

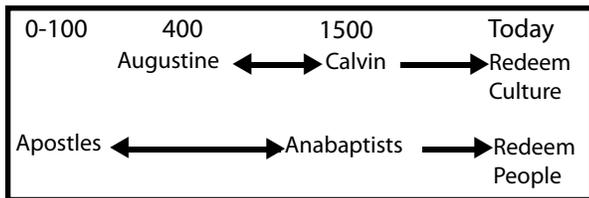
The New Social Gospel

by Dr. David A. DeWitt

- Should the Gospel be defined as receiving Christ or should the Gospel be defined as meeting the needs of the world?
- Should Christians see their eternal future as on this planet earth or should Christians see their eternal future as in a New Jerusalem of a heavenly realm?

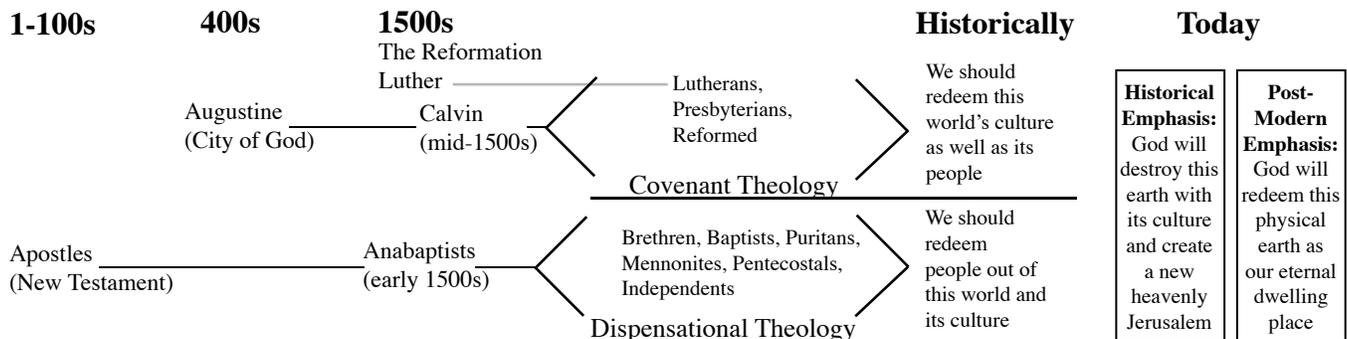
Historically ...

Christians have always had trouble getting the salt out of our saltshaker. Maybe that's because we have created saltshakers. Nonetheless, the question remains: What does it mean, *You are the salt of the earth* (Matthew 5:13)? The Protestant Reformers agreed that salvation was by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. But they generated two very different answers about the meaning and significance of social, cultural involvement. Luther didn't focus as much on culture, but Calvin did. Going back to Augustine, Calvin said Christians should be involved in the world in order to change it, make it Christian, and ultimately issue in the Kingdom of God. By contrast, the Anabaptists went back to the New Testament and concluded the church should be separated from the world and involved in it only for the purpose of evangelism and discipleship.



These two views have, with some variations, come all the way down through history to us today. In general, the Covenant churches (the Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Reformed) emphasize social and cultural involvement. The Dispensational churches (the Baptists, Brethren, Pentecostals, and Independents) emphasize evangelizing and discipling people **out** of the world. The contrast was probably best stated by D. L. Moody, who said, "Don't spend too much time polishing the brass rails on a sinking ship." The point, of course, is that the world is a sinking ship, and rather than polishing its brass rails, it's better to reach people for Christ and prepare them to get off the ship.

Both groups believe we should work in this world, care for this world, and be charitable toward its poor and needy. But the emphasis and motivation are different. [See the graph below.] Covenant churches believe we should be involved in this physical world and its culture in order to improve it, redeem it, and ultimately change it into the Kingdom of God. So the product of our work is important. Dispensational churches believe the world and its culture are a laboratory in which we prepare for our eternal destiny and witness for Christ. So it's the process, not the product, of our work which is important.



A New Gospel

Today, the Covenant view is being taken to a new extreme by new “leaders” from both groups. Rob Bell, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Grandville, Michigan, is quoted in “Christianity Today” (November, 2004) as saying, “People don’t get it. They think it’s about style. But the real question is: What is the Gospel?” (p. 41). The article links Bell to Brian McLaren and McLaren’s book, “A New Kind of Christian.” On page 40, McLaren says,

I don’t think we’ve got the gospel right yet. What does it mean to be ‘saved’? When I read the Bible, I don’t see it meaning, ‘I’m going to heaven after I die.’ Before modern evangelicalism nobody accepted Jesus Christ as their personal Savior, or walked down an aisle, or said the sinner’s prayer.

McLaren also said, “Election is not about who gets to go to heaven; election is about who God chooses to be part of his crisis-response team to bring healing to the world” (Ibid., pp. 39-40).

Michael Wittmer, currently an associate professor of systematic theology at Grand Rapids Theological Seminary, has written a book entitled “Heaven Is a Place on Earth” (Zondervan, 2004). He says, “I don’t want to go to heaven ... this planet is more than just a stopover on your way to heaven. It’s your final destination. ... not only our souls but also our bodies and the earth itself, together with our cultural contributions, appear to survive the transition from this world to the next. ... We need to become, in the best sense of the word, ‘worldly Christians’” (pp. 17, 19).

Cornelius Plantinga, president of Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan, writes, “We do not go to heaven; heaven comes to us. ... Fripp Island, S.C. will be a part of heaven. So will the Lake District in England ... the Great Barrier Reef ... Kenya’s Game Preserves, etc.” (“Engaging God’s World,” p. 137).

So this new gospel is to be defined not as going to heaven but (as Bell once put it) bringing heaven to earth. The church’s purpose is not to equip the saints but “to meet the world’s needs.” The individual serves the church, which serves this planet, which becomes the new heaven and new earth.

Although this view is certainly not mainstream, it is being endorsed by some new voices from both the Covenant and Dispensational groups.

An Evaluation

Jesus said, *I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, {there} you may be also* (John 14:2c-3). Jesus did not say we were to prepare a place for Him to come back to. Quite the opposite. He said He would prepare a place for us and take us from this earth to that place. And He never suggested we should be involved in helping Him prepare it.

The Apostle Peter said this physical earth will be destroyed, so we who are born again have a reservation in heaven, not on earth (1 Peter 1:3-4). Plus, he said this is what governs *what sort of people ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness...* (Read 2 Peter 3:10-13.) So Peter calls for godliness in the context of a world and its works destined for destruction **not** a godliness which redeems this world because this planet is our eternal destiny.

The Apostle John wrote, *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth passed away* (Revelation 21:1). The eternal destiny described by John is a heavenly city which sits on a new heavenly earth because *the first heaven and the first earth passed away*. He went on to say, *And the material of the wall was jasper; and the city was pure gold, like clear glass* (Revelation 21:18). Does that sound like part of South Carolina, England, or Kenya’s Game Preserves? Real? Yes. Substantial? Yes. This present earth? NO!

Here is the danger. The tendency of those who say we should redeem both people and the culture is to focus on redeeming the culture. This has historically led to institutions filled with people who are eternally lost, thinking they are saved because they are doing good works for the world’s culture.

The Apostle Paul said, *But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world* (Galatians 6:14).

Questions and Answers

Q: *Should the Gospel be defined as receiving Christ or should the Gospel be defined as meeting the needs of the world?*

A: We should care for our world (Jeremiah 29:7) and the needy. But the Gospel should be defined as receiving Christ (John 1:12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5), not changing the culture.

Q: *Should Christians see their eternal future as on this planet earth or should Christians see their eternal future as in a New Jerusalem of a heavenly realm?*

A: Read these passages. You decide.

Matthew 5:11-12, 20; 6:19-21; 8:11; 10:34; 16:26; 24:35;
Mark 8:36; 10:21; Luke 9:25; 10:21; 12:49-51;
John 15:18-20; 17:16; 18:36; Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 15:48;
Galatians 6:14; Ephesians 1:3; 2:4, 6; Philippians 3:18-20;
Colossians 1:3-5; 2 Timothy 1:5; 4:10, 17-18; Hebrews 3:1; 11:13; 12:22;
James 4:4; 1 Peter 1:3-4; 2 Peter 3:10-13; Revelation 20:11; 21:1-4ff.