



# The Social Gospel movement revisited: Consequences for the church

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This article introduces South African churches to the reasons why elements of the late 19th and early 20th century Social Gospel movement encourages local churches to participate in their respective communities through social contribution. The article argues that the Social Gospellers understood Christian responsibility as an imperative of '*participatio Jesu*' through social integration of living an ethos of *oikoumenē*. The history of the Social Gospel should be a relevant influence on mainline churches to understand the tension in the decision to participate or withdraw from social contribution today.

'When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist.' (Rocha 2000:53)

## Introduction

'Questions about morality are questions about how to live the human life well, a point that may seem obvious' (Pinches 2002:226). Henceforth, when the church<sup>1</sup> attempts to μιμεῖσθαι (mimesis),<sup>2</sup> for example in the Markan or Matthean account of Jesus' life, it is obviously supposed to be concerned about 'τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων' (Mt 25:45; see also Mt 5:3, 19:21; Mk 12:43–44). The question asked here is: Is this truly obvious or is this an outdated assumption? When churches choose to be ignorant about societal problems, the church has to be content with a secularising society in which it is losing its traditional authoritative influence.<sup>3</sup> In more academic language: The Church as institution and as part of the ecumenical church has to consider being more proactive about the *status quo* in South Africa.

Such constructive action, however, does not necessarily have to be a liberal, or essentially secular social program. That being said, a contemporary schism has been repeatedly created regarding the theological *intent* that embodies such an exhibition of Christian 'neighbourly love' through *participationis* in the globalised third millennium, which in this case is South Africa. What, however, does *actually* happen in the church (in denominations)? In recent history this is not the first time that contrasting opinions have created disagreement in the Christian church.<sup>4</sup> However, the question of whether the Church can overlook the plea of the oppressed,<sup>5</sup> if only those surrounding the churches geographically, remains relevant and needs to be analysed through the lens of scripture. If the Church chooses to engage through sustainable action, what will a faithful mimesis of the Markan Jesus be, without the Church deceiving itself about activities grounded in moralistic and humanitarian compassion?<sup>6</sup>

1.The Netherdutch Reformed Church of Africa (NRCA) serves as reference to 'Church' in this article, except where indicated otherwise in reference to the ecumenical churches in South Africa. However, 'church', refers to the body of Christ in the world.

2.Ricoeur (1988:176) introduces a more complex tripartite model of *mimesis*: '*Mimesis*<sub>1</sub>, refers to the way in which human action occurs in an unthematized or unreflective manner (preconfiguration); *mimesis*<sub>2</sub>, refers to the organization of these activities in a comprehensible form by means of *muthos*/plot (configuration); *mimesis*<sub>3</sub>, refers to the effect of reading or reception, by which a person can change his or her ideas and behavior as a result of discovering new dimensions of life (refiguration)' (Joy 1997:xxix).

3.See Van Wyk (2013:1), who explains why the NRCA are experiencing negative growth, for example 'poor ministry, proselyting of ministry, emigration, disassociation, and the rise of secularism and pluralism' (Van Wyk 2013:1).

4.The 'Social Gospel has become an established symbol of the theological split between liberalism and fundamentalism' (Wytsma 2013:209). The Westminster Theological Seminary and Princeton Theological Seminary, for example, split in 1929. As a result, the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was founded as an alternative to the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America (PCUSA). The more recent conflict in the NRCA in South Africa (see NHKA 2011:31–57), and the current debate in the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) on the Confession of Belhar are two more examples. Interestingly enough, the PCUSA, which is using Princeton Theological Seminary as their theological centre, is also reviewing the Confession of Belhar (PCUSA 2014).

5.For example the petitioners, then NRCA members, argued that the NRCA disintegrated into 'horizontalism and superficial concerns through a liberation theology because she [*the NRCA*] had made a theological statement with socio-ethical consequences' (Van Wyk 2011:4; my translation). This statement of the petitioners was in Van Wyk's (2011:4; my translation) opinion 'in principle, a departure from the Reformed theology. Reformed theology is not only about the differentiation between faith and works, justification and sanctification, or systematic theology and ethics, but also the correct relation between the two poles of each.'

6.See Van Aarde's (2008b:1683; 2014:27) explanation about 'humanitarian compassion that would not suffice as *love* for Paul.'

This article seeks to address this question, particularly in relation to South Africa, by first giving attention to the history of the Social Gospel movement in America and the mostly American and German counternarratives that criticise the movement. Thereafter, the resurfacing of foundational elements of the Social Gospel movement re-emerged – this is seen in American and European voices and also South African theological voices. Social Gospel elements outlived the fundamentalist and evangelical period in which fundamentalism emerged as a reaction to liberalising trends in American Protestantism. In conclusion, the article will draw preliminary final remarks for consideration based on the arguments made. This article's significance lies in its role to identify a theological (re)affirmation for South African churches and to convince them to participate, by means of social contribution, without betraying their biblically Reformed<sup>7</sup> theology.

This article also directly confronts the Church's peculiar assumption of its missional calling, yet, in reality, insulated *praxis* illuminated in the oxymoron, *strenua inertia* (see 'Social gospel implications'). A simple paraphrase of the quote by Archbishop Helder Câmara, (see above in Rocha 2000:53), would be: When I help my neighbours (any South African) they call me an imitator of Jesus. When I then ask why not all my neighbours (any person) feel comfortable in our Church, they call me a traitor of Church identity and this can introduce the significance of the oxymoron and be especially contextually relevant in South Africa's ecumenical church.

## The Social Gospel as a movement

The social conditions in the late 19th century America gave rise to the Social Gospel movement. America was in a state of social transition as industrialisation led to rapid urbanisation. This led to a rise in squalor and poverty that shocked Americans. The endless accounts of cheap labour and cruel capitalism were justified by an emerging Reform Darwinism<sup>8</sup> which was determined by the more affluent classes. The Social Gospel, on the other hand, was driven by the 'Progressive movement and Christian postmillennialism' that believed the 'positive forces of industrialization could be matched by positive social programs in an effort to help society ... into a new and just society' (Wytsma 2013:206). Looking back on the early 20th century, Henry Emerson Fosdick (1933) said that:

[A]ny church that pretends to care for the souls of people but is not interested in the slums that damn them ... [promotes] a dry, passive, do nothing religion in need of new blood. (p. 25)

Leading American pastors and theologians active in the movement during the period 1890–1945 were, among others,

7.The NRCA follows in the tradition of the Reformation with a Reformed theology identified as biblically Reformed (NHKA 2013:91; my translation).

8.The more affluent classes who had power through wealth agreed that poor people were 'less fit', but thought it was a rich man's duty to help them improve their lot. However, Reform Darwinists feared that poor individuals would not know how to properly handle direct charity. Instead, they sponsored major efforts in philanthropy aimed at improving society as a whole, like building libraries and hospitals and universities. See also Leonard (2009:37–51), who differentiates public forms of social Darwinism from the individualist type of social Darwinism.

Shailer Mathews, Walter Rauschenbusch, and Washington Gladden. They lobbied for safety legislation for factories, child workers and public health regulations. The Social Gospel was the attempt of conscientious Christians to respond to the social inequity of its time.

Throughout his career, Shailer Mathews was intrigued by the phenomenon of social change,<sup>9</sup> both at the practical level of church involvement in social reform and at an academic level of theological reflection on the implications of change in Christian doctrine. Mathews wrote with a sharp defensive tendency that characterised him as a modernist. Mathews thus distinguished himself from the reductionist liberalism and cultural Protestantism. He wrote extensively on the applicability of the gospel to society, and engaged with the emerging eschatological schools in German theology such as those of Johannes Weiss. When reading the corpus of Mathews' work,<sup>10</sup> one finds the importance of Mathews's contribution as 'a virtual compendium of North American Theology from the late nineteenth century through to the middle of the twentieth century' (Lindsey 1997:69).

Walter Rauschenbusch, serving as a young Baptist pastor among the poor of Hell's Kitchen, New York, adapted a strong sense of personal calling to encourage welfare and do missionary work. He also had a 'passion for political liberty' (Smucker 1994:22). Rauschenbusch was deeply devotional and practical with regard to Christian beliefs, and therefore critical of the evangelists of his time. According to Rauschenbusch,<sup>11</sup> evangelism 'used methods that seem calculated to produce skin-deep changes. Things have simmered down to signing a card, shaking hands, or being introduced to the evangelist' (Rauschenbusch 1945:97). The determination of Rauschenbusch to act on the disarray of the environment in which he found himself was increased by acts of injustice in the community in which he lived. To him, the *proselytising* of Christians substituted the *disciplining of them*. Disciplining produces a real change for the better in the inward character, while proselytising only leaves the person as found. For evangelism to be effective, Rauschenbusch (1945:17, 97–99) argued, it must do two things:

It must *appeal to motives* which powerfully seize people, and it must uphold a moral standard so high above their actual lives that it will smite them with conviction of sin'. (p. 97)

9.The term *social process* implies 'that interchange of mutual effect between church and society which is, for Mathews, the matrix within which Christians' theological reflection must always take shape' (Lindsey 1997:36). 'Any strict definition of the kingdom of God as used by Jesus must be eschatological. With Jesus, as with his contemporaries, the kingdom was yet to come. Its appearance would be the result of no social evolution, but sudden, as the gift of God; men could not hasten its coming; they could only prepare for membership in it' (Mathews 1905:82).

10.See especially Mathews (1897, 1905, 1913, 1934, 1936) for his theology about the Social Gospel.

11.Rauschenbusch (1945:131) understands the church-social-action relationship as follows: 'Secular life is belittled as compared with church life. Services rendered to the church get a higher religious rating than services rendered to the community. Thus the religious value is taken out of the activities of the common man and the prophetic services to society. Wherever the Kingdom of God is a living reality in Christian thought, any advance of social righteousness is seen as a part of redemption and arouses inward joy and the triumphant sense of salvation. When the doctrine of the Kingdom of God is lacking in theology, the salvation of the individual is seen in its relation to the Church and to the future life, but not in its relation to the task of saving the social order.'

For Rauschenbusch the problem was with the inability of the institutionalised church to translate the gospel to audiences outside the church. 'A perfect religious hope must include both: eternal life for the individual and the kingdom of God for humanity' (Rauschenbusch 1945:107). These audiences, Rauschenbusch argued, will 'listen with absorbed interest to religious thought when it is linked with their own social problems' (Rauschenbusch 1945:17). Rauschenbusch influenced two spiritual movements in America. Firstly, the creative *καρπός* responding to urban industrialism as the major thrust of his work (1890–1920), and secondly, the continuing and forceful impact of Rauschenbusch as discovered by Martin Luther King, Jr. during his seminary years at Crozier Theological School in Chester, Pennsylvania (1948–1951) and in subsequent years up until King's assassination in 1968. Rauschenbusch's introduction to the Social Gospel in *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1945) was foundational and is integral to the movement.

Washington Gladden encouraged his congregation to follow his distinctive contributions, which contributed to both American religion and social justice. These were, as stated in the October 29, 1891 edition of the *Ohio State Journal*:

1. The principle of equality in the Christian brotherhood, exemplified in a democratic polity.
2. The ideal of the church as a body for all people, regardless of wealth or class.
3. The promotion of education and popular intelligence.
4. The furtherance of liberty, equal rights, public order and improvement, political purity, and general progress (Dorn 1967:230).

The Social Gospel movement hereafter arose to counter the bleak landscape surrounding the churches. From this reality, American fundamentalism and the Social Gospel began as two distinct movements. Both began in the early part of the 20th century, and both sprang from Christianity's attempt to deal with modern problems. Unfortunately:

[A]s the Social Gospel spread, it began to be identified with a cynical view of the Bible and an emphasis on purely societal changes, rather than on people being transformed externally and internally. (Wytsma 2013:208)

Fundamentalism rose within the churches to combat this modern view of the Bible – therefore the scalding aversion towards the Social Gospel agenda – and without surprise extensively critiqued the Social Gospel.

## Criticism of the Social Gospel movement

In the last century, the Social Gospel received various negative reactions to its outcomes as a movement and its theological foundation. In the view of the author, the unjustified perceptions of the Social Gospel became the very scapegoat for churches to ignore participation in their communities (read: social contexts).

Conventionally, critics have accused Social Gospellers of largely ignoring African Americans and women's aspirations to justice equality and desegregation in the late 19th century. The charges of being 'tone-deaf to appeals for racial and gender justice' is not without some foundation, since the fathers of the Social Gospel were white Protestant men of middle-class background and professional standing who sometimes 'reflected the interests and prejudices of their cultural backgrounds' (Lindsey 1997:5). Social Gospel writers were also labelled as bourgeois reformers whose vision of the shortcomings of North American society was superficial, and whose 'prescriptions for social reform were moralizing rather than structural, revisionary rather than radical' (Dombrowski 1936:20).

Diane Yeager (1990:4) argues that the Social Gospel was dominated by a negative theological assumption, namely that the Social Gospel was best understood 'not as a theologically original endeavour but as a kind of gerrymandering of theological boundaries under the pressure of various external cultural differences'. Yeager's assessment implies that the movement was fated to die when the cultural situation to which it had adapted itself ceased to exist.

From 1880–1920, urban poverty and other social problems increased as a result of growing immigration and the industrialisation of America. Holbrook (1991)<sup>12</sup> accused the Social Gospel of a few things:

It shifted the emphasis of religion from the enduring problem of man's sinful ways to the prospect of his perfectibility; from the Bible as the solution for man's sinfulness to human sources of learning about how to improve mankind (study political science, economics, sociology, psychology, etc.) and from the goal of heaven as man's all-consuming desire to the goal of better living conditions here and now. Both liberalism and the Social Gospel exalt man, his carnal needs, and his rational powers at the expense of God. (pp. 206–207)

Generalising these points, Elize Amyx (2012) explains three major theological fallacies of the Social Gospel, saying: (1) 'Man is not so bad, and God is not so mad ... (2) Cultural restoration is the Gospel ... (3) Social salvation is superior to individual salvation.' The list can go on. The main argument by critics, it seems, was about forfeiting fundamentalist virtues as moralism through dedicated social action, from which the American church, as an end in itself, did not benefit as an institution. A clear example of the church as the self-appointed agent of grace and salvation is in Bishop McDowell's (1920) words:

[T]he church must hold a steady course toward universal democracy based on the right; a course that will save the world from the excesses of fanaticism, the unbridled sway of greed, the tyranny of the few or the tyranny of the many. Today, as always, the church is for order, steadiness, fairness, and law; and today the church must speak that steady word to which the world will listen. (p. 167)

12. Also see Bebbington (2005:247) who explains how the doctrine of the Social Gospellers, focused on social improvement, was 'derived primarily from the German liberal Albrecht Ritschl.'

## Rediscovering Social Gospel's intent

A few scholars have done research on the movement of the Social Gospel to redefine its original intent (see Carter 1954:31; Funk 1976:4; Hooft 1928:169–186; Lindsey 1997: 1–34; Niebuhr & Yeager 1988:115; Wilder 1954:37–54). Paul A. Carter (1954:31) wrote a well-balanced review of the rise and fall and rediscovery of the Social Gospel. He summarised the Social Gospel's influence in parallel with 20th century American themes: 'World Wars I and II; prohibition; pacifism; fundamentalism; conservatism, Protestantism and progressivism.'

When rediscovering the Social Gospel's intent, there are two lines of argument. Firstly, the Social Gospel leaders' initial concerns with social challenges are still found in the continuous challenge the church has with its members and in (post-) secular societies alike; secondly, the Social Gospel, including the errors it made, revitalised practical social action during its era. Both points hold timely relevance to the current situation in South Africa.

Kenneth Cauthen (1962) labels this early 20th century era as an era of liberal theology in which Social Gospellers had:

[A] deep consciousness of their continuity with the main line of Christian orthodoxy and felt that they were preserving its essential features in terms that were suitable to the modern world. (p. 28)

We also see this opinion in Gladden's conclusion that those who 'loved God and their neighbour were saved from sin, regardless of their creeds' (Gladden 1913:83). Jacob H. Dorn interpreted theology and biblical criticism for laymen and the values of Christianity to social reformers, but his focus was also much wider, expanding to 'the needs of humanity to the churches, and Americans to themselves. He sought, moreover, to interpret individuals, classes, and nations, to each other' (Dorn 1967:446).

Several points of critique were raised against the foundational intent of the Social Gospel. This list is not exhaustive, but the article also aims to redefine the intent of the Social Gospel and not to justify the movement altogether. Unfortunately, looking back in history, Carter (1954:222) lists the steady decline of mainline churches in America during the time of the Social Gospel movement (1890–1940) and categorises it with the evangelical movement. Evangelisation, evaluated in terms of numerical gains<sup>13</sup> (of souls), was and still is not the aim of selfless 'loving service' and should not be confused with church-growth programs. It might be interesting to do a study on the parallels between contemporary 'mission' and 20th century 'evangelisation' to identify any possible misunderstandings the church holds of *evangelisation*. Carter (1954) explains:

American Protestantism – including the Social Gospel – passed institutionally into the larger stream of world Christendom ...

13. See Reggie McNeal's (2003:20–42; 2009:111–128) arguments on how the church should move away from defining itself through numerical growth.

and influenced the movements that were pointing toward an eventual<sup>14</sup> World Council of Churches. (p. 108)

The Social Gospel 'was always chiefly concerned to find out the truth about society, and on the basis of that knowledge to chart programs for ameliorating the country's social woes' (Ahlstrom 1972:796). It is important that the aim of the Social Gospel movement is to see the 'church itself as agent of reform. The church's social destiny was not simply to recruit leaders for trade unions and peace societies' (Carter 1954:120). The churches were also encouraged to be responsive to their calling towards the community where they were active. To explain this urgency at the time, Adolf von Harnack (Von Harnack & Herrmann 1907) thus reasoned:

Firm resistance must be offered to all attempts to read into the Gospel any other social ideal than this: 'You are accountable to God, for all of the gifts you received, and so for your possessions also; you are bound to use them in the service of your neighbour'. (p. 4)

It is important to note here that, at the time Von Harnack wrote about neighbourly responsibility and continuing through to the time after World War II, German theology also found itself at a critical point. In this 'Eastern' theological trend, Barthianism had a big influence because of Barth's ongoing radical criticisms of capitalism and the philosophy behind institutions of economic individualism. In all the American social issues and discussions on social justice, social concern and social awakenings, one can see unrelated but similar Social Gospel elements finding form in the works of Barth. Barth (1954),<sup>15</sup> concerned about a sustainable theological response of the German church to the traumatic experience of the World Wars on the one side and the extreme Communism in the East, explains the church's relation to the State and to its fellow man as follows:

The church is witness of the fact that the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost. And this implies that – casting all false impartiality aside – the church must concentrate first on the lower levels of human society. The poor, the socially and economically weak and threatened, will always be the object of its primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the State's special responsibility for these weaker members of society. That it will bestow its love on them, within the framework of its own task (as part of its service), is one thing and the most important; but it must not concentrate on this and neglect the other thing to which it is committed by its political responsibility: the effort to achieve a fashioning of the law such as will make it impossible for 'equality before the law' to become a cloak under which strong and weak, independent and dependent, rich and poor, employers and employees, in fact receive different treatment at its hands; the weak being unduly restricted, the strong unduly protected. (p. 36)

14. See NRCA (NHKA 2013:406:407) for the recent decision made by the General Assembly of 2013 to apply for membership of the World Council of Churches (WCC).

15. This article does not aim to portray Barth as a socialist, communist, or agent of the Social Gospel. There are however significant similarities in his writings to those of the Social Gospel. This is in part because of American theologians, who came from the Social Gospel era in America and studied under Barth. It also is a result of Barth's Reformed pastoral experience in Safenwil, Switzerland and his concerns about German theology.



Niebuhr (1959:184) explains how the American institutionalised churches that were connected with Social Gospel's ideals showed interest in furthering their own development, but later seemed 'less interested in the worker [slaves] than in winning him to the church, that is, of using the Social Gospel as a means for the maintenance of the institution.' Niebuhr reflects his concern by criticising the Social Gospel for not maintaining what they promised in their theology. The effect of this development can be seen in the frustration of Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963) when he wrote from a Birmingham jail:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride to freedom is not the White Citizen's Councillor or the Klux Klux Klanner but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace<sup>16</sup> which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says 'I agree with you in the goal that you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;' who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season'. (p. 78)

King read Walter Rauschenbusch's manifesto *A theology for the Social Gospel* (1945). King explains his understanding of why 'Christian' brothers withheld their neighbourly love until the time suited them as institution. Rauschenbusch, Barth and King, writing from different contexts, and different challenges, share the same elements found in the urgency of the Social Gospel's understanding of social contribution. These are but three examples of theologians' compulsion to encourage the Church to participate in social action. Our circumstances in South Africa are taking a turn towards the question of how the Church should be active *in* society. A broader vision might be to ask the same question about the ecumenical contribution of churches in South Africa. As Rauschenbusch said: 'We have a Social Gospel. We need a systematic theology large enough to match it and vital enough to back it ... a theology to make it effective' (Rauschenbusch 1945:1). Barth (1932) explains this responsibility of the (ecumenical) church as follows:

But there are also other elements in the life of the Church in which what we say about God is addressed to our fellow-men but which cannot seek to be proclamation. To this group belongs a function, which from the very first has in some form been recognized to be an integral element of the life of the Church, namely, the expression of helpful solidarity in face of the external needs of human society. This, too, is part of man's response to God. When and because it is the response of real man, necessarily in terms of Matthew 5:14f. It is a shining light to people among whom alone man is real man. If God exists for man, as the Church's prayer, praise, and confession declare in answer to the proclamation heard, then this man as the man for whom God exists must also exist for his fellow-men with whom alone he is real man. Yet the special utterance about God, which consists in the action of, this man is primarily and properly directed to God and not to men. It can neither try to enter into

16. Relating to the intention Rauschenbusch, and in this case King had, a *pax Americana* seemed to be elusive to them: 'Peace, as considered as one of the Social Gospel's practical aims had been the Social Gospel's most spectacular failure ... although it had ecumenical success' (Carter 1954:107).

quite superfluous competition with society's necessary efforts at self-help in its straits, nor can it seek, as the demonstration of distinctively Christian action, to proclaim how God helps. 'That they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven,' that they may be a commentary on the proclamation of God's help, is, of course, freely promised, but cannot be its set intention. Like prayer, praise and confession, especially in cases like Francis of Assisi and Bodelschwingh, it has always been spontaneous, unpremeditated, and in the final and best sense unpractical talk about God. Then and in this way its light has shone out ... If the social work of the Church as such were to try to be proclamation, it could only become propaganda, and not very worthy propaganda at that. Genuine Christian love must always start back at the thought of pretending to be a proclamation of the love of Christ with its only too human action. (p. 50)

This extensive quotation taken from Barth serves as a thorough articulation of the church's responsibility and Christian love in a moribund time of turmoil in both Germany and America. Recent studies, maybe unknowingly, substantiate these elements of the Social Gospel, laying the theological foundation for the Church today and hence paving the way to consider its social identity.

## Social Gospel implications

Recent research has convincingly reinforced the fundamental points with significance to ethics, mission and action in the kingdom of God.<sup>17</sup> The themes 'action', 'identity' and 'responsibility' are, from a Christian perspective, also fundamental to further the argument of *why* the Social Gospel has elements that are significant for the Church in South Africa today. This can be seen by referring back to the critiques of the Social Gospel mentioned above. For example, the generalisations (1) 'Man is not so bad, and God is not so mad ...'; (2) Cultural restoration *is* the Gospel...; (3) Social salvation is superior to individual salvation' (Amyx 2012) can be answered, not for the sake of justifying the Social Gospel, but to rediscover the recent thematic similarities. The challenge is not to convince churches that they should be active through social contribution, but rather to help the ecumenical churches overcome the tension between their identity and their tangible action. Responding to the criticism of indeterminacy within the Social Gospel through studying South African research on the subject reminds the reader that the theological foundation is well established by these faithful scholars. Now the focus should shift to looking more specifically at the inherent institutional fortification built by the Church and for the Church. This is an esoteric projection or an internal Church barricade whose effect is similar to an abstract form of a modern Holodomor.

Therefore, let us turn to these fundamental (do not read 'fundamentalist') theological themes relating to the Social Gospel and the action as a result of it: Acting because of God's love for us, and not to evade judgement, but as an end in itself.

17. See McKnight (2014), Van Eck (2013), Kok (2012), McNeal (2003, 2009), Van Aarde (2008a) that hold relevance to this section of action and the kingdom of God.

Firstly, humans are 'bad' enough to still make wrong decisions. To prove human infallibility, however, is not the focus of the Social Gospel. Rather the focus, after understanding our human nature, is on responsible action<sup>18</sup> exactly because of God's love for us. Man, therefore, is not only bad, and God is not only mad. Van Eck (2013) argues that for the author of Mark:

[T]he kingdom of God is the only kingdom where peace and justice are abundantly available to all, because its patron, Jesus, is the true Son of God, and not Caesar. (p. 1)

Consequently, when becoming a member of this in-group, a member (singular: individual) of this 'kingdom entails standing up for justice and showing compassion towards outsiders created by the "gospels" of Rome and the Temple elite' (Van Eck 2013:1 of 13) by identifying as patrons of the God of this kingdom.<sup>19</sup> From this perspective, as the foundation of human fallibility and God's supremacy as righteous ruler, Rauschenbusch (1945) wrote:

When the doctrine of the Kingdom of God is lacking in theology, the salvation of the individual is seen in its relation to the church and to the future life, but not in its relation to the task of saving the social order. (p. 137)

Naturally, the next step is to determine how the collective action of the church (the combined effort of patrons) would then further the kingdom of God. Consequently, we see the criticism on the perceived intent of the Social Gospel in Amyx's second generalisation (2012).

Secondly, the Gospel message cannot be watered down to a mere agenda for a moralistic<sup>20</sup> life, implying that 'cultural restoration' is the ultimate essence of the Gospel. Kok (2012:1 of 11), reading 1 Thessalonians, explains how this *space*, or kingdom of God, was understood as 'an alternative symbolic universe resulting from a reconceptualisation of power or empowerment and loving service from a Christological perspective.' Kok explains how a member of this alternative kingdom 'maintains a high ethical lifestyle, because of their identity as children of God' (Kok 2012:10 of 11; my translation). As members of the kingdom of God, they 'portrayed self-sacrificing love, through Jesus' example,

18. See Pinches (2002:88) who asks if it 'is more likely that all human acts are moral acts?' and he explains the potential exceptions to such a rule.

19. God, unlike Caesar, accepts sinful people into the kingdom of which he is king. Van Eck (2013:11 of 13) explains that '[t]he kingdom of God has turned the world upside down: the official patrons have been replaced by a new patron, and the "sinners" are not the outsiders created by the gospels of Rome and the Temple elite. The sinners are those who ransack the temple (the priestly elite; Mk 11:17) and those into whose hands Jesus is delivered to be killed (Mk 14:41).'

20. In the time of the American Social Gospel developments as referred to above, Karl Barth (1954:36) urged the church of his day to focus on the poor and to contribute to justice in the political sphere. However, Barth also holds firm on how the church should approach participation in the community. Barth ([1928] 1981:517–518) reminds the church that it 'cannot abandon its fundamental and concrete attitude of humility before the World and Spirit of God that constitute it, in favour of a disposable plenitude of truth and power inherent either in its offices or in the whole community. Even as the bride of Christ, it cannot for a single moment or in any respect cease to be his handmaiden. It knows that it can only be led into all truth. The human work of the church is thus the service of God in the broadest sense, because it can never act effectively except under the *provisio* of the grace of God. It is the setting up of the symbol of proclamation and repentance whose reality is God's work alone. The symbol of this symbol is divine service in the narrower sense of the word (worship). This is the characteristic function of the church as such (in distinction from other human orders and societies which are not intrinsically the church).'

which included outsiders, to influence them (outsiders) in a positive way through the loving service' (Kok 2012:10; my translation). Gladden, (as quoted in Dorn 1967:230), describes not only cultural restoration, but also this very perspective of life in the kingdom of God. Similarly, Kok (2012:10 of 11) does not only talk about 'influencing (outsiders) in a positive way.' The criticism from Amyx (2012) is therefore reduced to generalised assumptions of the Social Gospel – that we do not simplify the gospel to mere 'cultural restoration'. It entails so much more than our action. Rather, *because* of the gospel's message of God's covenant-with-us through Jesus, believers responsibly 'maintain a high ethical lifestyle, because of their identity as children of God' as Kok (2012:10 of 11) mentioned. It is important to note that the individual has to first make a decision, and only then is the kingdom of God open to those who choose to accept Jesus as patron (Van Eck 2013:12 of 13), and with this new identity, members 'receive power from God to live with delight and loving service, even in times of hardship' (Kok 2012:10 of 11). Thirdly, referring to Rauschenbusch's plea to reintroduce the importance of discipling rather than proselytising (1945:97), the Social Gospel was never concerned only with social salvation, but firstly with individual decision and participation as believer. Van Aarde (2008b) explains that the 1 Corinthians 13:8a 'love' explained by Paul is characterised as requesting *nothing*, yet demanding *everything*:

To love in this way is only possible because God loved us first. And if we do not love our neighbour in this sense, that we can love because God loves us, then, in regards to Paul, it will be nothing more than humanitarian empathy. (p. 1684; *my translation*)

Barth ([1928] 1981:426) describes this in his *Ethics* as 'dealing' with someone, like a post office would 'handle' a client. This, according to Barth, is not offering neighbourly, loving, 'services' at all.

It is clear that the line of thought today differs from the critical assumptions<sup>21</sup> made about the Social Gospel. Rather, a strong argument is formed today that encourages sustainable action. This, as mentioned above, then concludes this article's first argument that the Social Gospellers understood Christian responsibility as an imperative of '*participatio Jesu*' through social integration of living an ethos of *oikoumenē*. However, there are discrepancies in what the Church today understands itself to be (through theology and ethics) and what tangible action it takes (empirically).<sup>22</sup> Unfortunately, when referring to the responsible mimesis<sub>2</sub> (Joy 1997:xxix) of

21. Hooft (1928:181) acknowledges some credit to the Social Gospel movement: 'They are aware of the exceedingly great moral dangers inherent in modern capitalism, industrialism, and economic imperialism. They are deeply troubled in their conscience about the lack of ethical standards in social life and about the flagrant injustice of the social order. There is something truly prophetic in their indignation and it is to their lasting credit that they have spoken so fearlessly and frankly about these issues, which most Christians complacently ignore. But the very intensity of their moral pathos, their impatience with reality as they see it, has led them astray. For instead of accepting the tension between the real and the ideal, between the existing social order and the Kingdom of God, they anticipated the ideal by concluding that it was already potentially given in the real.'

22. Van Wyk (2011:1) explains how the NRCA's ecclesiology and missiology, 'over the last few decades, went hand in hand with certain themes like independence, self-government, own identity, self-accomplishment, non-diversifying, and separatist.' This serves as an example of a Church understanding its calling but whose focus is not necessarily on its neighbours, but rather on its members.



Jesus in the gospels, it is problematic to identify the Church as being true to such a mimesis.<sup>23</sup> In this article's view, it is not because the Church is incompetent, but rather because of the 'ecclesiological tradition on which the NRCA have built upon is too narrow, nugatory and even doubtful' (Van Wyk 2013:1 of 11; my translation). In this discrepancy lies the value of the oxymoron,<sup>23</sup> *strenua inertia*. The NRCA have been continuously 'active,' almost religiously, with an implosion of action, yet with deliberate and conscious sluggishness (German: 'Trägheit'; Dutch: 'Traagheid') of contribution to a diverse South African society. Van Wyk (2013:1 of 11) defines this state of the Church as 'petrification', whereof the only alternative is 'innovation'. The significant appeal of this article is in its contribution to support the Church in its own disentanglement from the dilemma of potential petrification because of the illusion of repatriation in (a 1940–1981) South Africa. Such an intricate state of 'active *Trägheit*', or *strenua inertia*, can better be articulated through the tripartite model of mimesis, explained by narrative identity as used by Ricoeur. Ricoeur<sup>24</sup> says a narrative form of identity can 'rescue us from our contemporary dilemmas as defined by postmodern impasse between repetition and indeterminacy' (Joy 1997:xxix). This is the contribution, relying on Morny Joy's (1997) understanding of Ricoeur's explanation, when she says:

In place of the ontological understanding of identity as an abstract timeless entity, Ricoeur wishes to substitute an appreciation of narrative as a modality of awareness that allows for development and change while simultaneously providing a form of self-constancy... [t]his plot can help a person establish a bridgehead from which he or she can thematize (i.e. *emplot*) a set of events that may otherwise be either too chaotic or distressing. (p. xxix)

The sacrifice demanded of the Church in service of its neighbour and the actions we 'take' (for example, a Christian social contribution to society) are discovered 'in the network of multifarious social and historical relationships in which [we are] willy-nilly involved' (Kerr 1986:69). The Church situated in this arena of differentials can, according to Ricoeur, 'emplot' the current events and challenges it faces. *Emplotment* refers to this coalescence of 'action and narrative, showing how the latter draws the former further along in meaning' (Pinches 2002:218).

[E]mplotment synthesizes character, action and circumstance. It emplots together different sorts of incident and event, in particular the intentional and the accidental. Narrative relates both natural occurrences and human actions, as well as their consequences, both intended and unintended. (Loughlin 1996:141)

When the Church 'emplots' its situation through narrative, the process of tangible actions is initiated through

23. Taken at its word, 'oxymoron' dates to the 16th century, a late Latin word, *oxymorum*. Presumed Greek *oxymōron*, neuter of *oxymōros* ['sharp-dull'] equivalent to *oxý-* (s) 'sharp' and *-mōrós* ['dull']. It is a 'rhetorical figure in which incongruous or contradictory terms are combined, and can be an expression that is witty because it is paradoxical' (Pickett 2011:1262).

24. Speaking with specific reference to the problem of self and identity he says: 'Without the recourse to narration, the problem of personal identity would in fact be condemned to an antimony with no solution' (Ricoeur 1988:220).

indeterminacy (do not read: ambiguity). For example, to define how the Social Gospel's urgency of action and the above-mentioned theologians' contributions relate in convincing the Church to take action, let us return to Barth's contextually-relevant argument. Barth ([1928] 1981), regarding the urgency and legitimacy of the church's role within society, then proposes that the church do:

[E]vangelization and mission as a necessary expression of the church's life and its responsible proclamation to the rest of the world, which is alien to it but with which it must reckon in humility before God; ... theology, i.e., the never unnecessary critical self-reflection of the church on its origin, the promises and warning of its history, on its nature, and on its central and also its peripheral task; and also that the 'task and promise of this human work is fundamentally given to the church as such i.e., to all its members. (p. 518)

Firstly, it is clear that Van Eck, Kok and Van Aarde are at one about the faithful who are required to reach out to the out-group, but only by understanding 'loving service' as love from God. Jesus is clear about requiring love (Mk 12:33), mercy (Mt 9:13, 12:7) referring to Hosea 6:6, and not 'sacrifices' as misguided human attempts of service to God. However, the concern lies with the Church's *inertia*, or *Trägheit*, which makes the institution rather less than more enthused about altering its course towards possible petrification.

How does this relate to the second argument of the article, namely that the Social Gospel history has a pertinent influence on mainline churches to understand the tension to participate through mimesis<sub>3</sub> (Joy 1997:xxix) or withdraw from social action today? As mentioned above, the 'love' described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:8a is characterised as requesting *nothing*, and yet demanding *everything*. Likewise, the Social Gospel element of action because of God's love for us requests nothing but demands everything. The Social Gospellers revealed the example of immediate action<sup>25</sup> they found in the example of Jesus' life in the gospel narratives. The Social Gospellers realised the urgency (read: eschatological urgency) to live a life of outward social contribution because of their own accumulated abundance. They chose to 'emplot' their reality and disregard unrighteousness and inequality, but not for the sake of a 'good life,' well lived through moralism. Rather, as Ricoeur more recently suggested, we should 'learn to become the narrator of our own story [*stories*] without becoming the author of our life' (Ricoeur 1986:131).

## Final remarks for consideration

The biblically Reformed theology of the Church in South Africa is rich in its heritage of a responsible approach to biblical studies. The richness of ecclesiology as part of theology

25. Hooft (1928:181) gave the Social Gospel movement recognition for their attempt to enact social justice: 'They are aware of the exceedingly great moral dangers inherent in modern capitalism, industrialism, and economic imperialism. They are deeply troubled in their conscience about the lack of ethical standards in social life and about the flagrant injustice of the social order. There is something truly prophetic in their indignation and it is to their lasting credit that they have spoken so fearlessly and frankly about these issues, which most Christians complacently ignore. But the very intensity of their moral pathos, their impatience with reality as they see it, has led them astray. For instead of accepting the tension between the real and the ideal, between the existing social order and the Kingdom of God, they anticipated the ideal by concluding that it was already potentially given in the real.'



is situated in the fact that we are always almost finished with the ontological process in the world. For the Church to collect itself, it has to consider convincing its members to expose, or emplot, their complex situation through narrative re-assimilation of a state of *strenua inertia*. For example, the Church can incorporate an opportunity for members and visitors (any person), to partake in the Church's rediscovery of its ecclesiological identity in South Africa. A starting-point to be considered by churches is one of *humble boldness* in approaching John 3:30, ἐκεῖνον δεῖ αὐξάνειν, ἐμὲ δὲ ἐλαττοῦσθαι', towards a working narrative that plots the Church in direct contrast to its *Trägheit* – an innovative decision towards an invigorating decision to 'ὄψεται ζῶην' (Jn 3:36).

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