Why? Because “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you” (15:15). Finally, the sojourners (foreigners/strangers in the land), like the widows, orphans, and the

poor (Lev 23:22; Deut 10:18; 24:17), are to receive special care and protection, that is, they are to be loved as

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neighbors. Why? Because “you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God” (Lev 19:34).

From the king down to the slave, “all Israel” shares the common heritage of the land that the Lord has given (Deut 12:9; 15:4; 19:10). Fellow Israelites are “brothers,” and all of Israel is called to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev 19:18). For God’s people, the life of an individual is integrated firmly with the bonds of family and people, a truth illustrated especially in the acknowledgment by a farmer delivering up his first fruits in the sanctuary (Deut 26:5–10):

A wandering Aramean was *my* ancestor; and he went down into Egypt. . . . The Egyptians treated *us* harshly and afflicted *us*. . . . Then *we* cried to the Lord the God of *our* ancestors . . . and the Lord brought *us* out of Egypt. . . . He brought *us* into this place and gave *us* this land. . . . So now *I* bring the first of the fruit of the ground that you, O Lord, have given *me*.

The shifting from “I” to “we” and back again to “I” is, as Hans Walter Wolff states, “typical of the fact that the history of the individual coincides completely with the history of God’s people, in the changes experienced, in the troubles endured, and in the benefits enjoyed.”⁵ An individual’s identity is bound up in the community and its history to the extent that individual needs are social concerns. Thus, the redemption of Israel from Egypt serves as a model of God’s saving power—a paradigm at work within the law (Lev 26:44–45; Num 23:22; Deut 6:21–22), among the prophets (Isa 51:10; Jer 16:14–15; Mic 6:4; 7:15), the psalmists (Pss 77; 78; 81; 105; 106; 136), and, as we will now see, in the Gospels as well.

Jesus and the Kingdom of God

The second step is to demonstrate in Matthew and Luke how the Exodus paradigm is fulfilled in Jesus—teacher and embodiment of the kingdom of God. Matthew declares at the birth of Jesus that the Messiah shall be named Emmanuel, which means “God is with us” (Matt 1:23). “Emmanuel” proceeds throughout Galilee, “teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people” (4:23).

Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s past promises for Israel’s salvation. He is born in Bethlehem, the birthplace of a ruler who would shepherd “my people Israel” (2:5b–6= Mic 5:2 with 2 Sam 5:2). He is God’s “son” who went down and came out of Egypt as Israel, God’s son, did in the past (2:15b= Hos 11:1). His ministry is primarily in Galilee of the Gentiles, where the people sitting in darkness saw a great light (4:14–16= Isa 9:1–2). His deeds are combined with his words and, accordingly, his disciples are to “hunger and thirst” after righteousness (justice) (5:6), pursue a higher justice than the Pharisees (5:20), and seek the kingdom and his justice more than anything else (6:33; cf. Rom 14:17 and Matt 6:10).

Amidst ten miracle stories (8:1–9:34), perhaps suggesting a parallel to the ten miracles of Moses in Egypt (Exod 7:8–11:10), Matthew summarizes Jesus’ healings as a fulfillment of the prophet Isaiah: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases” (8:17= Isa 53:4). In so doing, he echoes our earlier observation that the God of the Exodus knows suffering and is acquainted with grief. Amidst intense opposition from the religious leaders, Matthew portrays Jesus as the servant—specifically, God’s chosen, beloved servant—who proclaims “justice to the Gentiles . . .” (12:17–21= Isa 42:1–4). When the crowds fail to see, hear, and understand his parables, Jesus tells the disciples that that failure is fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy that “this people’s heart has grown dull . . .” (13:14–15= Isa 6:9–10). And when Jesus enters Jerusalem, Matthew cites the prophets: “Tell the daughter of Zion, Look your king is coming to you, humble, and mounted on a donkey . . .” (21:5= Isa 62:11; Zech 9:9). The whole city, Matthew exclaims, “was in turmoil, asking, ‘Who is this?’” (21:10).

That same day Jesus enters the temple (the religious and social center of Judaism). He cleanses God’s sanctuary, declaring it to be a house of prayer, not a den of robbers (21:13). Then—and the social implications are so

striking—there in the temple he heals the blind and the lame (21:14), social groups previously barred from God’s sacred space. The children sing, which provokes the chief priests and scribes, but Jesus reminds them of their own Scripture: “Have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself’?” (21:16= Ps 8:2, Septuagint).

Finally, Matthew’s last example of Jesus’ teaching takes us to the end of the age and the final judgment (25:31–46). With “the nations” gathered before the Son of Man (25:32), the righteous are blessed by God (remember the beatitudes?) because they fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited those in prison. They are righteous because they innocently did good works (see 13:43; cf. 1:19). In answer to the question, “When did we do these things?” the king replies, “Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family (brothers), you did it to me” (25:40).

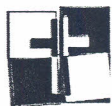
Truly, the Son of Man desires mercy, not sacrifice (9:13; 12:7). These individual and social responses to human need recall Israel’s experience surrounding the Exodus. The kingdom of heaven portrayed in Matthew contains, as Benedict T. Viviano states, “God’s definitive and ultimate promise of salvation to redeemed humanity, on earth as in heaven, in time and eternity, socially and politically as well as personally.”⁶ Surely Matthew says to us today, “Go and learn what this means” (9:13).

In the Gospel of Luke we revisit God’s mighty deliverance for all humanity. In the birth stories, Mary’s Magnificat (1:46–55) gives praise to God for the salvation of the lowly and oppressed. God’s power has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry, and sent the rich away empty (1:51–53). In his mercy God has helped his servant Israel according to the promises he made to Abraham and to his descendants forever (1:54–55). References to the lowly, the oppressed, and the poor are to the physically poor.⁷ In Jesus and in the mission of Jesus’ disciples, God is involved in a new Exodus (see 9:31).

The fulfillment of God’s promises is especially evident at the inaugural preaching of Jesus at Nazareth (4:16–30), for at this propitious event—on the Sabbath, in the synagogue of his home, and in realization of Scripture (Isa 61:1–2; 58:6)—Jesus preaches good news (gospel) to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom for the oppressed. The Greek term *aphesis*, else-

where used by Luke for “forgiveness” of sins, is translated here as “release” to the captives and “setting free” the oppressed. Forgiveness (remission) involves the whole person. Luke may indicate that Jesus’ ministry is the biblical jubilee—Israel’s time of restoration, new beginning, faith in God’s sovereignty, and conviction that social and economic structures must reflect God’s reign.⁸

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Luke’s theme of the poor then unfolds. In the Sermon on the Plain, beatitudes (pronouncements on those favored by God) are for the physically poor, the hungry, those who weep, and the persecuted (6:20–22). When the disciples of John come to Jesus asking for clarification of his ministry, Jesus points to what they have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised. Luke then ends Jesus’ reply with an additional statement: “The poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me” (7:22–23). Those invited to the Great Dinner are not friends, family, relatives, and rich neighbors—typical guests at banquets of Pharisees and lawyers (14:1–14). Instead, they are the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame (14:21). And still there is room in the house for those dwelling outside the town (14:23). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus sets forth a great reversal. In this life, Lazarus lays at the rich man’s gate and longs to satisfy his hunger (16:20–21; see 6:21). After their deaths the rich man suffers in Hades, but Lazarus is with Abraham (16:22). When the tormented man asks that Lazarus be sent back to this life to warn his five brothers, Jesus replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead” (16:31).

The climactic story of Luke, the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus (19:1–10), draws together concerns for tax collectors (5:29–32), the rich (18:25–27), and the lost (15:1–32). Jesus, out of divine necessity, “must stay” at

Zacchaeus’ house. In response, all who see it grumble that Jesus has crossed the boundaries separating clean from unclean. Nevertheless, Jesus does, and Zacchaeus voluntarily promises that from that point on half of his possessions will be used for the poor and that if he has “defrauded anyone of anything” he will make fourfold restitution (19:8). Zacchaeus, unlike the rich ruler (18:18–25), serves as a model of conversion to the call of God’s rule and reign. Jesus’ next statements are the central idea of Luke: “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (19:9–10). The story of Zacchaeus should be our story. Visited by Christ, we, like Zacchaeus, are called to care for the poor and to restore justice!

Conclusion

So why is the social gospel essential? It is because the gospel’s fullness—all that Jesus taught and embodied in proclamation, teaching, and service—has its alpha and omega in the living, active, sovereign God of the Bible. From the Exodus to the Gospels, God’s saving purposes for humankind find their completion in Jesus Christ. God’s rule (his kingdom) and the gospel are a seamless garment encompassing all of life. This means that God’s reign has already come in Jesus, continues through his people, and awaits its fulfillment in the return of Jesus Christ our Lord. The church is charged with carrying forward the kingdom’s coming in all its fullness, a task that requires a discernment of the vastness of God’s will on earth as it is in heaven. We are called to a unified mission of proclamation and service so that “God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 4:10–11).

Whenever a particular dimension of the gospel’s fullness becomes its defining center, whether that dimension be proclamation or social action, the result is a distorting reductionism. In the end, God’s kingdom is greater than any of our understandings but is, at the same time, profoundly simple: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28).

STUART L. LOVE teaches New Testament and Christian Ministry at Pepperdine University, Malibu, California, and serves as one of the editors of *Leaven*.

See page 73 for notes.