

Washington Gladden: The Social Gospel (1902)

*During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, many Protestants began to promote what came to be called the social gospel. They sought to apply Christian ethics in an effort to ameliorate the many problems spawned by rapid urbanization and industrialization: poverty, unsanitary living conditions, racial and ethnic tensions, and labor strife. Among the early champions of the social gospel was Washington Gladden, a prominent Congregational minister who pastored large churches in Springfield, Massachusetts, and Columbus, Ohio. Gladden was the first minister to endorse the labor union movement. He also spoke out against anti-Catholicism and racial segregation. In the following selection from his book *Social Salvation*, he explains why Christians need to become social reformers.*

From *Washington Gladden, Social Salvation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1902), pp. 14-15, 25-28, 206-8, 226.

Any treatment of social questions which failed to bring the responsibility for right social actions home to individuals would, indeed, be defective treatment; on the other hand, any discussion of the problems of the individual life which did not keep the social environment steadily in view would be utterly inadequate.

I am therefore unable to understand how Christianity, whether as a law or as a gospel, can be intelligently or adequately preached or lived in these days without a constant reference to social questions. No individual is soundly converted until he comprehends his social relations and strives to fulfill them; and the work of growth and sanctification largely consists in a clearer apprehension of these relations and a more earnest effort to fill them with the life of the divine Spirit. The kingdom of heaven is within us and among us; the preposition, in Christ's saying, seems to have the double meaning. It cannot be among us unless it is within us, and it cannot be within us without being among us.

It would seem, therefore, that the minister's work, in these days, must lie, very largely, along the lines of social amelioration. He is bound to understand the laws of social structure. It is just as needful that he should understand the constitution of human society as that he should understand the constitution of the human soul; the one comes under his purview no less directly than the other. He does not know definitely what sin is, unless he understands the nature of the social bond; he does not surely know what salvation means until he has comprehended the reciprocal action of society upon the individual and of the individual upon society. The men who are working out their own salvation are doing it largely through the establishment of right relations between themselves and their neighbors, and he cannot help them in this unless he has some clear idea of what these right relations are.

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... The minister who has become merely or mainly political, or sociological, or economical, or scientific, has abandoned his vocation. The minister to whom religion is not the central and culminating power in all his teaching has no right in any Christian pulpit. It is the religion of politics, of economics, of sociology that we are to teach, - nothing else. We are to bring the truths and the powers of the spiritual world, the eternal world, to bear upon all these themes. This is what we have to do with these social questions, and we have nothing else to do with them.

The first thing for us to understand is that God is in his world, and that we are workers together with him. In all this industrial struggle he is present in every part of it, working according to the counsel of his perfect will. In the gleams of light which sometimes break forth from the darkness of the conflict we discern his inspiration; in the stirrings of goodwill which temper the wasting strife we behold the evidence of his presence; in the sufferings and losses and degradations which wait upon every violation of his law of love we witness the retributions with which that law goes armed. In the weltering masses of poverty; in the giddy throngs that tread the paths of vice; in the multitudes distressed and scattered as sheep having no shepherd; in the brutalized ranks marching in lock-step through the prison yard; in the groups of politicians scheming for place and plunder, - in all the most forlorn and untoward and degrading human associations, the One who is never absent is that divine Spirit which brooded over the chaos at the beginning, nursing it to life and beauty, and which is nearer to every creature he hath made, than anything unto itself can be.

Nay, there is not one of these hapless, sinning multitudes in whose spirit he is not present to will and to work according to his good pleasure; never overpowering the will, but gently pressing in, by every avenue open to him, his gifts of love and truth. As he has for every man's life a plan, so has he for the common life a perfect social order into which he seeks to lead his

children, that he may give them plenty and blessedness and abundance of peace as long as the moon endureth. Surely he has a way for men to live in society; he has a way of organizing industry; he has a way of life for the family, and for the school, and for the shop, and for the city, and for the state; he has a way for preventing poverty, and a way for helping and saving the poor and the sick and the sinful; and it is his way that we are to seek and point out and follow. We cannot know it perfectly, but if we are humble and faithful and obedient, we shall come to understand it better and better as the years go by. The one thing for us to be sure of is that God has a way for human beings to live and work together, just as truly as he has a way for the stars over our heads and the crystals under our feet; and that it is man's chief end to find this way and follow it.

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No one who has lived and labored for many years in ill-governed cities, in the interests of virtue, can fail to be aware of the evil influence which bad government exerts upon the characters of those who live under it. The tone of public morality is affected; the convictions of the youth are blurred; the standards of honor and fidelity are lowered. That which in the family and in the Sunday-school and in the day-school and in the pulpit we are teaching our children to regard as sacred, the bad city government, by the whole tenor of its administration, openly despises; the things which we tell them are detestable and infamous, the bad city government, by its open connivance or inaction, proclaims to be honorable. The whole weight of the moral influence of a municipal government like that which has existed until recently in New York, like that which exists to-day in Philadelphia, and in many other cities, is hostile to honesty, honor, purity, and decency. The preacher of righteousness finds, therefore, in bad municipal government, one of the deadliest of the evil forces with which he is called to contend. The problem of the city is a problem in which he has a vital interest, a question on which he has an undoubted right to speak.

The American city of the nineteenth century has been notable for two things, the rapidity of its growth and the corruptness of its civic administration. The population of the whole land has been growing apace, but the cities have grown at the expense of the rural districts....

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Let us not underrate our problem. These people of the cities-many of them ignorant, depraved, superstitious, unsocial in their tempers and habits; many of them ignorant of the language in which our laws are written, and unable freely to communicate with those who wish to influence them for good; having no conception of government but that of an enemy to be eluded or an unkind providence from which dole may be extorted; and no idea of a vote higher than that of a commodity which can be sold for money-these are the "powers that be" who must give us good government in our cities, if we are ever to get it.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How convincing is Gladden's argument for a social gospel? Explain.
2. Should ministers be social activists and political reformers? Why or why not?
3. How does Gladden characterize the foreign immigrants streaming into American cities in the late nineteenth century?