

A PROPER LUTHERAN RESPONSE TO THE PITFALLS OF THE SOCIAL GOSPEL AND
QUIETISM CONCERNING THE ROLES OF THE CHURCH AND THE CHRISTIAN IN
SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explains the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism concerning the roles of the church and the Christian in society. While it responds to these pitfalls in a Lutheran way, it answers the question: “What is the church’s and the Christian’s proper role in society?” As it answers this question, it concludes that their roles fall between the Social Gospel and Quietism. As the church and the Christian avoid these two movements’ pitfalls, they must always keep in mind the proper distinction between the law and the gospel and the Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms. These teachings will guide them as they navigate difficult issues. Ultimately, in everything the institutional church and the individual Christian do, the proclamation of the gospel will be both goal and mission. As they do so, Christian love will inevitably follow, though Christians may demonstrate this love in different ways. After all, to share the gospel is to show Christian love, and a demonstration of Christian love always flows from a heart motivated by the gospel.

INTRODUCTION

Society is imperfect. Before Jesus comes back on Judgment Day, this will always be true. Naturally, the institutional church and the individual Christian will be concerned about this, but each church and Christian may express this concern differently. The Social Gospel and Quietism¹ are two examples of Christian ideologies that react to society's imperfections in entirely different ways.

In response to the Social Gospel, this thesis replies: though the church will be concerned about the physical well-being of society, the church does not seek to change the structures of society in order to create a "kingdom of God on earth," since the church's primary concern is to preach law and gospel to every soul. In response to Quietism, this thesis replies: though Christians are not *of* the world, they can let their light shine in the world in everything they do since they are still *in* the world. Therefore, as they reflect on the roles of the church and the Christian in society, Lutherans will avoid the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism by taking a "narrow Lutheran middle" approach.

1. From this point forward, the author has chosen to capitalize the terms "Social Gospel" and "Quietism" since they are the names of religious movements. However, they will remain uncapitalized if a cited author does not capitalize one of the terms in his/her work.

PART I: KEY DOCTRINES TO CONSIDER

In a textbook about the American Civil War, the editors cannot forget to mention Abraham Lincoln. When an experienced plumber is teaching a young apprentice, he naturally will mention the importance of the supply and drainage system. When a church history professor teaches a course on the Reformation that lasts an entire semester, he simply cannot neglect Martin Luther. Similarly, in a discussion about the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism, especially as they relate to the Church's and the Christian's roles in society, certain doctrines of Scripture should be considered—namely, the distinction between the law and the gospel and the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

The Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel

“The doctrinal contents of the entire Holy Scriptures, both of the Old and the New Testament, are made up of two doctrines differing fundamentally from each other, viz., the Law and the Gospel.”² Therefore, in any serious conversation about the Scriptures, a correct understanding of the law and the gospel is vital. Concerning the Church's and the Christian's roles in society, this doctrine deserves special recognition and explanation.

The word “law” has a wide variety of nuances in Scripture. For example, the law can refer to the first five books of the Old Testament (Matt 7:12 NIV) or the entire Old Testament (John 10:34). It can even refer to the entire Word of God: “but whose delight is in the law of the

2. C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel: Thirty-Nine Evening Lectures*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, [1929]), 6. This is the first of his twenty-five theses.

LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night” (Ps 1:2). More uses of the word “law” exist in Scripture, but in a “narrow” sense, the law refers to God’s message to sinners demanding that they follow his holy commands and remain sinless, both outwardly and inwardly. However, this is not possible since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Therefore, “no one will be declared righteous in God’s sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin” (Rom 3:20). Through its commands, the law shows sinners that they fall way short of what he commands and can never attain the perfection that God requires on their own.

The word “gospel” can mean more than one thing in Scripture. It can refer to a written record of Jesus’ life and ministry (Mark 1:1), while it can also refer to a proclamation that includes a law message to prepare its hearers for the gospel (Mark 1:15). The word “gospel” often refers to the good news that Jesus shared with Nicodemus: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). For our sake, God sent his Son, who was born of a woman and was obligated to obey the same Ten Commandments that we also are to obey, in order that he could redeem us and bring us into his Father’s family (Gal 4:4–5). On the cross, Jesus took the punishment that should have been ours so that by faith in his perfect life and sacrifice, God does not declare us guilty. Instead, he declares us innocent as he sees only the righteousness of Christ (2 Cor 5:21). Jesus did not only die for those who would believe in him but for the sins of the whole world, since “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor 5:19). In accordance with the Scriptures, Jesus was raised from the dead on the third day (1 Cor 15:4). His resurrection from the dead declares that God has justified all mankind (Rom 4:25). Through his resurrection, we

have been given new birth into a living hope, into an inheritance that can never perish (1 Peter 1:3–4).

The law shows us our sin; the gospel shows us our Savior. Staunch Lutherans have heard this distinction between the law and the gospel countless times in their pastors' sermons and Bible studies. They know that the law kills while the gospel saves. They know that both are necessary since without the law, sinners do not need salvation, and without the gospel, salvation does not come to sinners. But not everyone knows this distinction.

Since this doctrine is so important, it is no surprise that Satan desperately tries to lead people away from this essential truth. He leads people astray as he creates confusion between the proper roles of the law and the gospel. He gives people false hope when he convinces people that the law's ordinances can save a person or even an entire society. When Satan claims that the gospel cannot give absolute comfort since it does not save people, he wants to deprive sinners of certainty. When he persuades people that certain adiaphora are required or forbidden in every circumstance, he wants to burden consciences and change gospel freedoms into ordinances of the law.

When churches do these things, they confuse and mislead the souls within their congregations. Unfortunately, the Social Gospel and Quietism do these exact things.

The Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms

The Lutheran doctrine of the Two Kingdoms is the understanding that a Christian during his time on earth exists in two kingdoms: the kingdom of God and the kingdom of earthly government, or the "Kingdom of the Right Hand" and the "Kingdom of the Left Hand." A proper understanding of this doctrine does not only recognize both kingdoms as legitimate; it also realizes the

importance of a proper distinction between the two kingdoms and the different roles that God has given to each.

What is the church's role in society? Jesus defines it well. He said to his disciples: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:19–20). The Kingdom of the Right Hand is all about the gospel. This gospel message is the same message about which Jesus commanded the Eleven: "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:15–16). Jesus said to Peter: "Feed my lambs" (John 21:15). Jesus is clear about the church's role. The church should go out into the world, baptize in the name of the Triune God, preach the good news to all creation, teach them to obey everything Jesus has commanded, and feed his lambs. Besides the church, this role belongs to no other institution.

While the church focuses primarily on hearts and souls, the state focuses on outward actions, specifically those that can harm other people. Because some people, even Christians, may not conduct their lives with outward propriety, God gives the government power to control outward behavior with civil law.³ Ultimately, the government seeks to protect the people within its boundaries. Meyer concludes: "Governments exist, and if they are to have our stamp of approval must exist, in the interest of the people. . . . If it is not, it forfeits its right of existence."⁴

3. Daniel M. Deuschlander, *Civil Government: God's Other Kingdom* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1998), 21.

4. John P. Meyer, "Church and State," *Theological Quartalschrift* 25:3 (July 1928), 181.

The apostle Paul gives a profound, Spirit-inspired statement regarding the state's purpose and the Christian's obedience:

Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and you will be commended. For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also as a matter of conscience. This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, who give their full time to governing. Give to everyone what you owe them: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor (Rom 13:1-7).

Therefore, the state is a blessing from God as it fulfills its God-given purposes.

The church and the state are blessings to one another. As it fulfills its purpose, the state continues to be a blessing to the church since the presence of unconvicted murderers and thieves may hinder the church as it fulfills its purpose. The church certainly needs the civil government to carry out its role in protecting its citizens. It is also true that the church's presence in society helps to form a better society, as Christians are motivated by the love of Christ to live like Christ. Thus, the church is also a blessing to the state. Our confessions declare: "Because of the command of God both are to be devoutly respected and honored as the highest blessings of God on earth."⁵

The Holy Christian Church holds the sword of the Spirit; the state yields its own sword to curb outward actions. The state cannot tell churches what to teach, nor can it legislate particular religious dogma. At the same time, it is not the church's role to tell the government what laws to

5. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. and trans. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), AC XXVIII: 4.

enact, for God has given that role to the state. Nonetheless, the Church is quite concerned with its people's actions and the society in which they live. The Church is concerned about society and the things that take place in it. The Church is *in* the world, though it does not belong *to* the world, nor is it *of* the world. So, what is the church's role in society? What is the Christian's role in society? As the church and the Christian fulfill their proper roles, they must avoid the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism.

PART II: THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

A Brief History

“From the closing decades of the nineteenth century until the Second World War a tide of social concern swept through the ranks of Protestant clergy and some laity in Britain and North America,”⁶ since the world had rapidly changed. The Industrial Revolution brought significant changes in manufacturing, providing machines and factories that could mass-produce items at a rate the likes of which the world had not seen. Nevertheless, these improvements in manufacturing resulted in a deterioration of many ordinary people. Wealth was unevenly divided. While businesses fought against each other for profit, the poor were becoming poorer.⁷ Nolting describes it this way: “These were the times when mine owners investigated the death of a mule thoroughly, but had the crushed bodies of miners, killed in their mines under perilous working conditions, carried secretly out some side opening of the mine.”⁸ As a result of this severe social strife, churches became quite concerned.

This renewed concern took on the form of numerous social movements in Great Britain and the United States. One of these movements not only was influenced by these concerns in Britain, but it also was molded by previous influences from American Protestantism.⁹ By 1900,

6. Paul T. Phillips, *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American Social Christianity, 1880-1940* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), xiii.

7. Robert T. Handy, ed., *The Social Gospel in America: 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4.

8. Paul F. Nolting, *The Social Gospel – A Threat to the Principle of the Separation of Church and State* (Sleepy Eye, MN: *Sleepy Eye Herald Dispatch*, 1966), 23.

9. Handy, 4.

this movement was called the “Social Gospel,”¹⁰ and it grew in the United States.¹¹ Its prominent American leaders included Washington Gladden and Richard T. Ely,¹² but one leader rose above the others as the Social Gospel’s most prominent spokesman: Walter Rauschenbusch.¹³ The teaching of the Social Gospel is this: the church’s ultimate concern should be with the restoration and salvation of society, through which would come the salvation of individual souls. To accomplish this purpose, the church needed to be active in social reform.

It was ambitious. It was desirable. It even seemed attainable, that is, until World War I came and “punctured this optimistic balloon of the social gospel.”¹⁴ Yet not even the greatest war the world had ever seen could squelch the hopes of Rauschenbusch: “After the War the social gospel will ‘come back’ with pent-up energy and clearer knowledge.”¹⁵ Despite his hopes, the Social Gospel never quite reached its high level of popularity before the war.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the movement has not died in the slightest; rather, it has taken on a new form: “what was called the social gospel now is called social action.”¹⁷ Through its efforts, the Social Gospel taught that

10. Phillips, *Anglo-American Social Christianity*, xviii.

11. Handy, 4.

12. Handy, 16.

13. Nolting, *The Social Gospel – A Threat*, 25.

14. Armin Schuetze, “The Church’s Social Concerns — Scriptural Imperatives and Limitations,” in *Our Great Heritage, Volume 3*, eds. Lyle W. Lange and G. Jerome Albrecht (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1991), 414.

15. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917), 4.

16. Handy, 14.

17. Schuetze, “The Church’s Social Concerns,” 414.

“the kingdom of God would soon become a reality, bringing with it social harmony and the elimination of the worst of social injustices.”¹⁸

The Social Gospel’s Theology of the Kingdom of God

The Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer is “Your kingdom come.”¹⁹ If someone would read this statement alone, without the context of the rest of the Lord’s Prayer, they might ask a few questions. Whose kingdom is it? What is this kingdom? How does this kingdom come?

If someone reads the rest of the Lord’s Prayer, the first question can be answered easily: the kingdom belongs to the Father, for he is the one addressed in the prayer at the beginning. Nevertheless, the kingdom does not only belong to the Father. The apostle Paul writes about Jesus: “And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:22–23). Jesus also says: “My kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36). Undoubtedly, this is the same kingdom referred to in the Second Petition of the Lord’s Prayer. The Holy Spirit is not inactive in the working of the kingdom of God either. It is written: “The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). Therefore, the kingdom of God finds ownership among each person of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

However, the second and the third questions are more challenging to answer: what is this kingdom? How does this kingdom come? Of course, the answer to the third question entirely depends on the answer to the second question, for the coming of the kingdom depends on what

18. Handy, 10.

19. Or “Thy kingdom come” if you prefer the traditional version.

type of kingdom it is. One of the Social Gospel's major premises is the idea that the kingdom of God can (and should) become an "earthly" kingdom.

Walter Rauschenbusch is not shy when he speaks about the importance of this doctrine in his theology. He writes: "This doctrine is itself the social gospel. Without it, the idea of redeeming the social order will be but an annex to the orthodox conception of the scheme of salvation."²⁰ The supporters of the Social Gospel wanted to build a perfect society on earth, for it seemed that mankind was improving itself toward perfection.²¹ This task was neither easy nor insignificant: "the establishment of a community of righteousness in mankind is just as much a saving act of God as the salvation of an individual from his natural selfishness and moral inability."²² Rauschenbusch defines the kingdom of God as "humanity organized according to the will of God"²³ and it "is not confined within the limits of the Church and its activities. It embraces the whole of human life. It is the Christian transfiguration of the social order."²⁴ This assessment of the kingdom of God begs the question: how exactly does this "Christian transfiguration of the social order" take place?

Christian communities have long been concerned with the conditions of the suffering and the weak, provoking a "challenge to the conscience of Christian men."²⁵ Of course, in the modern era, one of the main reasons people might be weak or suffering is because they are poor.

20. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 131.

21. Schuetze, "The Church's Social Concerns," 414.

22. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 140.

23. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 144.

24. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 145.

25. Walter James, *The Christian in Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 38.

Thus, the problem is economic; capitalism is the enemy.²⁶ The *Chicago Tribune* noted: “The high school boys and girls of the Methodist Youth Conference held in Evanston last summer solemnly resolved, ‘Before permanent peace can ever be achieved, the present economic system must be changed to a cooperative commonwealth.’”²⁷ The human race must become one big, happy family, and the proponents of the Social Gospel believe that this is possible through economic prosperity for all. The Social Gospel attempts to achieve this goal through public activism and participation.²⁸ As the Social Gospel advocates for social prosperity, it also aims for morality to exist in all people. Yet it does not wish to employ the gospel for this task. Instead, they desire to see “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.”²⁹

To briefly summarize their position, the kingdom of God is the Christian transfiguration of the social order. The kingdom of God can only come by public activism, participation, and enforcement of social legislation based on Christian ethics. The Church has completed its task when all economic problems have ceased, and a new Christian society emerges, one which rests “on love, service, and equality.”³⁰ When this has happened, then the kingdom of God has truly come to earth.

26. Henry C. Nitz, “Another Gospel,” *Theologische Quartalschrift* 32:4 (October 1935), 247.

27. Nitz, 247. He cites the February 10, 1935 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*.

28. Edward C. Fredrich, “Activity vs. Activism in the Church,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 71:4 (October 1974), 248.

29. Nitz, 252.

30. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964 [1907]), 70.

A Lutheran Response to the Social Gospel's Theology of the Kingdom of God

Again, the Second Petition of the Lord's Prayer says: "Your kingdom come." Regarding this petition, there were three questions: whose kingdom is it? What is this kingdom? How does this kingdom come? The answer to the first question remains unequivocal throughout orthodox Christianity: the kingdom belongs to our Triune God. But Lutheranism disagrees with the Social Gospel regarding their answers to the second and third questions.

So, what is this kingdom? What is this kingdom not? It cannot be the transfiguration of society. The kingdom of God is not an earthly kingdom. Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus also tells us about his kingdom: "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is' because the kingdom of God is in your midst" (Luke 17:20–21). Therefore, the kingdom of God cannot be a worldly kingdom, as the proponents of the Social Gospel say that it is and should be.

Since the kingdom of God is not a "worldly" kingdom, what kind of kingdom is it? Because Jesus said to Nicodemus: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit" (John 3:5), it is clear that the kingdom of God is a spiritual kingdom. God delivered all believers "from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13–14). To those who are a part of this kingdom, the apostle Paul writes: "Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. . . . Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly" (Col 3:15–16).

Now, since the kingdom of God is spiritual, how does the kingdom come to us? Naturally, it comes to us through the Holy Spirit, who comes to us through his means of grace, the gospel in Word and Sacrament. The Sacrament of Baptism brings us into the kingdom of

God, since by the Spirit in Baptism we receive a “washing of rebirth and renewal” (Titus 3:5). He also uses the Word to create faith, as Paul says: “Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ” (Rom 10:17). We know that it is the Holy Spirit who works that faith through the Word, for Scripture says: “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3). Therefore, we conclude: “The kingdom of God is Christ’s rule in our hearts through his Word” and “God’s kingdom comes as the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith in our hearts through the means of grace.”³¹ The Apology describes Christ’s kingdom as “the heart’s knowledge of God, fear of God, faith in God, and the beginning of eternal righteousness and eternal life.”³² What a glorious kingdom we live in and that lives within us!

The Social Gospel’s Theology of the Condition of Mankind

Rauschenbusch writes: “Theology ought to be the science of redemption and offer scientific methods for the eradication of sin.”³³ One might assume that Rauschenbusch denies original sin completely. Thus, it is quite surprising to read just one paragraph later regarding the doctrine of original sin: “I take pleasure, therefore, in defending it.”³⁴ Since he cannot deny the prevalence of sin throughout the world, he cannot and does not wish to completely disregard the doctrine of original sin.

31. Stephen Geiger et al., eds., *Luther’s Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 2017), 255.

32. Ap XVI: 2.

33. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 57.

34. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 57.

Rauschenbusch understands “original sin” as those sinful, innate tendencies passed down from generation to generation. Because our ancestors acted in these ways, we are predisposed to act in these ways as well.³⁵ Still, regarding the teaching that Adam’s guilt has resulted in the total corruption of humanity, he says that “the old theology overworked it.”³⁶ He writes: “A theology for the social gospel would have to say that original sin is partly social. It runs down the generations not only by biological propagation but also by social assimilation.”³⁷ Rather than stressing the fall into sin, he emphasizes the specific sins passed down from each generation and culture, rooted deeply in society’s institutions and practices. His main concern is that theologians so strongly emphasize humanity’s sinful state that they neglect the sins that humans and whole societies actively commit,³⁸ saying that theology has failed to teach original sin correctly.³⁹ Therefore, he rejects the idea that original sin is the uniform depravity of all mankind⁴⁰ while also rejecting that mankind should be held responsible for their original sin.⁴¹ This statement might best summarize his teachings on original sin: “Original sin deals with dumb forces of nature; social tradition is ethical and may be affected by conscious social action.”⁴²

35. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 58.

36. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 59.

37. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 61.

38. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 60.

39. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 67.

40. Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 121.

41. Rauschenbusch, 59.

42. Rauschenbusch, 60.

Thus, Rauschenbusch has high hopes for humanity's condition, hoping to fix society's problems by fixing its institutions and customs. Since sinfulness is universal, this is a group effort, "not pertaining to every individual separately or referring to him alone, but *in each the work of all, and in all the work of each.*"⁴³ When all people become aware of the issues and when everyone works together, each for everyone else's benefit, the redemption of the social order no longer remains a possibility; it transforms into reality. This reality is the Kingdom of God on earth.

A Lutheran Response to the Social Gospel's Theology of the Condition of Mankind

Rauschenbusch's theology sounds right to human reasoning. According to our human logic, people should not be at fault for something that they inherited. It is not a baby's fault that she was born with brown hair. Since this is true, reason suggests: "Why would it be a baby's fault that he was born with original sin?" If the sinful tendencies that have come from nature have formed society's structures, then it is by transforming society's structures that society eventually transforms. Society would quickly perfect itself and dispose of all sinful tendencies as people enter societal structures that propagate good instead of evil. Then original sin finally becomes obsolete. Again, it just sounds so good. How could it be so wrong?

After David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan confronted him. After the prophet convicted him of his sin, David wrote Psalm 51. He said: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:3–5). David held

43. Rauschenbusch, 92. He is quoting from Friedrich Schleiermacher's *Der Christliche Glaube*.

himself responsible for what he did to Uriah and Bathsheba. David admitted that these sinful actions were proof that he was sinful from the point of conception. If David believed that he was not responsible for his sinful nature, he would not have believed he was responsible for his sinful actions since these sinful actions flowed from his sinful nature. Therefore, since David claimed responsibility for his sinful actions, he also claimed responsibility for his inherited sinful nature.

Surely it was not just David who was conceived in sin. It cannot be that only some of us were born in sin or that most of us were born in sin. All of us born naturally from a father and a mother are born in sin, or none of us are born in sin. So which is it? The answer is clear: “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom 5:12). Since all were born in sin, “all have sinned” (Rom 3:23). David claimed responsibility for his sinful nature. We do too.

Before our glorious entrance into heaven, sinful human beings will remain sinful. Theology cannot offer *man-made* solutions to the problem of sin. Instead, the Bible simply addresses that the problem exists. The Bible says that the problem of sin in this world will not get better but worse. Then, on Judgment Day, God will take the problem into his own hands. Without any help from human beings, he will eradicate sin on his own. But the Social Gospel movement disagrees.

Postmillennialism and the Social Gospel

“Blessed and holy are those who share in the first resurrection. The second death has no power over them, but they will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him for a thousand years” (Rev 20:6). Postmillennialism teaches that this passage refers to a long, indefinite period of ultimate and unprecedented peace and prosperity for God’s people. As Christians transform

society with Christian ideals, this “millennium” would begin someday. The beginning of this millennium would be the beginning of the age of “the Kingdom of God on earth.” As Social Gospel preachers concentrated on this endeavor, they dedicated far less time to other doctrines, such as original sin or personal conversion.⁴⁴ Though Rauschenbusch does not especially mention those who support postmillennialism, the theology of the Social Gospel directly relates to it,⁴⁵ particularly in its improvement of mankind and the construction of a heaven on earth.⁴⁶

This was not only attractive; it was deemed necessary. In order to save sinners, they needed to save society. After all, to reorganize the world societally was to regenerate the world spiritually.⁴⁷ But this societal progress cannot be man’s work alone. Progress does not only come from man’s nature; it is also divine.⁴⁸ This progress would not be inevitable either. Society would need to work at it, but Rauschenbusch believed it could happen.⁴⁹

A Lutheran Response to Postmillennialism

Revelation 20:6 refers to a period of a thousand years in which believers “will be priests of God and of Christ and will reign with him.” While postmillennialism teaches that this will be a time

44. Murray L. Wagner, “Social Gospel Liberalism: Postmillennial Views Among the Brethren,” *Brethren Life and Thought* 46 (2001): 135.

45. Dennis R. Davis, “The Impact of Evolutionary Thought on Walter Rauschenbusch,” *Foundations* 21 (1978), 262.

46. Lyle W. Lange, *God So Loved the World: A Study of Christian Doctrine* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 2005), 616.

47. Carl J. Guarneri, “The Associationists: Forging a Christian Socialism in Antebellum America,” *Church History* 52 (1983): 49.

48. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1914), 30.

49. Handy, *The Social Gospel in America*, 257.

of unprecedented peace and prosperity on earth, orthodox Lutheranism suggests that this is false doctrine. Rather than a time of ultimate peace on earth before Jesus returns, the millennium symbolizes the unknown length of time between the first coming of Christ, in which he destroyed Satan and the power of death (Heb 2:14) by triumphing over him on the cross (Col 2:15), and the second coming of Jesus, which will occur on Judgment Day (Acts 17:31). This amount of time is the New Testament era.

The apostle Paul writes: “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim 3:12–13). The times will not get better; they will get worse. Jesus promises: “Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:12–13).

Thanks be to Jesus that he, the one who will save us in the end, promises to be with us to the end (Matt 28:20).

Americanism and the Social Gospel

The adherents to the Social Gospel hoped that the kingdom of God would be an earthly kingdom. Of course, setting up an earthly kingdom from scratch is no easy task, especially one that is supposed to be God’s kingdom! They could not create their own government that would officially establish a universal kingdom of God and bring the new millennium of peace and prosperity. Instead, they would need an existing kingdom to fulfill the role of ushering in this kingdom. Considering the strength of the United States on the world stage, considering that many leading figures of the Social Gospel were American, and considering America was a nation filled with Christians already, the United States was a major candidate to usher in the

kingdom of God. Thus, the advocates of the Social Gospel deeply desired a Christian America.⁵⁰ After all, that was their idea of Americanism: that the United States would be the nation that becomes God's kingdom on earth. Among their advocates was a man named Washington Gladden.

On October 13, 1909, Gladden preached on Isaiah 60:4–5⁵¹ in Minneapolis, Minnesota to the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. The sermon was entitled “The Nation and the Kingdom.” Its focus was on the development of the kingdom of God through social justice. After he cites sections from Isaiah 65,⁵² he argues that if one nation organizes its societal structures upon the teachings of Jesus and becomes a nation that promotes equality and sustains it, the rest of the nations will follow in its footsteps. After all, every nation wants righteousness, justice, equality, and peace.⁵³ Of course, he believed the United States was most likely to propagate this social justice to the greatest degree. Concerning the words of Isaiah, he states: “These words of the text, as we read them, sometimes sound like a transcript from a current history of the United States.”⁵⁴

In other words, he maintains that the United States needs to become a theocracy. As a matter of fact, “that is God's plan for every nation; he desires no other relation to any nation than that which he maintained toward Israel. . . . In truth, the evangel which the divine love is seeking

50. Handy, 135.

51. “Lift up thine eyes round about, and see; they all gather themselves together, they come unto thee; thy sons shall come from far and thy daughters shall be carried in the arms. Then thou shalt see and be radiant, and thy heart shall thrill and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be turned unto thee, the wealth of the nations shall come unto thee” (KJV). Because Gladden used KJV as the basis of his sermon, KJV is quoted here.

52. This section of Scripture vividly describes the new heavens and the new earth, which will be created on Judgment Day and will never perish.

53. Handy, 137–139.

54. Handy, 140.

to proclaim to all the peoples, is a truth so large that it can only be adequately uttered by a nation's voice."⁵⁵

A Lutheran Response to Americanism

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution says: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." These ten words had already existed for over one hundred years when Gladden advocated for a Christian America in 1909. By law, the United States cannot promote a specific religion, let alone make all of its teachings the law itself. Nevertheless, Gladden's idea of an American theocracy, as well as the idea that the United States should usher in an earthly kingdom of God, is not merely a trespass against the Constitution. It contradicts what God teaches. It is an improper application of the Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

Americanism, or any movement that seeks to establish a Christian theocracy, is concerned about the nation's lack of morality. Indeed, this is a noble concern. God expresses concern about the depravity of humanity in every nation (Gen 6:5–6). Therefore, the church is also concerned. The church should promote Christian morals in everything it does. So the issue is not that the Social Gospel desires Christian morality. Instead, it is how it seeks to accomplish this goal: legislative action. The adherents to the Social Gospel believe that if Christianity's morals become the law, then the whole nation will eventually become Christian. Yet, in their efforts to legislate Christianity, they neglect the state's God-given purpose.

God has made the state to be a blessing to the church, but the state is not the church's public advocate in the political sphere. It simply is not the state's role, for the authorities are

55. Handy, 141.

God's servants who dedicate their time to commending law-abiding citizens and punishing wrongdoers (Rom 13:3–4,6). Therefore, the Augsburg Confession declares: "For the magistrate protects not minds but bodies and goods from manifest harm and constrains people with the sword and physical penalties."⁵⁶ With its civil laws, the state can only curb outward actions.⁵⁷ The state cannot curb the inner thoughts of the heart; therefore, it is imprudent for the church to desire the state's sword to transform hearts and create a theocracy. Indeed, the church should not "prescribe to magistrates laws concerning the form of government that should be established."⁵⁸ Thus, we conclude: "A truly Christian state is an idle dream. And that dream is the real object of the social gospel. It is here where our danger lies."⁵⁹

In their efforts to Christianize the nation through civil laws, the Social Gospel forgets how God intends to change the heart: the law and the gospel found in the Word. The law of God is powerful, for "we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God" (Rom 3:19). The gospel of God is powerful, for "it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16). The law condemns sinners. The gospel saves souls. So Brug writes: "Our duty as church is to preach God's law, not to reform Caesar's law."⁶⁰ The church preaches the whole Bible, but it does not seek to legislate everything that the Bible demands. The church does

56. AC XXVIII: 11.

57. John Brug, "The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms," in *Our Great Heritage, Volume 2*, eds. Lyle W. Lange and G. Jerome Albrecht (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1991), 410.

58. AC XXVIII: 13-14. The Augsburg Confession lists more too: "It should not usurp the other's duty, transfer earthly kingdoms, abrogate the laws of magistrates, abolish lawful obedience, interfere with judgments concerning any civil ordinances or contracts..."

59. August Zich, "The Social Gospel," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 31:1 (January 1934), 30.

60. Brug, "The Two Kingdoms," 410.

not need the sword of the state to promote Christian morality; it has its own “sword.” Paul encourages all believers when he says: “Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph 6:17).

Therefore, we are not ashamed of this sword. Instead, we thank God for it, we diligently use it, and we trust in it. After all, through the gospel, God motivates godly living and transforms the will of the heart in the first place (Rom 12:1–2).

The Significant Dangers of the Social Gospel

I must admit: the theology of the Social Gospel is appealing. A message of worldwide peace through Jesus’s teachings can be difficult not to like. No true Christian enjoys the thought of children dying of hunger in third-world countries. Christians cannot (and should not) deny that the world has so many problems. So, when the Social Gospel addresses these societal problems and claims that it has godly solutions to every one of them, many Christians are eager to join the cause or at least are eager to listen to their message.

Despite its seeming hopefulness, two significant dangers exist within the Social Gospel: it treats the law as the gospel, and it treats earth as a place that can become heaven.

The Law Becomes the Gospel

Jesus has commanded his church to preach the gospel to the whole world (Mark 16:15). The gospel is God’s power through which he saves sinners (Rom 1:16). The power of the gospel is found so clearly in the message of the cross (1 Cor 1:18), a message so important that the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Since it was on that cross that “God made him who had no

sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21), this message has everlasting implications: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). No one can overemphasize the gospel.

But the gospel can surely be underemphasized: “If our exposition... is true, then evidently a salvation confined to the soul and its personal interests is an imperfect and only partly effective salvation.”⁶¹ If the gospel is only partly effective in salvation, something needs to be added to it to make it completely effective. In its efforts to complete salvation, the Social Gospel blatantly adds the works of the law. Rauschenbusch describes it this way: “Complete salvation, therefore, would consist in an attitude of love in which he would freely co-ordinate 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.”⁶² However, just one paragraph later, he admits that there is never an instance of complete Christian transformation.⁶³ If “complete salvation” requires a perfect Christian attitude, then where can a Christian find real hope in the Social Gospel? Can anyone be saved?

When the Social Gospel says that salvation is incomplete, they destroy the gospel’s beauty: “It is finished” (John 19:30). Our works, even when disguised as “gospel,” cannot save. In fact, regarding justification, Paul writes: “However, to the one who does not work but trusts God who justifies the ungodly, their faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom 4:5). Our sanctified living cannot save us. Salvation which depends on human works either falsely convinces proud

61. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 95.

62. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 98.

63. Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, 98.

sinner that they have saved themselves or drowns sinners in hopelessness and uncertainty, wondering if they have done enough.

When complete salvation depends on human works, what happens to Christ? He becomes the example to follow in order to attain forgiveness, rather than the substitute who already attained forgiveness in our place. When Jesus is just an example, then what humans do for Jesus becomes far more important than what Jesus did for humans. Sure, they would admit that there would be no way of knowing how to fix society without his guidance. However, they believe they can do the work to save society and save themselves with his guidance.

In its efforts to save society, the Social Gospel proves itself to be no gospel at all. Instead, it proves itself to be the “Social Law.” The law cannot save helpless sinners, nor can it ever save society.

Earth Can Become Heaven

The Social Gospel desperately desires to perfect the world. They want this world to be free from all suffering. However, in their attempts to transform the world, they disregard what awaits every believer who dies: heaven! Consider this statement from a millennialist after Lange asked him if he was sure that he would go to heaven if he died that night: “Who can think of heaven when I have the millennium to look forward to.”⁶⁴ Although this quote is from a Jehovah’s Witness, who almost certainly believes in premillennialism and not in postmillennialism,⁶⁵ it conveys an

64. Lange, *God So Loved the World*, 618.

65. Premillennialists believe that Christ will return to the world to begin the millennium; postmillennialists believe that Christ will return to the world after the “millennium” is over. Premillennialists believe that Christ will visibly rule the new kingdom with all believers of all times during the millennium; postmillennialists believe that the “millennium” will be a period of unprecedented prosperity, but Jesus will not return visibly until Judgment Day. Premillennialists believe that the signs of the end of the age described in Matthew 24 will not be completed until just before the millennium; postmillennialists believe that all of the signs of the age described in Matthew 24 already happened during the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70.

idea common to both premillennialists and postmillennialists: they cannot wait for this millennium to begin. All millennialists eagerly anticipate a time when earth truly will be heavenly.

Sadly, the Social Gospel postmillennialists forget that earth cannot become heaven. Though the gospel will be preached in the entire world (Matt 24:14), they forget that “small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matt 7:14). Jesus is clear: far more unbelievers will be in hell than believers will be in heaven. During the one thousand years leading up to Judgment Day, the world will not be Christianized or be in the process of Christianization. The world will not be “mostly Christian” or even “fairly Christian.” Concerning his coming on the Last Day, Jesus asked: “However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). If Jesus is hypothetically asking whether faith even will be found on the earth on Judgment Day, how then can it be legitimately espoused that the world will be Christian when Jesus returns? Heaven is a place where sin does not exist. So, since Jesus demonstrates that the earth will be nothing but sinful when he returns, we can only conclude that the present earth can never become heavenly.

The irony is that the impossible “utopia on earth” they desire is nothing compared to the glorious reality that all Christians will experience in heaven with their Savior. But there is danger in this irony. As they build “heaven on earth,” they forget to tell people where the believer’s true citizenship is: heaven (Phil 3:20). If earth can become heaven, then there is no need for heaven. If there is no need for heaven, then we do not need to be rescued from the present evil age (Gal 1:4) and we certainly do not need a Savior to receive us into our heavenly home (Acts 7:59), since we are already bringing the glories of heaven down to earth!

So, while the Social Gospel becomes so focused on building heaven on earth, they forget that their primary purpose is to preach the gospel, which brings people who are on earth into the glories of heaven. If only they realized that the gospel of Jesus already does the very thing they are trying to accomplish through other means: it brings sinners to a perfect home.

The Importance of the Church's Proper Role in Society

The differences between the Social Gospel and Lutheranism are numerous. In response to all these differences, some may say: "Yes, they have taught these things incorrectly. But aren't they helping everyone they can? They're trying to do good things for society, aren't they? What does it matter? Who cares?" Most people who say such things probably have good intentions. Perhaps most people who say these things wish to express concern about their neighbors in need.

Christian love and concern for our neighbors are fruits of faith that come from the Holy Spirit.

Praise God that he has motivated his children to care about those who are suffering! So the issue with the Social Gospel is not their concern for people's physical well-being; the issue is that this concern becomes their primary concern.

The church cannot focus itself completely, or even primarily, on worldly ambitions filled with worldly implications. The physical well-being of mankind cannot be the church's primary concern. For the worries and concerns of this world are only temporary. While the time human beings have on this earth will be full of troubles before the moment of their death (Ps 90:10), in heaven, we will never again hunger nor thirst, for God will wipe every tear from our eyes (Rev 7:16–17). But eternal death in hell also lasts forever, and it offers just the opposite (Rev 21:8).

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."⁶⁶ 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).

Although the Social Gospel loses sight of what is most important, the Social Gospel exhibits a genuine concern for the physical well-being of humanity. The apostle John did too: "If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth" (1 John 3:17-18). God gave this law to the Israelites, "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits" (Exodus 23:6). To the Pharisees (and us), Jesus says the following: "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed" (Luke 14:13-14).

God is not unconcerned about the bodily conditions of mankind. God tells us in the Scriptures that he wants believers to help those in need. Though the church's primary concern is the soul, churches may help believers demonstrate this concern by administering relief efforts for those who are suffering. Scripture offers examples,⁶⁷ including this excerpt from the early Christian church: "For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the

66. AC XXVIII: 5-6, 8-9. Together, the following passages demonstrate this truth: Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:15; John 20:21-23; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26.

67. Other examples include Acts 6:1-6; 11:28-30; Romans 15:26; 1 Timothy 5:9,16.

money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need" (Acts 4:34–35).

Is there something churches can do for the poor? Of course. Yet, as institutional churches and individual Christians demonstrate Christian love through relief programs, they must recognize that this is more than an opportunity to provide daily bread. It is a chance to share eternal bread, to provide the bread that never spoils and always satisfies, the Bread of Life (John 6:35). It is a fantastic opportunity to share law and gospel.

Yes, people need daily bread. That necessity is part of the reason why many churches offer daily bread in the first place. But we all need something far greater. Thus, we say with Schuetze: "When the church administers welfare work, it will, wherever possible, bring this into a close relationship with its prime responsibility of preaching the gospel."⁶⁸ Ultimately, that is the church's proper role in society. It is this gospel that saves, not the Social Gospel.

68. Armin W. Schuetze, "Scriptural Principles with Respect to the Church's Mission and Christian Welfare Work," *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 70:3 (July 1973), 207.

PART III: QUIETISM

While refuting the Social Gospel, there were two central themes. The first theme was that the church's mission must be to preach the law and the gospel, forgive and retain sins, and administer the sacraments. The second theme was that the problems of society would not disappear in this life.⁶⁹ Because of these themes, some people might think that since the church is not of the world, it should do all it can to refrain itself from being in the world. In many respects, this is the error of Quietism.

What is Quietism?

The term "Quietism" can refer to a teaching beginning in the 17th century that emphasized total passivity in every situation and circumstance to know God's will entirely and attain perfection. It also frequently refers to "any system of spirituality minimizing human activity and responsibility."⁷⁰ Although these two ideas are somewhat related, this paper will use the latter definition to describe Quietism.

Anabaptists and the Quietist Theology of the Christian's Responsibility in Society

Quietism has pervaded the theologies of many denominations which call themselves Christian, including the Quakers,⁷¹ whose views were influenced by the Anabaptists. This section's focus will be on Quietism as it is taught in Anabaptism since it was against the Anabaptists' teachings

69. Nor is it the church's job to try and fix them. By "this life," I mean that these problems will never be fixed completely (or at all) until Jesus returns on Judgment Day.

70. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Edited by F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone. 3rd ed. rev. (Oxford University Press, 2005), 1366.

71. Hugh Barbour and J. William Frost, *The Quakers* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1988), 101.

that the Lutheran confessors wrote Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession, entitled “Concerning Civic Affairs.” It says: “They condemn the Anabaptists who prohibit Christians from assuming such civil responsibilities,”⁷² which included, but was not limited to, the following: to hold civil office, to work in law courts, to decide matters by imperial and other existing laws, to impose just punishments, to wage just war, to serve as soldiers, to hold property, and to take an oath when required by magistrates.⁷³

With respect to holding a civil office, such as working in law courts, deciding matters by imperial and other existing laws, and imposing just punishments, the Schleithem Confession states: “Finally it will be observed that it is not appropriate for a Christian to serve as a magistrate because of these points: The government magistracy is according to the flesh, but the Christians’ is according to the Spirit; their houses and dwelling remain in this world, but the Christians’ are in heaven.”⁷⁴ In other words, since Christians do not belong to the world, they should not participate in government since governments are worldly entities.

So, with respect to waging just war and serving as soldiers, it should come as no surprise that the Anabaptists not only prohibit Christians from taking part in it, but they condemn any nation who fights in a war or any soldier who fights for his country.⁷⁵ The previous quote continues:

Their citizenship is in this world, but the Christians’ citizenship is in heaven; the weapons of their conflict and war are carnal and against the flesh only, but the Christians’ weapons are spiritual, against the fortification of the devil. The worldlings are armed with steel and iron, but the Christians are armed with the armor of God, with truth, righteousness, peace,

72. AC XVI: 3.

73. AC XVI: 2.

74. John Christian Wenger, “The Schleithem Confession of Faith,” *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 19 (October 1945), 251.

75. Lange, *God So Loved the World*, 656.

faith, salvation and the Word of God. . . . Now since Christ is as it is written of Him, His members must also be the same, that His body may remain complete and united to its own advancement and upbuilding.⁷⁶

Again, they emphasize that the church is separate from the world. Thus, it is separate from the state and its particular functions, especially those that would cause harm to others.

With respect to holding property, they taught that “Christian perfection consists in not holding property.”⁷⁷ By intentionally not holding property, they were indicating that they were above temporal, worldly attachments.⁷⁸ It also aided both rich and poor in their Christian life, even keeping them from losing faith, for Satan tempted the rich with the love of money and the poor worried about their need.⁷⁹ With these ideas, they advocated for a joint holding of property among all of their people, not to mention that this would be the circumstances during the millennium.⁸⁰

With respect to taking an oath when required by magistrates, they prohibit it based on Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount: “But I tell you, do not swear an oath at all: either by heaven, for it is God’s throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King” (Matt 5:34–35). Therefore, they prohibit not just oaths required by the government but every oath. Besides, since Christians need to speak the truth, oaths seemed unnecessary to them.⁸¹

76. Wenger, “Schleitheim Confession,” 251.

77. Ap XVI: 9.

78. James M. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1972), 167.

79. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 88.

80. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 293.

81. William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 261.

The Anabaptists regarded all these things as incompatible in the lives of Christians. These things were against God's will, and Christians could not do them with a clear conscience. Of course, these prohibitions also exhibited elements of Quietism. As they eliminated ways Christians could be active in society, they limited the Christian's responsibilities as a citizen of the world.

A Lutheran Response to the Quietist Theology of the Anabaptists

While the Anabaptists prohibited Christians from certain civil responsibilities, Article XVI of the Augsburg Confession declared that Christians could perform any of these civil responsibilities as good works with clear consciences.⁸²

Holding a civil office, which may involve working in law courts, deciding matters by imperial and other existing laws, or imposing just punishments, can be an excellent way for a Christian to serve both God and neighbor. When the Anabaptists reject Christian involvement in government, they disregard the value of government. The state is more than just a mere necessity due to the fall into sin. The apostle Paul speaks highly of the governing authorities, saying that God has established them and that they are God's servants (Rom 13:1,4). The apostle Peter urged Christians to submit themselves to every authority (1 Peter 2:13). God's people want to serve God and their neighbors in everything they do. Since the government's God-given role is to protect people from harm, it promotes temporal welfare and peace in society. As God's people serve faithfully in the government, they serve both God and neighbor. It is not a sin to serve in government. In fact, it is a God-pleasing action, for the Christian's purposes for serving "are to glorify God by his works, to promote conditions in which the gospel can be preached freely, and

82. AC XVI: 1-2.

to serve the best interests of his neighbors by seeking justice for all, by protecting the rights of individuals, and by hindering evil.”⁸³

It may not be an easy task. If Christians decide to become Christian politicians,⁸⁴ they must accept that many decisions will not be a dichotomy of right versus wrong but wrong versus slightly less wrong.⁸⁵ This is not avoidable but inevitable since the government uses human reason and natural law as its source of right versus wrong rather than God’s objective Word.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, a Christian citizen can faithfully serve in public office with a clear conscience, remembering that the state’s role is not to curb hearts but outward actions.

Christian citizens can also engage in just wars or serve as soldiers. Again, this task will not be easy. Without sin in this world, war would not exist. War is a horrible reality of life that will remain on this earth until the Lord Jesus returns (Matt 24:6–7). Since this is true, some Christians will conclude that participating in war is a sin. They may say, “People murder other people in war. How can someone kill another person without sinning? How can war ever be just? How can a Christian participate in war and not sin?”

These are legitimate questions frequently asked today. They were asked during Luther’s day as well, so much so that Luther felt the need to address them with his book “Can Soldiers Too Be Saved?” His answer was “yes.” Just as the government protects its citizens with capital punishment (Gen 9:6; Rom 13:4), it may also need to use force to guard against nations that pose

83. Brug, “The Two Kingdoms,” 385–386.

84. In this context, the term “Christian politician” does not refer to a person who tries to legislate the values of Christianity. Rather, it simply refers to a Christian who serves publicly in the political sphere.

85. Paul G. Elbrecht, *Politics and Government* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1965), 39.

86. As was expressed earlier, a theocratic state would cause more problems than it would solve in a sinful society such as ours today and would impose a severe threat to the Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms.

a threat to our safety. “It is a difference in number only,”⁸⁷ and “it cannot maintain order by turning the other cheek.”⁸⁸ Therefore, just as Christians may participate in government, Christians may participate in wars since they act as agents and representatives of the government. But what if a war is unjust?⁸⁹ This is not so easy to determine. Ultimately, if a nation convinces people to fight in an unjust war, the guilt is upon the instigator, not its faithful citizens.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, where there is a question of whether a war is just or not, Christians will need to follow their consciences.⁹¹ Such circumstances encourage us to pray continually “for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (1 Tim 2:2).

A Christian can be a property owner and not feel guilty in the slightest. Abraham, David, and Daniel had great wealth, yet the Bible does not reprove them for this. In fact, the seventh commandment implies that people will own their own possessions.⁹² Perfection has never consisted in not holding private property; nothing in the Bible speaks in this way or implies this idea. To assert this is ludicrous.

With respect to taking an oath when magistrates require it, Christians can do so freely with a clear conscience, though they should be honest in their interactions with one another already. In numerous settings, the Christian’s oath is superfluous: “All you need to say is simply

87. John P. Meyer, *Studies in the Augsburg Confession* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Pub. House, 1995), 207.

88. Lange, *God So Loved the World*, 656.

89. Professor Brug lists the traditional criteria for a *just* war in an article previously cited, “The Lutheran Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms,” 403.

90. Meyer, *Augsburg Confession*, 207.

91. Lange, *God So Loved the World*, 656.

92. Ap. XVI: 11.

‘Yes’ or ‘No;’ anything beyond this comes from the evil one” (Matt 5:37). But Jesus’s words in Matthew 5 speak not about the courtroom but the marketplace, about our interactions in everyday life.⁹³ He was reacting against those who say things like, “I didn’t take the last piece of cheesecake, I swear to God!”⁹⁴ Such statements break the Second Commandment as they misuse God’s name (and the Eighth Commandment if the person really ate the last piece of cheesecake). However, if Jesus were condemning every oath, he would have been condemning himself. During his trial, Jesus was charged to take an oath, and he did (Matt 26:63–64). Since Jesus never sinned and since he took an oath in that particular setting, Christians can take oaths in front of magistrates without fear of taking an unnecessary oath and thereby sinning. Of course, this is a serious matter and should be treated as such. Any form of dishonesty in such situations would merit righteous judgment from both God and the state.

Hence, we say with the Lutheran confessors:

[The gospel] permits us to make outward use of legitimate political ordinances of whatever nation in which we live, just as it permits us to make use of medicine or architecture or food, drink, and air. Neither does the gospel introduce new laws for the civil realm. Instead, it commands us to obey the present laws, whether they have been formulated by pagans or by others, and urges us to practice love through this obedience.⁹⁵

The Significant Dangers of Quietism

The Anabaptists have limited how a Christian can participate in the world around him. With their Quietist theology, they reduced his potential responsibilities. Their false teachings are not

93. Deutschlander, *Civil Government*, 103.

94. Types of sinful swearing would include: swearing to reinforce a lie, swearing for useless things, and swearing for uncertain things. These helpful distinctions were given to me during my vicar year by Pastor Gene Sims while teaching the Second Commandment for Bible information class.

95. Ap XVI: 2-3.

without dangerous implications. Two significant dangers exist within Quietism: it treats gospel freedoms as lawful ordinances, and it disregards the blessings of good government.

Gospel Freedoms Become Lawful Ordinances

“Very truly I tell you, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. (John 8:34). Jesus said these words not just to a nation ready to kill him (John 8:37) but to a far greater audience: a giant, desperate world that so desperately needs emancipation, for sin imprisons this world (Gal 3:22). No, it was not the crust, mantle, and core that were shackled; but you and me, held prisoner by the law (Gal 3:23). That divine, almighty law reveals who we truly are by nature: helpless, shameful sinners who have fallen short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23), who can say absolutely nothing to defend ourselves (Rom 3:19), for our sin says it all.

Yet, even when our sin said it all, Jesus said even more: “It is finished” (John 19:30). By faith in the truth, God set us free from the bondage of sin, as Jesus unshackled us and opened the prison door with his perfect life, innocent death, and glorious resurrection. So Scripture promises: “Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever” (John 8:35), and since you are his son, “God has made you also an heir” (Gal 4:7) to “an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade” (1 Pet 1:4): eternal life (Titus 3:7).

The gospel is everything to us. It is God’s most excellent demonstration of his love. It makes us alive. It forgives us. While the gospel frees us from sin, Satan tempts Christians to use this freedom to indulge in the sinful nature. In response to these temptations, Paul encourages Christians to use their freedom to serve one another in love (Gal 5:13). Naturally, people will choose different ways to express this freedom according to their gifts and preferences. One Christian might have a tremendous ability to cook delicious food, so he goes to the homeless

shelter every Friday and brings his homemade cookies. Another Christian loves to coach basketball (and she is really good at it), so she dedicates her time at the local Lutheran grade school and teaches fifth-graders how to shoot a free throw properly. Another Christian is a natural-born leader and well-educated in politics, so she ran for mayor and was elected.

While we would correctly say that all three Christians are using their gospel freedoms to serve, Quietism would argue that only two out of three are serving in a God-pleasing way since they believe that Christians cannot serve in government.⁹⁶ They take an act of Christian service, a righteous act which God commends, and they call it a sin! Rather than praising Christians who faithfully serve in government, they condemn them. Rather than freeing people's consciences, they bind them, for they add a law to God's Word that God himself did not prescribe. This goes against God's clear commands in Scripture (Deut 4:2) as it tries to add commands to them. Since they say that a Christian who serves in government is sinning, they are also saying that Christians, who recognize that they are serving in government but refuse to repent, are outside of the kingdom of God. Thus, they are saying that some believers are unbelievers. This is not only preposterous; it is downright dangerous.

As Christians, we warn against this danger, and we commend those who demonstrate their Christian freedom by serving in various ways. We say with Paul: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery" (Gal 5:1), for we are free indeed.

96. Wenger, "Schleitheim Confession," 251.

The Blessing of Good Governments is Disregarded

The Anabaptists emphatically opposed a merger of church and state.⁹⁷ Lutheranism agrees: “The powers of church and civil government must not be mixed.”⁹⁸ They believed that no one could coerce people to believe.⁹⁹ We agree! But it becomes clear that with these Anabaptist assertions comes a disregard for the blessing of good governments since they have no desire to allow their people to serve in them and do not allow their people to enjoy many of God’s blessings given through these good governments. In this regard, we entirely disagree.

Regarding those who serve in government, they taught that “in a strict sense there was no such thing as a good ruler, because all political power necessarily put the temporal and external before the eternal and the spiritual.”¹⁰⁰ This is an improper way for a Christian to think about his government. Christians are encouraged to respect and obey their government’s leaders (Rom 13), but their teaching shows disrespect. It also shows no appreciation for the protection which the government gives to its citizens, even to those citizens who would say such disrespectful things about the government.

The government itself is an authority that God established (Rom 13:1), and it is God’s servant (Rom 13:4). How then could it possibly be a sin to serve in it? Nevertheless, in 1524 Balthasar Hubmaier, a 16th-century Anabaptist leader, said this in response to the idea of a Christian magistrate: “But he who is God’s cannot injure any one, unless he first deserts the

97. Franklin Hamlin Littell, *The Anabaptist View of the Church: A Study in the Origins of Sectarian Protestantism* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1958), 65.

98. AC XXVIII: 12.

99. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 261.

100. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword*, 171.

gospel.”¹⁰¹ In other words, a Christian leader in government who administers earthly punishment cannot be a Christian at all, even if he would be administering the death penalty to a mass murderer. Again, this displays a disregard for good governments that administer justice properly.

While Paul urges Christians, “If you owe... respect, then respect; if honor, then honor” (Rom 13:7), Quietism gives neither to government. It is a dangerous thing to disregard such a huge blessing that God gives to his people. It is certainly a sin, for when they disrespect the blessing, they are also disrespecting the One who is giving the blessing.

As Lutherans reflect on the blessing of good government, they thank God and say: “For the gospel does not destroy the state or the household but rather approves them, and it orders us to obey them as divine ordinances not only on account of the punishment but also ‘because of conscience.’”¹⁰² With the apostle Peter, we implore one another with these words: “Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor” (1 Pet 2:17).

The Importance of the Christian’s Proper Role in Society

Bruce Shelley describes the Anabaptist theology in this way: “The church, said the Anabaptist, is distinct from society, even if society claims to be Christian. Christ’s true followers are a pilgrim people; and his church is a marching demonstration of perpetual aliens.”¹⁰³ While it is true that Christians are “aliens” in the sense that our citizenship is not on earth but in heaven (Phil 3:20), Quietism takes this idea too far. Along with all the proponents of Quietism who actively tried not

101. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 262.

102. Ap XVI: 5.

103. Bruce L. Shelley, *Church History in Plain Language*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1995), 254.

to become a part *of* the world,¹⁰⁴ the Anabaptists became so withdrawn from the world that they profusely limited Christians from what they could do *in* the world. Thus, quietists become neither *of* the world nor *in* the world.¹⁰⁵

Quietism withdraws its followers from the world to an unhealthy extent. Christians simply cannot do this. Yes, Christians must be careful in their interactions with the world. In this respect, we would agree with Quietism. Christians also must take the words of John 15:19¹⁰⁶ seriously, knowing that the world will hate them for their beliefs. If they persecuted Jesus, the sinless Son of God, they will also persecute Christians (John 15:20). Since Jesus has chosen believers out of the world, they cannot belong to the world.

But Christians cannot be so focused on John 15:19 that they forget about Matthew 5:14–16.¹⁰⁷ Often, when Christians withdraw from society, they squander significant opportunities to demonstrate Christian love to the world, a type of love that will express itself with deeds (1 John 3:16–18) that are so selfless that they are entirely unlike the expressions of love which the world gives (Luke 6:27–36). By this love, people will know that Christians are followers of Jesus (John 13:35). Finally, this Christian love, which is always motivated by God’s love and done to his glory, has such a profound impact that God uses it as a great testimony and display of his great love so that people may believe in him. But, just as people cannot see light if it is under a bowl, so this love cannot be a witness to the world if people do not go out into the world and serve God

104. Judith Jennings, “Mary Morris Knowles: Devout, Worldly and ‘Gay’?,” *Quaker Studies* 14 (2010): 201.

105. Fredrich, “Activity vs. Activism,” 249.

106. “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.”

107. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

and others in various ways. Of course, the unique, extraordinary way Christians can love their neighbors is by sharing the good news of the greatest love of all: while we were still in our sins, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8).

Instead of being terrified that the world might change us, we Christians recognize that the message we share changes hearts. So Christians, changed by the gospel, change society with the gospel of our never-changing God. Our faith in this gospel will inevitably express itself in love (Gal 5:6). As John says: “We love because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). In this dark world, we shine forth as light (Matt 5:14) because we reflect the true Light that came into the world (John 1:9).

CONCLUSION

Lutherans must recognize the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism. The church must recognize that its proper role is to preach the gospel and not transform society's structures. This earth cannot become heaven, so we should not hope that it can be heaven. Simultaneously, though Christians eagerly look forward to heaven, they are still *in* the world, even if they are not *of* the world. Therefore, Christians can still have a positive impact on society; in fact, they have the greatest impact on society when they proclaim the gospel.

The church and the state are separate kingdoms, both established by God as blessings on this earth. Since the church and state have different functions, a proper distinction between the two is vital. In their relationship with one another, the church must not use the state's sword to convert people. The state only has the power to curb outward actions, while only law and gospel change hearts. These are the church's tools; this must never change. However, that does not mean that individual Christians cannot serve in government or take advantage of the temporal blessings which God grants through the existence of government. Nonetheless, Christians who serve in government are not serving as representatives of the church but as individual Christian citizens, eager to serve both God and neighbor through public service.

After a brief examination of the pitfalls of the Social Gospel and Quietism, as they pertain to the proper roles of the Church and the Christian in society, one cannot help but think of a "narrow Lutheran middle" approach to the critical issues entangled in both movements. To fulfill their proper roles in society, the church and the Christian must avoid the pitfalls of both movements.

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