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CONSERVATIVE PRESBYTERIANS: The Gospel, Social Reform, and the Church in the Progressive Era

by Gary Scott Smith

IN THE LAST TWO DECADES OF THE nineteenth century a broad array of Protestant pastors, professors and other lay people created and supported a movement to improve social conditions in American society. Popularly called the Social Gospel, this effort to ameliorate social problems built upon social reform crusades undertaken by evangelical Christians in the antebellum years.1 The immense social and economic changes brought about by rapid industrialization and massive immigration in the 1880s and 1890s, however, specifically stimulated the increased social consciousness and efforts of many Protestants during these years. During the first two decades of the twentieth century the Social Gospel became an official part of the ministry of the Federal Council of Churches (established by thirty-three denominations in 1908), of Episcopalians and Congregationalists and of the Northern branches of the Methodist, Presbyterian and Baptist communions.2 During the Progressive years the tenets of the Social Gospel were taught in many Protestant seminaries and its programs were implemented by an increasing number of congregations.3 Meanwhile, in classrooms, churches and popular literature the theories and methods of sociology were frequently discussed and endorsed and, in many ministries across the nation, put into practice. In addition, a substantial number of Protestants embraced socialism as a vehicle to improve industrial, commercial and political conditions.

In 1903 the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. (PCUSA) created a Department of Church and Labor under the direction of Charles Stelzle, the first denominational program of this type. In 1910 the communion adopted a strong statement of social concern at its annual General Assembly. By this year the denomination had established more than one hundred mission day and industrial training schools and forty social centers in immigrant communities.4 In 1911–12 many members of the denomination supported the Men and Religion Forward Movement, a continent-wide crusade to evangelize the unsaved, involve men in the ministry of the church and remedy social problems.5 By 1922, however, the editors of the Christian Century lamented: "Ten years ago the Presbyterians were leading all denominations in opening the pathway of social action, but they have fallen into significant silence on the great industrial issues in recent times."6 What happened during

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the second decade of the twentieth century that changed Presbyterian attitudes and approaches to social service so dramatically?

Despite these many public and practical endorsements of Social Christianity, some theologically conservative Presbyterians began around 1910 to challenge the stance of their own denomination and of many other Protestants toward social questions. Through a variety of means—publications, addresses, sermons, seminary and college lectures and denominational pronouncements and actions—they protested against some of the emphases of the Social Gospel, Christian socialism and increasing stress on sociological theories and methods within the Christian church. Their efforts led to the resignation of Charles Stelzle in 1913, to a reduced role for social service in the PCUSA’s official agencies and to the adoption by several Presbyterian denominations of a “United Declaration of Christian Faith and Social Service” in 1914 which sought to provide a more biblically based foundation for social ministry than had the Federal Council of Churches.

In raising a variety of objections against Protestant social Christianity in the Progressive years, theologically conservative members of the PCUSA spoke for many other Reformed Christians and some other evangelical Protestants. Understanding the nature of their opposition can help us better comprehend the factors and disputes which produced the Fundamentalist–Modernist controversy of the 1920s. Conservative Presbyterian leaders declared deep concern about the urban, political, industrial and social problems afflicting America during the early years of the twentieth century. They supported efforts to ameliorate poverty, improve working conditions, provide employment, build better housing and ensure a Sabbath rest. They objected, however, that much social reform rested upon a faulty basis, that Christian socialism was not a viable position, that sociological analysis was sometimes replacing rather than supplementing theological analysis, that emphasis on improving social conditions was leading to a neglect of evangelism and Christian nurture and that ministers and congregations were frequently intruding into the political sphere where they did not properly belong.

One evidence of growing desire among conservative Presbyterians to develop their own unique approach to and agenda for the social ministry of the church was the appointment by the PCUSA General Assembly in 1909 of a committee of five ministers and five laymen to prepare a report on problems confronting the church. The next year this Special Committee on Social Problems presented to the General Assembly what it called “The Christian Solution to the Social Problem.” It proclaimed through its chair, John McDowell, that urgent questions about wealth and poverty, luxury and want, capital and labor and war and peace demanded answers. Unfortunately, the report declared, “the development and application of the [era’s] moral and religious ideas” had “not kept pace with industrial progress.” This was especially alarming because others were offering alternative programs for improving social conditions resting exclusively on a secular, materialistic basis. While applauding the work being done by existing agencies of the church to remedy social problems, the committee challenged congregations to denounce human selfishness and stress the social principles of the gospel. Although Christianity had done much to arouse the current “demand for social and economic justice,” its proponents had not sufficiently developed the theological and moral basis for economic relations and reform. The committee urged Presbyterians to recognize that Jesus Christ was “the final authority over the social
as well as the individual aspects of life” and to apply “the principles of the kingdom of God, as taught by Jesus Christ” to “present practical conditions.”

The fourteen declarations of the report were closely related to the “Social Creed of the Churches,” adopted by the Federal Council of Churches in 1908. Nine of the declarations duplicated ones from the Social Creed, although most were paraphrased and some had different emphases. The addition of new declarations on the obligations of the affluent, the equitable distribution of wealth, the need to improve sanitation and congestion in the cities, the care of the handicapped and a Christian approach toward criminals as well as the assertion of five paragraphs to clarify their meanings gave these declarations a distinctively Presbyterian stamp.

Its authors insisted that wealth must be procured only “in obedience to Christian ideals” and that all possessions must be “administered as a trust from God for the good” of others. They argued for basing the operation of both companies and labor unions on Christian principles, abolishing child labor, improving working conditions for women, protecting all laborers from dangerous machinery and occupational disease, providing workmen’s compensation, reducing hours of employment (including having Sundays off) and using conciliation and arbitration in industrial disputes. While recognizing that much poverty was due “to vice, idleness or imprudence,” they argued that it often resulted from “preventable disease, uncompensated accidents, lack of proper education, and other conditions for which society” was responsible and should work to remove. The United States therefore must provide assistance to its aged and incapacitated.

A report published in the Minutes of the 1912 General Assembly provides a second expression of the views of conservative Presbyterians on the social ministry of the church. Entitled “Safeguarding Social Service in the Life of the Church,” the report was issued in response to the widespread emphasis upon social service in American society and the demand by many pastors that their congregations engage in this ministry. It encouraged Presbyterian congregations to follow Christ’s example in their efforts to improve social conditions. To do this they must meet people’s physical and social needs, teach Christian virtues, “cure crime and vice,” “place the down-trodden on the path of progress” and improve the opportunities of all classes for work and education. By implication, the social service of the church should involve supporting charities and correctional institutions, ensuring child welfare, improving working conditions, public health and housing, providing more public parks and opportunities for recreation, helping to mediate between owners and workers and fighting for Sabbath observance and against the liquor trusts. This could best be done, however, not by “any purely social effort,” or through the various forms of contemporary socialism. The church’s social ministry was most effectively conducted “by carrying the religion of Jesus into the social sphere to sweeten and purify and uplift and heal.”

A third development which sheds light on the convictions and concerns of Presbyterian conservatives centers around events involving the PCUSA’s Bureau of Social Service in 1913. Originally named the Department of Church and Labor, the agency was created in 1903. Under the leadership of Charles Stelzle the department strove to act as a liaison between workers and the church. As the first denominational agency of its type, it served as a model for similar agencies developed by other Protestant communions. Born to German immigrants in New York City in 1869, Stelzle grew up in the slums of the Lower East Side. Soon after the death of his father, Stelzle went to work at age eight in the
sweatshops. After laboring as an apprentice in a printing shop and as a journeyman machinist and serving with the YMCA and with a mission on the edge of Brooklyn, he decided at age twenty-four to become a minister. After ten months of education at Moody Bible Institute, involvement in a mission to workingmen in Minneapolis and pastorates in New York City and St. Louis, Stelzle became the head of the PCUSA’s Department of Church and Labor. During his ten years in this capacity he regularly wrote columns for hundreds of union newspapers, held evangelistic meetings in factories, urged Presbyterian congregations to celebrate Labor Sunday and arranged exchanges of fraternal delegates between ministers’ associations and labor unions. In 1910 Stelzle opened the Labor Temple on New York’s Lower East Side which ministered to working people through a variety of classes, forums and worship services. Like most Progressives and proponents of the Social Gospel, Stelzle considered the labor question to be basically a moral issue, sought to promote “good unionism,” repudiated violence and class warfare, supported strikes in principle and advocated such specific reforms as the abolition of child labor, reduced hours of labor and better working conditions. He repeatedly expressed his opposition to socialism and drew fire from both socialists (who thought he was being used by capitalists) and from the strongly anti-union forces led by the National Association of Manufacturers. Stelzle adhered to historic Christian orthodoxy, and he vigorously promoted and engaged in individual evangelism.11

Despite the similarities Stelzle shared with Presbyterian conservatives, concerns about the ministry of the Labor Temple and of the denominational agency he headed became widespread after 1910. “Stelzle’s rhetoric, which often sounded more radical than he was” especially created trouble for him in the PCUSA.12 Mark Matthews, pastor of a 7000-member Presbyterian congregation in Seattle and moderator of the 1912 General Assembly, accused Stelzle of being a socialist. The denomination’s Executive Commission investigated these charges but exonerated him.13 Nevertheless, other Presbyterian conservatives complained that Stelzle was too favorable toward socialism and chastised him for arguing that Christians could properly be socialists. In addition, some conservatives protested that his partiality to workers when dealing with society’s labor problems was causing some wealthy contributors to withdraw their financial support from the denomination. Moreover, some objected that the ministry of the Labor Temple was primarily social and secular instead of evangelistic and religious.14 Summing up the problem from the conservative Presbyterian perspective, the editors of the Presbyterian wrote that “Stelzle started out serving the gospel but” had “drifted into sociology,” which meant to them that he was trying to save society by improving the environment, “working from the outside to the inside,” instead of following the approach of the gospel which was “to rescue individuals and preserve and enlighten society” through them.15

Because of this opposition to his ministry Stelzle resigned from his position in 1913 when the General Assembly proposed to redesign the work of the Bureau of Social Service and significantly cut its budget and to transfer supervision of the Labor Temple from the Bureau to the New York Presbytery.16 Thirteen years later Stelzle wrote in his autobiography that three issues were involved in his resignation. The PCUSA was considering uniting with the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), the United Presbyterian Church of North America (UPCNA) and the Reformed Presbyterian Church, all of which were “very conservative in their attitude toward social problems.” This, combined
with the increasing conservatism in the PCUSA itself, especially of a small group in the Pittsburgh area, and the growing belief within the denomination that "too many special departments were being organized and too many so-called 'experts' employed" led him to conclude that the ministry of his department would be substantially altered. The effort to change the focus of the Bureau of Social Service and the objections raised about Stelzle's theology and activities illustrate conservative Presbyterian concerns about how the social ministry of the church should be conducted.

In 1913 Presbyterian conservatives took another step to develop and express their own distinctive basis for and understanding of the social implications of the gospel by establishing a joint committee to study and report on social problems consisting of delegates from the PCUSA, the PCUS, the UPCNA and the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod. They produced a "United Declaration of Christian Faith and Social Service" which was adopted by the annual meetings of their parent bodies in 1914. The statement expressed "their common faith in the great truths of the Gospel" with regard to social service. Believing that there was substantial confusion about and misrepresentation of the Bible's social teachings, they sought to "make clear to the world the true place of Social Service in Christian life and work." While the authors asserted that their declaration rested upon "the essential doctrines...held in common by all Evangelical Churches...embodied in the ecumenical creeds of Christendom," their underlying propositions for social action stressed traditional Reformed understandings of creation, fall, redemption and the work of the church. "We believe," they declared, "that man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever, and that the first duty of all men is to seek God, to repent of sin, to accept the offer of salvation through Jesus Christ and to dedicate their lives unreservedly to His service." Because "all evils, social and individual," were rooted in "human sin and selfishness" they could be remedied only through the conversion of individuals by God's grace. The church, along with the state and family, had a distinctive role to play in improving contemporary social relationships. The church's power, however, was "spiritual, ministerial and declarative." Its function was "to inculcate and apply those principles and to quicken those motives" which were "essential to all true and lasting reform."

The declaration insisted that the unjust distribution of wealth, the exploitation of the many by the privileged few, the "weakening of the sense of individual responsibility for social wrongs" brought about by the development of huge corporations, "the fostering of protection of vice as an instrument" to gain "place or power," and the ignorance and poverty of the masses, which made it more difficult to evangelize them, all demanded that the church "stand as Christ did against the sins of social injustice and tyranny." In explaining how the church should do this, however, the authors stressed the duty of individuals to "practice the Christian principles of love, justice and truth in all their social relations, economic, industrial or political," as neighbors, citizens, employers or employees and stockholders. They also emphasized that individuals were responsible for how they acquired and used "positions, possessions and power" and for working to abolish social evils. Christians were also obligated to do their "full share of the world's work" and to insure that all workers were paid a living wage, labored under safe, healthy conditions, received one day off in seven and had adequate provision for illness and old age. Many modern social evils were so deeply entrenched that they could be "cured only by concerted and organized effort on the part of all good
citizens.” This could best be accomplished not by congregations, whose primary functions were spiritual—evangelism, nurture, worship, Bible study and the like—but rather through voluntary organizations created specifically to remedy social ills. Congregations should not adopt definite positions on political or social issues or promote particular social reforms. Instead, they should urge their members to participate in those reform agencies which could best use their talents and which seemed to them most likely to achieve good results.\(^\text{19}\)

While conservative Presbyterians agreed with the Federal Council of Churches that planned, united Christian action was needed to rectify the many deplorable social problems of the Progressive era and supported many of the organization’s programs, they disagreed with its basis for social service and its attempt to involve congregations in direct efforts at social reform.\(^\text{20}\) The United Declaration concluded, therefore, with a challenge to the Federal Council to reassess its foundation for and methods of social service. While recognizing that the Federal Council was a vehicle through which Christians could work cooperatively to promote “the vast and holy enterprise of Christian Social Service,” they urged their denominational representatives to this body “to endeavor at all times to have the Federal Council distinctly recognize the great truths of the Christian faith held in common by the Evangelical Churches and thus to avoid and allay misunderstandings.”\(^\text{21}\)

The position staked out in the United Declaration is more fully explained in numerous works by various Presbyterian and Reformed leaders published during the early years of the twentieth century on the Social Gospel, Christian socialism, the place of sociology in the Christian mission and the role of the church in contemporary society. Conservative Presbyterians applauded and supported the efforts of Social Gospelers to correct social, political and economic abuses and to reform American society, and they acknowledged that social amelioration could remove obstacles that hindered individuals from hearing and responding to the gospel. William B. Greene, Jr., who taught apologetics, ethics and philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1893 to 1928, wrote extensively on social issues.\(^\text{22}\) In reviewing Samuel Zane Batten’s *The Social Task of Christianity*, he summarized issues upon which Social Gospelers and conservative Presbyterians agreed. America’s appalling social problems created “an atmosphere most adverse to both civic and personal righteousness.” Christians must, both individually and collectively, “attack the causes not just the results of these conditions.” Prevention was better than cure; preformation was just as Christian and just as necessary as reformation. The family, state and church all had an “important part to play in forming and reforming civilization.” Church members should be deeply interested in social questions, and the church “should be the most potent agent in social regeneration.”\(^\text{23}\)

Despite agreeing on these points with Social Gospelers, conservative Presbyterians raised a variety of objections to their positions. The “Social Gospel must be analyzed,” wrote Benjamin Paist in 1912, “by asking is it historical, rational and above all, scriptural.”\(^\text{24}\) Judged by this standard, many conservatives concluded, its proponents misconstrued the nature of Christ’s mission on earth and of the kingdom of God, minimized the effects of the fall and sin in the world, overestimated how Christian American society was, ignored the role and power of the Holy Spirit in effecting reforms, exaggerated the influence of the social environment on people, placed too little emphasis on individual regeneration, misunderstood the functions of the
church and rested their movement upon an inadequate theological foundation.

Greene protested that Social Gospelers frequently conceived of Christ only as a social reformer. Much more attention was given to Christ's example and ethical teachings than to his atonement for sin and role as redeemer. Advocates of the Social Gospel incorrectly portrayed the kingdom of God as primarily "material and social rather than spiritual and individual." The fact that Christ had resisted pressures to become a political leader and focused on public preaching indicated that the aim of the Kingdom he promoted was not the "reorganization of the industrial system." Many Social Gospelers assumed that "the wisdom of modern sociology" could be used to cure America's demoralizing social conditions and failed to recognize that sin was the underlying cause of all these problems. What was called sin, explained the editors of the Presbyterian, was to many Social Gospelers simply "the result of unfavorable social conditions." The proponents of social Christianity, protested the editors of the Christian Reformed Banner, overlooked "the fearful results of the fall" and ignored the fact that people were alienated from God because of their sin. Because they depreciated the effects of sin in the world, conservative Presbyterians argued, some Social Gospelers were too sanguine about social progress. Rauschenbusch, for example, was "woefully mistaken," asserted a Southern Presbyterian in 1910, when he alleged that the many factors which had previously "neutralized the social efficiency of Christianity" had "strangely disappeared or weakened in modern life."

Conservative Presbyterians argued further that Social Gospelers minimized how important the power of the Holy Spirit and the regeneration of individuals were to the reforming of society. Instead, Greene argued, Gladden, Rauschenbusch, Batten and others tended to assume that restructuring society according to biblical blueprints would be sufficient to eradicate evil and insure social progress. To many Social Gospelers, social service was "the essence of Christianity rather than one of its fruits" and social amelioration rather than the preaching of the gospel was the primary task of the church. In hundreds of pulpits, Greene complained, improving society was stressed more than saving individuals. Many ministers seemed to consider social reforms to be more important than spiritual revivals. Criticizing the methods employed by Social Gospelers, Arnold Huijinga added in 1912 that Christianity had always worked primarily to reform society through regenerating individuals. The principal ills of society, Greene maintained, resulted from "human sin and selfishness;" the "chief remedy" to them was the "grace of God, not social reorganization."

In addition, some conservative Presbyterians protested that Social Gospelers placed too much emphasis on the role of both the church and state in improving social conditions and too little on the individual. To individuals, Greene contended, through their vocations and voluntary organizations belonged the work of social reform. It was the "function of the state only to protect him in, and of the church only to inspire him to, this work." The church as an institution had no biblical mandate to reform society. Attempting to do so was likely to produce division among members over political, economic and social issues and strategies and methods of reform and to divert the church from its primary tasks of worship, nurture and evangelism.

Many of the objections conservative Presbyterians raised against the Social Gospel amounted to a charge of improper emphasis. More significant to conservatives, and to become a greater source of conflict in the 1920s, was their
argument that the theological foundation of the movement was defective. The editors of the Presbyterian alleged that many Social Gospelers rejected the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, believed instead that people were basically good by nature and therefore did not sufficiently emphasize the need of regeneration. Many proponents of social Christianity mistakenly assumed that proper education and a healthy living environment by themselves could develop the innate potential and moral character of most people.\(^{43}\) Conservatives insisted that Social Gospelers displayed an alarming tendency to repudiate or minimize the fundamentals of the faith—the integrity and authority of the Bible, the deity of Christ, his substitutionary atonement as the only way of salvation and his bodily resurrection.\(^{44}\) Equally troubling, Presbyterian conservatives complained, was that some Social Gospelers claimed Biblical support for specific social and economic positions and measures when in fact there was none.\(^{45}\)

Conservative Presbyterians believed that many of the criticisms they made of the Social Gospel also applied to Christian socialism because most Christian socialists identified with the Social Gospel. They raised additional objections, however, to the effort to wed biblical teachings with socialist theory. One leading critic of Christian socialism was Charles R. Erdman. A theological conservative and premillennialist as was his father, William, who was long associated with the Niagara Bible Conference, Charles was one of the PCUSA members of the joint committee which wrote the United Declaration on Social Service. In addition, he chaired the denomination’s Standing Committee on Home Missions which was very important in shaping the PCUSA’s social ministry during the 1910s.\(^{46}\) Erdman contributed an article entitled “The Church and Socialism” to The Fundamentals (1910–1915), a twelve volume series written by prominent Protestant conservatives from Great Britain, Canada and the United States to defend their understanding of biblical orthodoxy and sound moral and social practices.\(^{47}\) “The sudden rise of socialism,” Erdman declared, was “the most surprising and significant movement of the age.” Only a few years earlier it had been the dream of a few fanatics; by 1910 it embodied “the creed and hope of intelligent millions.” Socialists and Christian congregations protested against many of the same social and economic evils. Some forms of socialism, however, were antagonistic to Christianity and even sought to become a substitute for religion. Meanwhile, some Christians strove to forge the gospel and socialism into an effective tool for reforming society.\(^{48}\)

Erdman, Greene and others objected to socialism in general and Christian socialism in particular on a number of theological, economic, political and practical grounds. As always for conservatives, biblical and theological considerations were of utmost importance. Erdman repudiated the idea that “Jesus Christ was a Socialist and that the early Church was established on Socialist principles.” He rejected the argument that socialism was “merely the application of Christianity to industrial problems,” that ministers were obligated to preach socialism and that the primary task of the church was to “support Socialism as the one cure for all existing social evils.”\(^{49}\) Erdman and many other conservatives insisted that these contentions could not be supported scripturally. The basis for socialism in the New Testament was remote, argued George Greene; at best, socialism could be deduced from the principle of brotherly love.\(^{50}\) Many of its presuppositions and positions, William Greene added, had no biblical foundation.\(^{51}\) Erdman claimed that Jesus could not be identified “with any social theory or political party.” Christ strongly advocated brotherhood,
love and justice; but to suggest that these virtues were "the monopoly of any one political or economic party" was "presumptuous." Proving that Jesus supported the collective ownership of property, Erdman declared, was impossible. The communism of the early church provided no support for creating a socialist society, Erdman continued, because it was "local, voluntary, occasional, [and] temporary." The sharing of all things in common by some Christians in Jerusalem was "prompted by love and designed to meet a special crisis," but it was not "established as an abiding principle of Church life."

Because much of what socialism dealt with was not directly discussed in the Scriptures and because few ministers had sufficient education in sociology, economics and political theory to be able to evaluate socialism adequately, some conservatives contended, they should not preach or lecture about it. There was so little biblical teaching on the subject, Erdman maintained, that the church had "no right to ally itself with any political party, or to commit itself to any one form of social or industrial organization." Government ownership or control of the public school system, the postal service, railroads, mines, public utilities and even factories, Erdman alleged, did not "involve questions of religion, but of expediency and political wisdom," questions with which the church had nothing to do. Therefore, church members were free "to adopt or reject Socialism." A person could be "an ardent Socialist and a sincere Christian" or "a true Christian and a determined opponent of socialism."

Despite making this argument, Erdman strongly opposed use of the term "Christian Socialism" because it implied, "whether intentionally or not, that other Socialists are not Christians, and that other Christians should be Socialists." Moreover, as expressed by most of its advocates, Christian socialism was neither Christian nor socialism; it was "disappointing to Christians and irritating to Socialists." Christians disliked it because it minimized or denied such foundational biblical tenets as "the incarnation, the virgin birth, the atonement, the resurrection, justification by faith, the work of the Holy Spirit [and] the second coming of Christ." Other socialists disdained it because few Christian socialists denied the right to private capital or insisted upon the "collective ownership of the instruments of production." Because Christianity was a religion and socialism was a political and economic theory no union between them should be attempted. Like oil and water, they simply did not mix. They had different agendas and emphases; while Christianity strove to care for souls and create better people, Arnold Huizinga argued, socialism strove to improve economic conditions.

Because of what they considered to be the political, economic and practical
difficulties involved in socialism, many conservative Presbyterians went further than Erdman and argued that all Christians should reject socialism. Because socialism would give too much power to the state, William Greene declared, Christians must oppose it. Socialism substituted “state control for providence” and put “society in the place of God.” To Greene, recent increases in state regulation and intervention threatened to lead to “worship of the state” and suppression of individual initiative. Moreover, if the state owned the means of production, what was to prevent it from assuming supremacy in other spheres of life as well? Such a development would destroy the balance of power among societal institutions and increase the state’s ability to oppress its citizens.

Presbyterian conservatives argued that socialists also misunderstood the function of the state. The state’s task was to ensure justice in society, not to dispense benevolence. The state had no responsibility to divide wealth evenly among its citizens. Assistance to the poor and infirm should be provided through congregations and other private agencies, not through the state.

Socialism also rested upon economic fallacies, conservative Presbyterians proclaimed. Socialists attempted to override economic laws ordained by God, which was immoral. “The law of supply and demand must regulate wages,” William Greene argued. Trying to fix wages on any other basis was “fundamentally dishonest and eventually impossible.” The right to own private property was guaranteed in the Bible. Socialism, insisted George Greene, violated the “God-given instinct of acquisitiveness” and therefore was a “reform against nature.” By thwarting this inherent human desire, socialism “would paralyze ambition and ingenuity.”

Given these considerations, conservative Presbyterians argued, socialism was “visionary, impractical...impossible..., irreligious, unjust and absurd.” It simply would not work. Even if it could be implemented it would stifle human incentive to work, reduce productivity, cause great discord among people and give the state too much power. Socialism was irreligious because it “would put the state in the place of God and would have the government override providence.” It was unjust because it proposed to treat people with different levels of ability and achievement “as if they were equals.” It was absurd because it strove to improve social conditions without improving human beings. Based upon this analysis, Greene sharply disagreed with Charles Stelzle that Christians could be socialists if they were convinced that socialism was “morally and economically sound.”

Erdman objected even more strongly to what he called “popular socialism.” More than a scientific economic theory, popular socialism was a social creed which promised material benefits to all, bitterly opposed Christianity and offered itself as a substitute religion. In addition, the socialist movement falsely accused the church of supporting capitalism completely and uncritically, did not distinguish between honest and benevolent capitalists and dishonest and exploitative ones, failed to recognize that its own underlying principles of justice, fraternity and charity were taken from Christianity and incorrectly placed physical needs above spiritual ones.

The best service socialism had rendered, Erdman concluded, was to point out “the social wrongs and cruelties of the age,...the defects of the present economic system,...the special privilege and entrenched injustice [and the] prevalent poverty,...hunger, and despair.” It challenged the church to “proclaim more insistently the social principles of Christ,” especially that wealth was a trust from God and that the state was a divinely ordained institution, to demand
that its members practice the social teachings of Jesus more consistently and to explain more clearly and convincingly the nature of God’s kingdom and the end of the age.71

In addition to criticizing the Social Gospel and socialism, conservative Presbyterians also complained that denominational agencies, seminaries, congregations and ministers were too heavily influenced by sociological theories and methodologies and sought to analyze this discipline in light of the Scriptures. Articles in the Presbyterian in 1914 proclaimed “Sociology Over-emphasized” and “Social Service Overdone.”72 Theories of social service were confounding the church and misdirecting its work, wrote the editors of the Presbyterian. Sociologists “had labored hard and spoken learnedly to convince the Church [that] improving the environment would automatically improve people.” They sought to redeem society instead of individuals “by education and legislation, by economics and eugenics, by philanthropy and survey.”73 As a result of such arguments, many Americans were ascribing too much power to the environment and minimizing the importance of human character and the ability of people to shape their surroundings.74 Moreover, the influence of sociology led some to stress the body over the soul and to make interpersonal relations more important than a person’s relationship to God.75

The prominent role the church was giving to sociology led William Greene to contribute “The Bible as the Textbook in Sociology” to the Princeton Theological Review in 1914. In this article he sought to clarify the conservative Presbyterian understanding of this discipline. Greene argued that the Bible was as “truly the authority in sociology” as it was in “dogmatics and ethics.” This was so because sociology was implicated in and the result of theology and ethics, the Scriptures contained “much information” and “much instruction” which was “directly sociological” and the Bible was “the final revelation of the will of God for man in his present state of existence.” In defending this position, Greene countered several objections, most notably the argument that the Bible said nothing directly about many specific contemporary social issues such as strikes or women’s suffrage. While this was true, Greene argued, God had established “principles and limitations of universal and perpetual obligation” which served to guide Christians in combating the social problems of their era.76

To Presbyterian conservatives, most Social Gospelers, Christian socialists and sociologists misconstrued the mission of the church and focused too much on changing the environment and too little on changing individuals. Consequently, conservative Presbyterians frequently attempted to delineate and defend what they believed to be the biblical view of the role of the church in the world. William Greene identified three different understandings of how the mission of the church related to ameliorating social conditions. One position, advocated by Walter Rauschenbusch and Charles Macfarland, maintained that social reconstruction was always the primary mission of the church and that congregations should therefore work directly as organizations to solve social problems. A second position asserted that the principal task of the church was usually to convert and disciple individuals, but in times of crisis (as in the early twentieth century) congregations should shift their focus to social ministry. A third position insisted that no matter what the condition of society the mission of the church was not “fundamentally or even chiefly social”; instead it was “primarily and characteristically individual and above all religious.” This third alternative, Greene contended, was the most biblical. The church must concentrate on worship, Bible study, edu-
cation and evangelism because the spiritual dimension of life was by far the most important. This task was so demanding that it left “neither time or [sic] energy for anything else.” Moreover, congregations were not qualified to engage directly in social service because the problems of society were too complex. If denominations and congregations became identified with political parties or benevolent organizations they would lose their distinctive mission and thereby lessen their “efficiency as a spiritual force.” By turning aside from its “uniquely high and indispensable vocation” of proclaiming “first and always ...the gospel of salvation of the whole man on account of the blood and through the Spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ” to a social ministry, Greene warned, the church would actually have less impact upon society. If it made social reform its primary function the church would be shorn of its strength.

If churches as organizations should not support political parties or take sides on political issues or engage directly in efforts to reform society, how should they seek to improve social and economic conditions? While conservative Presbyterians frequently confessed that social service and evangelism were “indivisible,” they emphasized the latter. They were convinced that society would be reformed only if the gospel of salvation were effectively proclaimed. Converting individuals was the “indispensable condition” for “all genuine and permanent betterment or social reform.” The best way for the church to reform society was by concentrating its efforts on evangelism. The “crux of the social question,” asserted Erdman, was “how can individuals be regenerated and perfected?” The salvation of individuals “must precede and underlie every effort for social betterment”; the “acceptance of the full Gospel of Christ” would “lead to service in every sphere of social need.” The Christian principle and effort, declared Arnold Huizinga, had always been to improve society through saving individuals. The radical change wrought in individuals, added W. H. Marsh, was the “source of the transformation of society.” It was not enough, of course, simply to redeem individuals. Converts must be nurtured and discipled in the faith, educated about social problems and inspired to work to change them. James Howerton, a professor of philosophy at Washington and Lee University, argued that as such Christians grew in numbers they would have greater influence upon society and society itself would increase in moral insight so that social evils which once were justified or condoned would instead be condemned. If their working and living conditions were improved and various social evils were removed, people could respond more readily to the gospel message. Thus social amelioration was a valuable adjunct to evangelism, but it clearly played a secondary role for most conservative Presbyterians.

The church must not be converted into a political party, conservative Presbyterians averred, and as an organization it must not promote political or economic reforms. It should, however, encourage such reforms by helping to shape the “character, principles and motives” of those called to serve God in business, society and government. Congregations could not accomplish this task simply as a “side effect of saving souls.” They must teach Christians how to follow biblical principles in all areas of their lives. The primary role of the church in social reform, William Greene argued, was to serve “as a generator of moral and spiritual energy.” While the church in its organized capacity should not be involved in social reform, he proclaimed, individual Christians should be. The church should confine itself to the sphere of the Spirit, Greene declared, but Christians should “live the gospel in every sphere” in order to transform
them. Howerton urged ministers and lay people to “form voluntary and inter-denominational organizations to unify and systematize their work for social reforms.” The 1914 PCUSA General Assembly challenged Christians to work through such agencies to pass better laws and remedy social ills in order to enhance the quality of American life. These social improvements, most conservative Presbyterians believed, would in turn stimulate the practice of virtue in society and make it easier for individuals to embrace Christianity.

Closely connected to the question of how denominations and congregations should promote social reform was another question: what role should the clergy play? In the early years of the twentieth century several different answers were given to this question. Some politicians, judges and academicians counseled ministers to “stick to their Bibles” and leave political, legal and social issues to the specialists. They advised the clergy to “confine their remarks to religion” and not to meddle in public affairs. Because ministers had substantial public influence but lacked specialized knowledge, a political scientist from Oberlin argued, they should not become involved in political debates or use the power of their pulpits to urge their congregations to undertake specific political action. Their influence on these matters was so great that ministers often inadvertently prevented “scientific theories from receiving” adequate “popular attention and consideration.”

In large part, conservative Presbyterians agreed with this argument. As one of them wrote, the clergy had “no commission to put the affairs of society right, or to eradicate the evils in this present naughty world.” It was a miserable mistake for ministers to fail to put their best energies into evangelism and discipleship and “instead to compete with journalists and politicians in guiding some project for social reform.” Greene expressed the most extreme position when he agreed with W.M. Clow of Scotland that the minister must not use “his pulpit or his hour of public worship to discuss public social questions.” Moreover, he should not even discuss these questions outside the pulpit “lest he shut men’s minds against his message, and lest he lessen his time and energy for his unique and more urgent business” of preaching “the everlasting grace of God.”

All Presbyterian conservatives agreed that by concentrating on “the great evangelical doctrine of sin and grace” sermons could best promote both private and public morality. Some conservatives also urged ministers to preach on the moral questions involved in political issues and to discuss specifically how Christians should conduct themselves in the fields of business, commerce, politics, education and society. Even Rauschenbusch argued that ministers should not usually become involved in partisan politics and should attempt to shape public opinion on issues before they became hotly debated political questions. Greene agreed with Rauschenbusch that denominations should take positions on the ethical aspects of proposed legislation, civic regulations and government administration. He and other Reformed Christians disagreed, however, with the prominent Social Gospeler about whether ministers could properly throw “themselves completely into political or social agitation” as Charles Parkhurst, pastor of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church, had done in his fight against Tammany Hall in New York City.

Conservative Presbyterian criticism of the emphasis on social service within Protestantism in general and their denomination in particular clearly influenced actions taken by the General Assembly of the PCUSA during the 1910s. The denomination restructured its agencies during the decade, giving social ministry a much lower priority. The Gen-
eral Assembly Minutes reported little about the denomination's social reform efforts after 1913. In 1917 the Assembly did "authorize the creation of a new Social Service Commission that was to report directly to it." Its report entitled "Upon the Church and Industry," presented to the Assembly in 1920, "reaffirmed and amplified the Presbyterian Social Creed adopted in 1910 to make it relevant to recent developments." That same year Robert E. Speer, a theological moderate who served as the secretary of the PCUSA Board of Foreign Missions for forty-six years, was elected president of the Federal Council of Churches. During these years, however, most conservative Presbyterians became even more critical of the theological basis of the Social Gospel, even more committed to the spiritual mission of the church, less interested in social reform efforts and less willing to cooperate with persons holding other theological positions. The forces which would erupt into conflagration in the mid 1920s were already smoldering as the decade began, in part a result of differing interpretations of the social ministry of the church. Its increasing preoccupation with doctrinal disputes and its struggle to hold its different factions together led the PCUSA to curb further its social ministry during the 1920s. In the years following 1920 most theologically conservative pastors and members of the denomination continued to raise similar concerns about social action and to focus their attention almost entirely upon evangelism, nurturing believers and church growth. Except for their involvement with a few social issues such as abortion and pornography, this pattern is still evident among most evangelical ministers and members of the Presbyterian Church (USA) today.

NOTES


"While historians disagree considerably about what Progressivism was, most of them use this term to describe a movement which attempted to reform American society during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Although historians have not discovered "a typical progressive profile," a "coherent political agenda" or even a "definable ethos," they generally agree on several points about Progressivism. It was a political response to the industrialization, urbanization, immigration, class divisions and economic concentration of the early twentieth century. The journalists, professors, ministers, and politicians who led the movement were not radicals or revolutionaries but reformers. Their goal was to ameliorate the social ills of capitalism, not to abolish this economic system. Disagreement about Progressivism arises in large part because it was never a "cohesive movement with a unified program" but rather was a "diverse array of reform activities that sometimes overlapped and sometimes diverged sharply." Some progressives sought primarily to regulate businesses, while others worked to pass legislation to protect workers and the urban poor. Some focused on reforming the structure of government, while others fought to restrict immigration, abolish prostitution and institute prohibition. As a result, progressives aligned in shifting coalitions that united and divided differently on different issues. Daniel Rodgers argues convincingly that progressives drew on three distinct groups of ideas to voice their discontentment and their vision of a better society: the rhetoric of antimonopolism, of social bonds, and of social efficiency. Theodore Roosevelt's New Nationalism and Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom sought in different ways to carry out the Progressive crusade to regulate corporations, reform the political process, improve the lives of laborers and the poor and curb social evils. See Paul S. Boyer et al., The Enduring Vision; A History of the American People, Vol. 2 (Lexington, MA, 1990), pp. 760-786; Daniel T. Rodgers, "In Search of Progressivism," in Stanley I. Kutler and Stanley N. Katz, eds., "The Promise of American History: Progress and Prospects," in Reviews in American History, 10 (Dec. 1982), pp. 113-132; Peter G. Filene, "An Obituary for the "Progressive Movement,"" American Quarterly, 22 (1970), pp. 20-34; John W. Chambers II, The Tyranny of Change: America in the Progressive Era, 1900-1917 (New York, 1980); John D.


25 Mr. Stelzle and Sociology," Presbyterian, July 16, 1913, pp. 3–4.

26 Minutes of the General Assembly* (1913), pp. 297–298. The Bureau "was accused of misappropriation of funds, malfeasance, and mismanagement," but "an investigating committee found these charges to be ungrounded and suggested that the problem resulted from a difference with regard to methods rather than expenditures." The quotation is from Gorrell, *The Age of Social Responsibility,* p. 220; see *Minutes of the General Assembly* (1913), pp. 178–179.


29 Ibid., pp. 54–55.


31 Minutes of the General Assembly* (1914), p. 56.
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22 See Earl William Kennedy, "William Brenton Greene's Treatment of Social Issues," Journal of Presbyterian History, 40 (1962), pp. 92–112. Greene wrote no books and only a few articles. His position on social issues is primarily expressed in more than 100 book reviews he wrote for the Princeton Theological Review. As Kennedy correctly points out, Greene's social views are based not simply on a conservative capitalist response to the Social Gospel and Progressivism but also on a historic Calvinist understanding of society as organic and interdependent (p. 93).


24 Benjamin Paist, Jr., PTR, 10 (April 1912), p. 352.


26 See, for example, Charles M. Cantrall, PTR, 13 (Jan. 1915), p. 152.


28 Greene, PTR, 5 (Oct. 1907), p. 699. Some conservative Presbyterians disagreed with this argument. James Howerton argued that the redemptive process God had "supervened upon human history" sought the "salvation not only of individuals but of society" (The Church and Social Reforms [New York, 1913], pp. 50–51). Speaking for the National Reform Association, a movement consisting primarily of Reformed Christians established in 1864 to amend the United States Constitution to acknowledge Christ's supreme authority over the nation and to work for many social reforms, Sylvester Scovel declared that Christianity afforded "the only adequate solution for all social problems"; its "design was to reach and save all men in all the relationships of life..." (The World–Wide Meaning and Mission of National Reform, in Report of the World's Christian Citizenship Conference [Pittsburgh, 1911], p. 15).

29 Greene, PTR (1912), p. 511.


32 E.C. Gordon, "Christianity and the Social Crisis," Presbyterian of the South, March 9, 1910, p. 292. Of all the groups of conservative Presbyterians, pastors and members of the Presbyterian Church in the United States were the least receptive to the Social Gospel. They rejected the Social Gospel because of its connection with liberal theology and their traditional emphasis on the spirituality of the church. Moreover, the efforts of the Social Gospel centered on remedying industrial and urban problems which were much less significant in the predominantly agrarian and rural South. See Peter H. Hobbie, "Walter Lingle, Presbyterians, and the Enigma of the Social Gospel in the South," American Presbyterians, 69 (Fall 1991), pp. 191–202.


35 Greene, PTR, 10 (April 1912), p. 360.


37 See Erdmann, PTR, 9 (April 1911), p. 364.


39 Greene, PTR (1907), p. 701.


41 On this issue, see, for example, Greene, PTR, 3 (July 1905), p. 514; Greene, PTR, 11 (Jan. 1913), pp. 166–167; Greene, PTR, 11 (July 1913), p. 548; Greene, PTR, 12 (July 1914), pp. 519–520; and William H. Roberts, "What the Presbyterian Brotherhood Stands For," in Presbyterian Brotherhood, pp. 39–40.

42 See Greene, PTR (1912), p. 516.

43 "The New Birth and Education," Presbyterian, June 18, 1913, p. 4.


46 On Erdmann's life and his convictions about social issues, see Bradley J. Longfield, The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates (New York: Oxford, 1991), pp. 128–161. Longfield discusses Erdmann's theological heritage and orientation, his struggles with J. Gresham Machen at Princeton Theological Seminary (Erdmann accepted the newly created chair of practical theology there in 1906), and his role as the moderator of the pivotal 1925 General Assembly. As Longfield shows, Erdmann was convinced that America's destiny and strength was "inseparably connected with the knowledge of God and obedience to his laws." In the years following 1910 Erdmann promoted strict observance of the Sabbath and faithful practice of family worship and fought against drunkenness and divorce. He passionately believed, as did other conservative Presbyterians, that America's Christian civilization could be preserved only by greater efforts in evangelism, religious education, and godly living. Speaking for all of them, he wrote in his commentary on the book of Acts, "Ethics and social reform are absolutely essential parts of the gospel message, but they must not supplant and can only follow the proclamation of a living and divine Christ, through faith in whom alone men receive in all fullness the gift of his Spirit." The first quotation is from Charles R. Erdmann, "Bible Teachings about Education," Presbyterian, 21 (April 1921), p. 12; the second is from Erdmann, The Acts: An Exposition (Philadelphia, 1920), p. 132.


49Ibid., p. 99.


53Ibid., p. 98. Under this arrangement, Erdman explained, “no one was compelled to divide or sell his property; not all adopted the practice, but many like Mary the mother of Mark kept their homes in the city. Furthermore, this Communism was practiced only for a time.” The communal life of the apostles was “extraordinary,” argued William Greene, and therefore was not a “legitimate example.” The law of private property, by contrast, was “divinely constituted” in the Eighth Commandment. See William B. Greene, Jr., PTR, 2 (Oct. 1904), p. 705. Nor could the Old Testament prophetic tradition, from which Rauschenbusch and other Christian socialists drew much of their inspiration, properly be used to support socialism. While the prophets denounced oppression, Greene argued, they did not call for a fundamental reordering of society. “Just because the prophets taught social morality,” he added, did not mean that “they or we should teach socialism” given its many flaws. There were much more biblically sound and practically effective ways for Christians to follow the example of the prophets and condemn exploitation and work to achieve social justice.

54Greene, PTR (1907), p. 701; James Howerton, The Church and Social Reforms, p. 106.

55Erdman, “The Church and Socialism,” p. 100.

56Ibid.

57Ibid., p. 101.


60Greene, “The Bible as the Text-book,” p. 22.


62Greene, PTR (1907), pp. 701-702.

63Greene, PTR (1915), p. 130.

64Ibid.


70Erdman, “The Church and Socialism,” pp. 103-104.

71Ibid., pp. 104-108. Presbyterian conservatives frequently asserted that the church should not recognize distinctions of wealth and class, proclaimed that Christianity had promoted social equality and engaged in some efforts to aid the working class. They insisted that living by Christian principles of industry, fidelity, thrift and honesty enabled people to increase their wealth and power, and they argued that not all capitalists were “guilty of robbery and greed.” They generally supported the right of laborers to organize and strike. Strongly influenced by their own socioeconomic situation, they tended to use middle class attitudes, values and behaviors as a standard for judging both the rich and the poor. They warned against the perils of wealth and the pitfalls of poverty. Poverty, in their judgment, resulted more from personal flaws than from structural conditions. They argued that paupers must be required to work so that they could gain self-esteem and would not become dependent on society. See Erdman, “The Church and Socialism,” pp. 102-103, 105, 107; Greene, “The Bible as a Text-book,” p. 14; Greene, “The Church and the Social Question,” p. 389; Howerton, The Church and Social Reforms, pp. 45, 60-69, 125-127; Minutes of the General Assembly (1912), p. 295; and William Sloan, Social Regeneration: the Work of Christianity (Philadelphia, 1902), pp. 73-77. The quotation is from Erdman, p. 103.


73Alertness and Fidelity,” Presbyterian, July 30, 1913, p. 3.

74Personal Responsibility,” Presbyterian, Feb. 25, 1914, p. 5; Huizinga, “Social or Individual Regeneration?” p. 49. “Perhaps, no doctrine is more popular among a large class of earnest people,” wrote William Greene, than the belief that the “social environment absolutely determines the man” (Greene, PTR [1916], p. 512).

75“Missions and Evangelism,” Presbyterian, Jan. 7, 1915, p. 3. Of what service was “culture, economics or sociology,” asked the editors, if people were lost? “Until men’s salvation [was] secured, all else [was] in vain.” Cf. J. Gresham Machen, Christianity and Culture,” PTR, 11 (Jan. 1913), pp. 1-15.


78Greene, PTR (1912), p. 516. There was some truth to the contention, added James Howerton, that attempts of churches to deal with economic and political problems diverted them from their “mission of preaching the Gospel and saving souls,” divided them even more and aroused fears that they wanted to usurp civil authority (The Church and Social Reforms, p. 73).

79William B. Greene, Jr., PTR (1911), p. 177.


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