

Christ in Capital
The Invention of American Corporate Christianity

Brad Thibodeaux
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Dr. Christin Lazo
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Introduction

Modern Conservative American Christianity has changed dramatically in recent history, most notably in the 20th century. With the close of the 19th century, American Christians saw a connection with the Gospel and the responsibility of the government to care for the poor and needy. This Social Gospel was the backbone of politicians and ministers to fight for the working class and the disenfranchised in American society and led to important progress in society. Unfortunately, this Gospel would be replaced with one of unfettered capitalism and an individualistic view of Christianity.

Corporate backlash to FDR's New Deal policies were not well received in the public eye, as appeals by businessmen were viewed with criticism and cynicism. The big business lobby needed a way to deliver their message, and they found their prophets in the pulpits of Conservative Christianity. With the unholy union of Christ and Capital, American Christianity changed forever, by demonizing the collective social duty of the Church and replacing our shared responsibility with an individual piety.

The Social Gospel

The Social Gospel was a movement that began in the late 19th century and into the 20th century that was focused on a collective reading of the Gospel, and in particular the Sermon on the Mount given by Jesus in Matthew 5-7. Walter Rauschenbusch, a prominent minister and theologian in the movement, noted in his 1917 book *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, that “a readjustment and expansion of theology, so that it will furnish an adequate intellectual basis for the social gospel, is necessary, feasible, desirable, and legitimate.”¹ This Gospel saw the

¹ Rauschenbusch, Walter. *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. New York: Macmillan, 1917, 1.

repentance of systemic injustice and inequality as imperative to the Great Commission of Jesus. It was impossible to be true disciples of Jesus if one failed to follow His teachings in the Sermon on the Mount and the example of the Early Church in Acts. This theological framework led American ministers to endorse labor movements like unions and the end of child labor, social morality laws like Prohibition, as well as the New Deal creation of welfare systems to curb poverty, hunger, and homelessness.

The Social Gospel of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was concerned with the treatment and wellbeing of people's physical existence rather than their post-mortem destination, reframing the Good News towards public good and away from personal salvation.² The Federal Council of Churches, founded in 1908, published *The Social Creed of the Churches* later that year. It listed the predicament that these churches saw in the industrializing world, including abolition of child labor, establishing a minimum living wage, and a healthy 'work-life balance'.³ The Federal Council of Churches was also a strong proponent of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, seeing the reforms proposed in line with the basic Christian tenets of caring for the poor and disenfranchised, securing for them "daily bread, shelter, and security."⁴

Prohibition was also endorsed by the Social Gospel, believing that alcohol was detrimental to the salvation of society and the culture. The saloons were consistently full of workers who found solace from the industrial world through the bottle, leading to crime, violence, and social discord. The elimination of alcohol from daily life brought the Millennial reign of Jesus closer to reality, particularly in the working poor. Floyd Tomkins notes in 1923, "I

² Kevin Michael Kruse. 2016. *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America*. New York: Basic Books, 5.

³ "National Council of Churches - Common Witness - the Social Creed of the Churches," nationalcouncilofchurches.us, December 4, 1908, <https://nationalcouncilofchurches.us/common-witness/1908/social-creed.php>.

⁴ Kruse, 5.

find a marked improvement in the number of men who are saving their money and who own their homes or are buying their homes, and I find a decided improvement in the home life of the workers...”⁵ The time and money spent in bars was being spent in the home and on family life, improving the society as a whole gradually. Tomkins notes that, while the consumption of alcohol was still prevalent, it was mostly indulged by the ‘leisure class’ and alcohol use among the working class fell by 75 percent.⁶

The Eschaton of the Social Gospel

The ultimate end of the world and the reign of Jesus has not been universally agreed upon in Church history, typically broken up in premillennialism, postmillennialism, and amillennialism. These three branches of eschatology worked to justify the Biblical teachings of when Jesus would return and set up His kingdom on earth. American Protestantism has been in a period of premillennialism since the publication of the Scofield Study Bible (and particularly after World War II and the formation of the nation of Israel) but the foundations of America can be tied to postmillennial preaching.

Postmillennialism is a eschatological interpretation of the Bible, particularly the book of Revelation, that views the Millennial reign of Jesus as a literal, early kingdom that will be established in the future. This requires believers to bring the kingdom of God to earth by systematically making the world better. As Jonathan Edwards, an 18th century revival preacher

⁵ Floyd Tomkins, “Prohibition and Its Enforcement,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 109 (September 1923): 20, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1014989>.

⁶ Ibid.

put it, the “great work of God will be gradually wrought, though very swiftly, yet gradually.”⁷ This is in contrast to amillennialism which believes that the millennial reign in the Bible is allegorical, and the premillennialist position that there will be a literal tribulation that will cause chaos, destroy the earth, and include the rapture of true believers before Christ’s return to rule.

“The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience. It calls on us for the faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.”⁸ However, the Civil War and Reconstruction posed a problem for postmillennialists. With a divided nation in ruin, the idea that America was a city on a hill for the second coming was difficult to justify, but this was not a defeat for this eschatology. The Social Gospel took the same postmillennialist position, believing that the world was in the Kingdom Age, but focused its efforts on reforming social and government institutions.

Christian Libertarianism

In Kevin Kruse’s book *One Nation Under God*, Kruse defines Christian Libertarianism as the “blend of conservative religion, economics, and politics”⁹ This Christian Libertarianism found its origins in the late 1930’s and through the mid-20th century. During the implementation of the New Deal, big business owners were looking for a way to reclaim their economic power. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) promoted the ideals of free enterprise and the free markets, but were fighting a losing battle in the public eye. With the Crash still in recent

⁷ Steven Pointer, “American Postmillennialism: Seeing the Glory | Christian History Magazine,” Christian History Institute, accessed November 9, 2022, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/american-postmillennialism-seeing-the-glory>

⁸ Rauschenbusch, 5.

⁹ Kruse, 7.

memory, Americans were wary of the business tycoons. Corporations needed to find a way to reinvent themselves and build a bridge to the regular American.

W. Prentis, head of Armstrong Cork Co. and NAM president, gave the first Christian Libertarian appeal in 1938. After years of unsuccessful attempts of reframing big business in a positive light, the Social Gospel was still seen as the authoritative view of the Gospel in the industrialized world. During a speech at the US Chamber of Commerce, Prentis noted that “Economic facts are important, but they will never check the virus of collectivism... the only antidote is a revival of American patriotism and religious faith.”¹⁰ Prentis was a businessman who saw the need for the religious leaders to justify his ideas and Congregationalist minister Fifield was the man for the job.

James W. Fifield Jr. gave a rousing speech at the 1940 NAM meeting, saying that big business was not to blame, but was, in fact, the only hope for America: “Titans of industry had been told, time and time again, that they were to blame for the nation’s downfall. Fifield, in contrast, insisted that they were the source of its salvation.”¹¹ Fifield, who had founded Spiritual Mobilization in 1935 in order to organize ministers in the fight against statism, had found a natural alliance in NAM. It was the express goal of the Spiritual Mobilization group and Fifield to preserve the four most important freedoms - the free pulpit, freedom of speech, free enterprise, freedom of the press, and the freedom to assemble.

Spiritual Mobilization produced material for local ministers to help move public opinion in favor of corporations. *Faith and Freedom*, a monthly journal that was marketed as a place for open dialogue between conservative and liberal views, strongly supported and skewed conservative, betraying the true motives. In 1951, Spiritual Mobilization put together a number

¹⁰ Kruse, 6.

¹¹ Kruse, 7.

of events around the Fourth of July called 'Freedom Under God'. These events were organized by the newly formed *Committee to Proclaim Liberty*, a board dominated by conservative politicians, ministers, and celebrities. The Committee promoted personal and corporate religious ceremonies and practices in the days leading up to the 4th of July church services. The stage was set for the Christianization of America.

Domestic Fear

While many modern Americans think of the fear of Socialism as a reaction to the Cold War and Communism throughout Eastern Europe, the root cause of this panic can be traced to the New Deal policies of FDR. The New Deal initiated many public programs, including public works, welfare programs like food stamps, Social Security, and fair labor practices, to name a few. These new programs required financing, which Roosevelt found through taxing the wealthy to redistribute wealth. This primarily affected businessmen, who in turn founded lobbying organizations like NAM.

While some programs were generally popular, organized labor hurt business the most and was targeted by NAM and other pro-business organizations. At the infamous NAM meeting at the Waldorf-Astoria, then NAM president H.W. Prentis listed "the only antidote [to the virus of collectivism] is a revival of American patriotism and religious faith."¹²

This was a defining line between conservative Christianity and the revived Social Gospel of the Roosevelt era. FDR used religious language to promote his agenda of "daily bread, shelter, and security."¹³ The Social Gospel thought that Christian influence in government and society should be a collective improvement. This greatly influenced the reforms of the New Deal

¹² Kruse, 6.

¹³ Kruse, 5.

and the policy enacted during Roosevelt's and Truman's administrations. The necessity of everyone's basic needs being met led to many of the new federal government programs.

The systemic vision of the Social Gospel was seen as a false idol by the politically and religiously conservative. Fifield and Abraham Vereide, both conservative ministers and forerunners to the evangelist Billy Graham, thought that the Gospel was focused on an individual's personal decision of salvation. This worldview led them to preach the necessity of free enterprise and capitalism over socialism and communism.

Revisionist Christianity

The inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower was the culmination of decades of work by pro-business Christian Libertarians and the conservative Christians in America. Eisenhower, who grew up a fundamentalist Mennonite, was religious without being denominational. He saw the Christian religion as being foundational to the creation of the country but did not want to seem sectarian or to favor one tradition over the other - rather, leaning on vague religiosity. This blend of religious necessity without denominational ties saw the rise in religious practice in governmental and public life.

It was the Eisenhower administration that adopted religious language in the Pledge of Allegiance, the Presidential church service spectacle, and the National Prayer Breakfast. Eisenhower brought on Christian ministers into his inner circle, notably Billy Graham, while keeping a specific Christian sect out of the policy. While Eisenhower may have hoped this would hold, his additions to the American zeitgeist would prove problematic.

In the notable case *Engel v. Vitale*, New York State law required the recitation of the *Regent's Prayer* by students daily. This prayer, written by the New York Board of Regents, was

brought to the courts by a group of parents, arguing that it was violating the separation of Church and State. The lower courts all ruled in favor of the Regent's, citing the religious history of America, and claiming that this prayer was patriotic and not religious. The courts cited the religious language found in American daily life, including 'in God we trust' on money, 'under God' in the Pledge of Allegiance, and prayer practices in Congress and the National Prayer Breakfast. As Kruse notes, "In a sign of how swiftly and thoroughly the religious revival of the 1950s had taken root, these judges cited changes that had occurred in their own recent memory as proof that the country's religious roots stretched back to time immemorial."¹⁴

The Social Gospel Fails

Big business pushback to the New Deal was a major force against the Social Gospel. Christian Libertarianism, the marriage of capitalism and Christianity, found the Social Gospel to be a perversion and heresy. The National Association of Manufacturers (NAM) in the 1930s and 40s worked with ministers to promote a pro-business Christian mode. The emphasis of individual salvation was juxtaposed with the Social Gospel, claiming that the only way an economic system could be in line with Christianity was one that was also individualistic - primarily capitalism.¹⁵

World War II was a second blow to the Social Gospel movement. The horrors of a second world war, fascism, and the Holocaust, all cast doubt on the idea that the world was becoming a better place. The Scofield Study Bible was a major player in the decline of postmillennialism. Scofield's premillennial commentary of Daniel and Revelation was almost prophetic with the creation of Israel and the power shift in Eastern Europe. In premillennialism, the world would become more evil before the Rapture of God's people, ushering in the Antichrist and Tribulation

¹⁴ Kruse, 176.

¹⁵ Kruse, 7.

period. After World War II, premillennialism became the dominant eschatological framework of American Protestantism.

American Evangelicalism places a large amount of importance on personal accountability, in both spiritual and social decisions. Billy Graham, one of the most important American Evangelicals in history, spread the gospel of making a personal decision for Jesus as well as individualism in society and the workforce. While his nationwide revivals stressed the importance of a personal decision and relationship with Jesus in order to secure heaven, his boardroom prayers focused on the labor unions.

Graham saw labor unions as not compatible with Christianity and sided with big business when speaking to and about corporations. In a hotel owners convention, Graham was recorded saying ““God bless you and thank you... and God bless the Holiday Inns.””¹⁶ This can be contrasted with his views on labor, which he saw as sinful. He thought of the unions as taking unfair advantage of employers, striking members as selfish, and government restrictions as hindering the opportunities that America could be presented with. He spoke about the Garden of Eden being perfect - without union dues and organized labor - while also inferring that those in unions were completely godless.¹⁷

The Red Christian Scare

Graham was a major player in the Christian Libertarian’s fight against Socialism, but the temperature of the nation as fear of Communism spread throughout the 20th century was not solely his responsibility. While secular and political pressure led to the Red Scare, Conservative

¹⁶ Kruse, 37.

¹⁷ Kruse, 37-38.

ministers in America had completely abandoned the collectivism of the Social Gospel in favor for individualistic capitalism, both in the body politic and the pews.

Karl Marx, a German philosopher and coauthor of *The Communist Manifesto*, was the prevailing thought leader in Soviet Russia. Marx saw the struggle of the common person as a struggle against the working class, and primarily the oppression of the few in power over the many who gave their power to the rich. Marx saw religion as a major oppressor of the masses - a thought line that led Soviet leader Joseph Stalin to forcefully close churches, imprison, and sometimes kill the religious in the Soviet Union.¹⁸

The Cold War panic was incorporated in the ‘Freedom Under God’ rally by Baptist Reverend Kenneth W. Sollitt in his sermon titled *Freedom Under God: We Can Go on Making a God of Government, or We Can Return Again to the Government of God*, broadcasted on ‘Independence Sunday’.¹⁹ “‘The one road leads to the slavery which has always been the lot of those who have chosen collectivism in any of its forms... communism, socialism, the Welfare State—they are all cut from the same pattern. The other road leads to the only freedom there is’—free enterprise.’”²⁰ American Christianity once again sided with Capitalism and corporations, moving farther away from their legacy of the Social Gospel.

The Woke Gospel

The Social Gospel has had a resurgence in the 21st century due to many of the same reasons it was popular at the turn of the 20th century. Corporate greed, growing economic inequality, and the corruption in many governmental agencies laid the groundwork for a revival

¹⁸ Natasha Frost, “Why Stalin Tried to Stamp out Religion in the Soviet Union,” HISTORY, April 23, 2021, <https://www.history.com/news/joseph-stalin-religion-atheism-ussr>.

¹⁹ Kruse, 32.

²⁰ Ibid.

of the Christian plea for basic necessities. Many of the Progressive White Protestant and Black churches have found their voice (or have finally had their voices amplified) with the increased societal pressure for reform and fairness.

One example is Reverend Doctor William Barber II, co-chair of *The Poor People's Campaign*. Dr. Barber preaches and lectures on the necessity for the elimination of poverty and equitable opportunities for all. He pastors Greenleaf Christian Church, a Disciples of Christ church. While the Black Church has been historically more in line with the Social Gospel, many Mainline Protestant Churches have moved to the political left. The Mainline Church demographics are typically older and White, yet they have moved to the Left of other majority White Protestant denominations like the Southern Baptists and other Evangelical denominations.²¹

The legacy of the Social Gospel is important and is often overlooked. Many of the nation's labor laws and protections for the poor have their roots in this tradition, yet it is demonized by the Religious Right. Conservative Christianity claims that the Gospel is only focused on personal, individual salvation.²² This strict theological interpretive lens limits the role that Christianity has had in America's history and will continue to hinder the enrichment of the lives of the poor in our nation in the future.

²¹ Michael Lipka, "U.S. Religious Groups and Their Political Leanings," Pew Research Center (Pew Research Center, February 23, 2016), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/02/23/u-s-religious-groups-and-their-political-leanings/>.

²² "What Is the Social Gospel?," CompellingTruth.org, accessed November 9, 2022, <https://www.compellingtruth.org/social-gospel.html>.

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