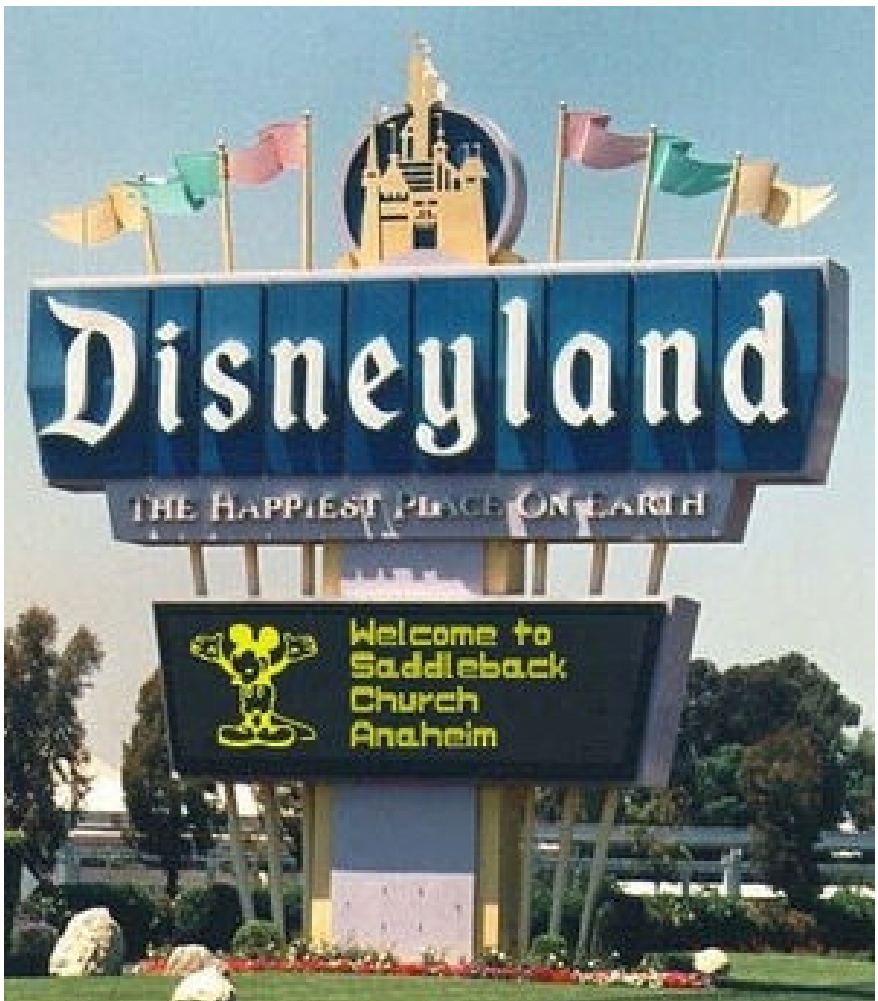


# The Social Gospel

(by George Battey)



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# THE SOCIAL GOSPEL

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## **Galatians 1:6-10**

6 I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a **different gospel**,

7 which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert **the gospel of Christ**.

8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach **any other gospel** to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed.

9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches **any other gospel** to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.

10 For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ.

Verse 6 speaks of people being "called into the grace of Christ." That's the gospel of Christ. It originated with God. It pleases God (v10). It saves men (1 Cor 15:1-2).

Verse 6 also speaks of "a different gospel." This is a gospel but it is of a different nature than the gospel of Christ. The apostles did not preach this gospel. This other gospel originated with men (vv8-9). It seeks to please men (v10). The social gospel is a different gospel than the gospel of Christ. This study is about the social gospel.

## **THE SOCIAL GOSPEL**

**Social Gospel** – "liberal movement in American Protestantism, prominent in the late 19th century, that sought to apply Christian principles to a variety of social problems engendered by industrialization. Its founders and leaders included clergymen Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch ..." (Encarta Encyclopedia)

Gladden is often called the "father of the social gospel." Gladden and Rauschenbusch felt churches were wrong for concerning themselves with only the spiritual side of mankind. They felt that if religion was worth anything, it must minister to the "whole man" rather than just his spiritual side.

## **THE "WHOLE MAN" CONCEPT**

The "whole man" concept was emphasized. Here's how the concept works. The "whole man" has:

- Spiritual problems.
- Financial problems.
- Marital problems.
- Psychological problems.
- Occupational problems.

This "whole man" has many needs, so the church must minister to all those needs – not just spiritual needs. Churches which focus on spiritual needs only are not meeting the needs of the "whole man."

## **FAMOUS SOCIAL GOSPELERS**

Perhaps you never heard of Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. However, other men took the idea of the social gospel and made the ideas well known.

- Salvation Army
- YMCA
- Martin Luther King, Jr. (King had read Walter Rauschenbusch's book Christianity and the Social Crisis. He said this book "*left an indelible imprint on my thinking.*")
- 
- Bill Hybels (Willow Creek)
- Rick Warren (Saddleback)

## **WILLOW CREEK CHURCH**

Willow Creek Community Church is an example of the social gospel church and is setting the standards for church growth.

We are all concerned about church growth. We get discouraged because not one congregation among us really seems to be growing much. Baptizing a person who is completely unaffiliated with the church seems to be a rare thing. Retaining such people after they are baptized is also rare and difficult. However, Willow Creek doesn't have any problems with church growth.

- Rented a movie theater (from which the name Willow Creek was taken),
- They launched the church on October 12, 1975 with an initial crowd of 125.
- In three years, attendance grew to 2,000 people.

- Today it has a combined weekend attendance of between 16,000 and 17,000. (Ferguson)

They are busting out the seams. People are flocking to Willow Creek and they love it.

### **Why are they growing?**

**Q:** What are they doing that is making them grow?

**A:** They are preaching the social gospel. They are ministering to the "whole man" and not just the spiritual man.

"Pastor" Bill Hybels took a three-man survey team through the community, asking those people who admitted to being unchurched and unsaved, why they did not attend church: *"What would it take to get you to come to church?"* The results:

- People didn't like being bugged for money.
- They found church boring, predictable, and routine.
- They always left church feeling guilty (the Christian message too negative with "sin" etc.).
- They didn't think the church was **relevant** to their lives.

Hybels solution was to program the church services toward non-believers so newcomers would feel welcome, unthreatened, entertained and they want the church to be "relevant." By *relevant*, the unchurched people are referring to Bible doctrines that seem old, static and irrelevant to people living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Irrelevant issues would include things like:

- The Godhead
- The plan of salvation
- Issues of morality
- Scriptural worship

In other words, these issues have been preached and debated for years and Generation X is tired of the same bickering and fussing over such issues that they consider irrelevant. They want things that are truly relevant. Willow Creek has learned: If you want the church to grow, you give the people "relevant teaching." You preach a series of "How to" lessons on things the people "need" to know.

- How to have job satisfaction.
- How to overcome disillusionment.
- How to be happy.
- How to improve your home.
- How to manage your time.
- How to be a friend.
- How to Make Your Marriage Sizzle.

These are "relevant" issues.

### **Meet "perceived needs."**

Willow Creek meets every possible need one can think of. In Bill Hybels' 1990 message, *"Who We Are At Willow Creek,"* he writes:

"We have Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Narcotics Anonymous, Emotions Anonymous, [Debtors Anonymous, Over Eaters Anonymous,

Incest Survivors Anonymous, Sex Addicts Anonymous, S-Anon (spouses of Sex Addicts Anonymous), and Nam Vets Alcoholic Anonymous] you-name-it anonymous, I think we have it here. And we have a counseling center, and a food pantry, and a benevolent board that counsels people that are hurting financially; an employment counseling ministry; we are committed to helping a church in the inner-city; a hospital in Haiti; projects through World Vision; and other ministries [one even for women going through menopause]. I believe we are called to arrest the social decay we see happening around us." (Hybels)

Therefore, the whole man is ministered to. These are called **perceived needs**. Hybels also said this:

**"The unimpressive truth is that we made the whole thing up as we went along, trusting the Holy Spirit for each next step,** rarely seeing which direction the path ahead would take. It was only by following the voice of God—by listening for his particular call to us—that we could move forward with confidence." (McDade)

Christians should know the Holy Spirit today leads, guides, and directs only through His written word, the Bible, (Eph 6:17; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Therefore, when one takes the Holy Spirit out of this statement, the only thing left is this:

**"The unimpressive truth is that we made the whole thing up as we went along ..."**

## **SADDLEBACK COMMUNITY CHURCH**

The Saddleback Community Church in Lake Forest, CA is another example of a social gospel church. "Pastor" Rick Warren started saddleback.

- He is the author of The Purpose-Driven Church and The Purpose-Driven Life.
- The Purpose-Driven Life has sold 4.5 million copies as of 2003.
- Warren has trained 300,000 pastors from 100 countries and from over 63 denominations in his church-growth seminar. ("A Visit"; Costella)
- He was trained as a Southern Baptist and speaks at the Southern Baptist conferences.

Warren has been called "America's Pastor." His church is thoroughly committed to the social gospel. Here are some things taught by Rick Warren in the "Building a Purpose-Driven Church" seminar:

### **1) A contemporary worship service must replace the traditional service.**

The church service must be non-threatening, familiar and comfortable to the "seeker" (the unsaved visitor).

### **2) The dress must be casual.**

The typical "Saddleback Sam" is classified as a "yuppie." (Costella) This yuppie dresses up for work all week, and he wants to "dress down" on the weekends. (Saddleback Sam's likes and dislikes are what determine the style of the church service.)



Attendees and church staff alike shun any ties, suits and dresses. Warren, dressed in a casual shirt, khakis and loafers told his seminar audience:

"Get comfortable. This is as dressed up as I get in this church. My idea of winter is I put on socks, and obviously I don't think it's winter yet." (Costella)

### 3) **The music must be contemporary.**

The music is instrumental of course – a "given." Not only must the lyrics of the music be recent, but also the style of music should be that which the unsaved hears on a daily basis. Saddleback's sound system, band, singers and presentation would rival any rock concert. Warren stated that one of the first things a church should do is "replace the organ with a band." He said:

"I passed out a three-by-five card to everybody in the church, and I said, "You write down the call letters of the radio station you listen to." I wasn't even asking unbelievers. I was asking the people in the church, "What kind of music do you listen to?" When I got it back, I didn't have one person who said, "I listen to organ music." Not one. I didn't have a single person who said, "I listen to huge choirs on the radio." Not one. In fact, it was 96-97% adult contemporary, middle-of-the-road pop. It wasn't heavy metal rock, but it was something with a beat like you hear most commercials have today on television. So, we made a strategic decision that we are unapologetically a contemporary music church. And right after we made that decision and stopped trying to please everybody, Saddleback exploded with growth." (Costella)

#### 4) **Stop worrying about what the brotherhood thinks.**

Warren said, "We made that decision and stopped trying to please everybody." The "everybody" in that statement means the old-fashioned, traditional folks in the Southern Baptist brotherhood. In other words, Rick Warren is saying, "We made a decision to stop trying to please the brotherhood."

#### 5) **All messages delivered to the church must be only positive.**

One of the reasons people are unsaved and unchurched, Warren discovered, is that people do not like to go to church and be made to feel guilty. People want a "come-as-you-are" and find unconditional acceptance for who they are. They do not want to be preached to.

#### 6) **Meet the "perceived needs" of those who attend.**

Here are some of the "needs" people think they have which the church should solve for them:

- Financial problems
- Marital problems
- Problems with kids
- Problems with parents
- Psychological problems
- Sexual-identity problems

So ... the church should have a "ministry" for all these "perceived needs."

Interestingly, there is no ministry listed in Saddleback's bulletin that involved the taking the Gospel message out to the lost in the community. In fact, Warren scoffed at the idea of passing out tracts or going door-to-door since such old-fashion, outmoded forms of evangelism offends "Saddleback Sam".

## **7) A spirit of compromise must prevail.**

The compromise is on the part of the church leaders. The style of the worship and the evangelistic approach will be changed to attract the unchurched. There is no compromise, however, with the Southern Baptist brotherhood. Warren says this in his seminar:

"Be willing to let people leave the church. And I told you earlier the fact that people are gonna leave the church no matter what you do. But when you define the vision, you're choosing who leaves. ... And in your church, you may have to have some blessed subtractions before you have any real additions." (Costella)

## **8) An ecumenical spirit must dominate.**

In other words, there must be a commitment to Unity-In-Diversity. The church will not grow otherwise. People are tired of the fussing and fighting of bygone years over doctrinal issues. Warren said:

"It really doesn't matter your denomination, folks. We're all on the same team if you love Jesus." (Costella)

**9) The name of the church must be changed to something neutral.**

Denominational leaders have criticized Warren because he suggests denominational "labels" should be abolished (thus, Saddleback Community Church, the People's Church, Willow Creek Community Church, etc.). This is common to ecumenical endeavors that minimize doctrinal differences. Warren feels that terms like Baptist, Bible, Presbyterian, etc. might unduly offend some or unnecessarily narrow the group of those who would visit:

"The unchurched hang-ups determine our strategy. ... We found a hang-up about denominational labels. I went out. I went door to door and said, "What do you think of when I say 'Southern Baptist'?" They said, "You don't want to know." ... So, we chose a neutral name. Why? Well, it wasn't a theological decision, a compromise. It was an evangelistic strategy decision because we wanted to reach out." (Costella)

For many years we have been told that names are unimportant. Now, Rick Warren is telling us the name is extremely important.

**10) Convince the brotherhood that traditional preachers approve of your ministry.**

In Warren's church growth seminar he tells this story:

"Sitting catty-corner to me -- I was a little nervous about this -- sitting catty-corner to me was Dr. W. A. Criswell....for two hours I'm just telling what's going on at Saddleback. And here's W. A. Criswell in his seventies taking notes as fast as he could, writing things down, writing things down. And I

walked out of there, and I started crying. I was so humbled by that experience, and I realized why he was a great man. He'd never stopped learning." (Costella)

This story is not given to merely express Rick's humility. This was an effort to authenticate his church growth strategies by showing respected, traditional preachers in the Southern Baptist brotherhood accept these things.

## **WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS?**

**Q:** What's wrong with the social gospel?

### **1) The social gospel *CONFUSES INDIVIDUAL ACTION WITH CHURCH ACTION.***

The Bible clearly distinguishes between things that individuals may do and things that the church can do.

- It is false doctrine to argue: "If an individual Christian may do something, the church may do it."
- There is a distinction between individual action and church action (Mt 18:15-17).
- There are some things which only individuals may do (1 Tim 5:16).
- There are some things which only the church may do (1 Cor 11:33).
- As an individual person, a Christian provides material things to needy people as he has opportunity (Gal 6:10; Ja 1:27).
- The church supplies only certain material things for certain church members (1 Tim 5:16; Acts 6:1-7; 11:27-30).

- The church is never authorized to provide recreation or entertainment for anyone (Rom 14:17).

## 2) **The social gospel *PERVERTS THE TREASURY OF THE CHURCH.***

It is wrong and sinful to use the church treasury for non-members.

- The collection is "for the saints" (1 Cor 16:1-2).
- The apostles were sent to preach without money in their money belts (Mt 10:9-10).
- When these apostles arrived in town to preach, they had no money to offer.
- The citizens were expected to provide for the needs of the apostles (Mt 10:11-15).
- Church money was used only for church members (Acts 11:27-30).

## 3) **The social gospel perverts *THE NATURE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH.***

The church was given three jobs to perform:

- **Evangelism** (Mk 16:15-16; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Th 1:8; Acts 13:1-3, 26)
- **Edification** of its members (Eph 4:11-16; Acts 2:42)
- **Benevolence** of its members who have no other source of help (Acts 4:32-37; 6:1-7; Tit 3:14).

The social gospel distracts the church from fulfilling its jobs. The Devil hates the church, but ... if the church must continue, the next best thing (as far as the Devil is concerned) is to get the church sidetracked.

- Preachers are not to leave off preaching to "serve tables" (Acts 6:1-2).
- When "tables were served" it was only for certain widows in the church (Acts 6:1; 1 Tim 5:16).
- The Lord did not heal all the sick in the country (cf. Acts 3:1-2).
- The Lord did not feed all the hungry (Jn 6:26-27).
- The apostles did not heal all the sick (2 Tim 4:20).
- Neither the apostles nor the church fed all the hungry (1 Tim 5:16; 2 Th 3:10).
- The church was known for "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), not for providing social needs.

#### 4) **The social gospel RUINS EVANGELISM.**

The social gospel conditions the world to view the church in the wrong way. The church is viewed as:

- A supplier of money for the poor.
- A daycare center.
- An after-school center.
- A recreation center.

People come to the church only when they need money and only long enough to receive the money. When the flow of money quits, these people quit coming to church. The social gospel fills the church with people wanting only the material things the church can supply.

- Jesus refused to give bread to people coming just for bread (Jn 6:26-27).
- Paul warned that if sinners are converted based on any other foundation than the teachings of Jesus (1 Cor 3:11), the church of God would be defiled

(1 Cor 3:17) and the sinner himself would be lost (1 Cor 3:13-15).

People coming just for fun and food are coming for the wrong reason.

## 5) **The social gospel destroys *THE ONE HOPE* of the gospel.**

There is only "one hope" (Eph 4:4). There are at least three aspects of this one hope:

- A hope for the physical return of the Lord (Acts 1:11) ending all the material creation (2 Cor 4:18; 2 Pet 3:10).
- A hope for a physical, bodily resurrection from the dead (Acts 2:26; 24:15).
- A hope for a home in heaven (Mt 6:20; Col 1:5).

The social gospel causes people to "lay up treasures on earth" (Mt 6:19) hoping for "heaven on earth."

Sin is the cause of death, suffering, pain, sorrow, and scarcity. The effects of sin will not be destroyed until Jesus returns (1 Cor 15:24-26).

## 6) **The social gospel perverts *THE GOSPEL*.**

- Social gospel ⇒ only positive messages ... otherwise, Saddleback Sam won't come.
- Bible ⇒ "reprove, rebuke, exhort" (2 Tim 4:2).
- Apostles made people feel guilty (Acts 24:24-25).
- "I have not shunned to declare the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27).
- Do not subtract from the word (Rev 22:19).



- Joe Hisle, "People accuse us of preaching on questions no one is asking about. ..."

## 7) **The social gospel perverts *THE WORSHIP* of the church.**

The social gospel believes worship is unregulated and should appeal to the "seeker." In other words, the social gospel is man-centered. The Bible teaches that worship is regulated.

- Worship is supposed to be done "decently and in order" (1 Cor 14:40).
- Worship is to be based on the doctrines and commandments of God, not men (Mt 15:9).
- Worship is to be in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24) – indicating it is regulated by a pattern.
- Christians are instructed to follow the divine traditions delivered to the churches for worship (1 Cor 11:2) because those traditions were delivered by the Lord Himself (1 Cor 11:23).

The bible teaches worship is God-centered:

- Social gospel ⇒ worship centers around Saddleback Sam (man-centered).
- Bible ⇒ worship centers around God (God-centered – Mt 6:10; 26:42).

## 8) **The social gospel perverts *THE MUSIC* of the church.**

The social gospel teaches music in worship is completely unregulated. However, music in worship has always been regulated.

## OT

- Israel began with two silver trumpets – with instructions on exactly how to make them and who was allowed to play them (Num 10:1-8).
- King David by inspiration (2 Ch 29:25) made additional instruments (1 Ch 23:5) which were to be played by the Levites (1 Ch 16:1-6).
- Israel had to "make" instruments especially for praising God (Num 10:2; 1 Ch 23:5) and was not allowed to "borrow" instruments from heathen nations.

## NT

- Eph 5:19 – All Christians are told to "sing"
- **"Sing"** means **"make music with the voice"**
- Instruments are forbidden by silence (Col 3:17; Mt 15:9)
- Music "made with voice" ⇒ consist of words classified as "songs, hymns and spiritual songs" (Eph 5:19).
- Vocal instrumentation ⇒ unauthorized because not classified as "songs, hymns and spiritual songs."
- Handclapping ⇒ unauthorized because it's percussion instrumentation not classified as "sing" ("make music with voice")

### 9) **The social gospel destroys *THE UNITY* of the church.**

The social gospel is determined to march forward even if it means dividing the brotherhood.

- Christians are to "love the brotherhood" (1 Pet 2:17).
- Matters of permission are not to be pushed to the point of causing division (Rom 14:14-23).
- Requirements and prohibitions of the NT are not to be suspended because a perceived "good" is

accomplished by the social gospel methods. (I.e. The end does not justify the means – Rom 3:8).

- Unity is to be based on the truth revealed in the NT scriptures (Eph 4:3).

## 10) **The social gospel PROMOTES UNITY-IN-DIVERSITY.**

Look at those involved in the social gospel. They all have something in common.

- They all think there are "good people in all churches who will be saved."
- They all think there are some "good people," who don't go to any church, who will be saved.

In other words, they all believe in Unity-In-Diversity.

**Q:** Why?

**A:** Because when the church gives money to someone that indicates spiritual fellowship.

- The Greek word for "**contribution**" (κοινωνία) (Rom 15:26) is also translated "**fellowship**" (1 Jn 1:7).
- When the church gives its money to a preacher, it indicates that church is in spiritual fellowship with that preacher (Phil 4:15).
- When the church gives its money to needy people, it indicates that church is in spiritual fellowship with those needy people (2 Cor 8:1-4).

When a church buys into the social gospel, it is, at the same time, buying into open fellowship with false religions. The *Social-Gospel* and *Unity-In-Diversity* and the *Church-Growth-Movement* go hand in hand. They all go together. It is a package deal. Those among us who are advocating the social gospel are

also advocating open fellowship with digressives and denominations.

Jim Woodroof (a digressive) worries about the survival of the church:

"... experience with Christian university students over the last two decades leads me to believe that, for the most part, they are not interested in keeping alive the issues that have divided us in the past. Instead, they are looking for a basis of accepting those brothers who differ with them."

"... They do not share our finely-tuned positions. ... They deserve to have a biblical base upon which they can stand in their desire to accept those who differ with them. If we do not provide them this, I fear they will vote with their hearts and with their feet and abandon a movement they perceive to be sectarian." (Woodroof)

Woodroof is implying that the divisions in the church are not based on biblical principles, young people can see that, and they're disgusted with it. He's saying that if we do not provide these young people with a larger social network, these young people will "vote with their feet" and walk away from the church. (Bless Brother Woodroof for being so concerned for the good of the church that he advises we change the work and worship of the church and have Unity-In-Diversity with digressives and denominations.)

- The social gospel has a no faith in God's plans.
- God said the church will never be destroyed (Dan 2:44).

- God said "the gates of Hades will not prevail" against the church (Mt 16:18).

We do not have to lower standards in order for the church to survive.

- The Lord said, "strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life and there are few who find it" (Mt 7:14).
- But social gospel advocates want to widen the gate and make it the broad way.

### **IS THE SOCIAL GOSPEL IN OUR BROTHERHOOD?**

**Q:** Is the social gospel being promoted in our brotherhood?

**A:** Yes ... most definitely.

- A woman teaches publicly in the church building:  
*"God's Original Plan For Health And Healing"*
- Church carwashes
- G.E.D. programs
- Family Promise program
- Great Days Of Service program
- Dave Ramsey *Financial Peace* seminars
- Money given to non-members to help pay utilities and rent

All of these activities might possibly be acceptable if performed by Christians in the right way at the right time.

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**EXAMPLE:** A Christian could teach G.E.D. classes as an individual, but only as an individual.

The church cannot do this because the Lord never authorized the church to teach secular education.

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So there is a *time*, a *place*, and a *person* to tend to social matters. However, the purpose of the church is spiritual. When the church begins to participate in activities of the social gospel, two problems occur:

- First, the church is sinning for doing something it has no authorization to do (Col 3:17; 2 Jn 9). (Sin of commission)
- Second, because the church is doing something it has no authorization to do, it begins to neglect duties it should be doing. (Sin of omission)

The church is supposed to be preaching the gospel (1 Tim 3:15; Phil 2:16), but if the church becomes bogged down in secular education and other social issues, it has no time to do what it should be doing.

## **CONCLUSION**

Leaders of the church must learn the lesson of being informed:

### **Deuteronomy 13:12-14**

12 "If you hear someone in one of your cities, which the LORD your God gives you to dwell in, saying,

13 'Corrupt men have gone out from among you and enticed the inhabitants of their city, saying,

"Let us go and serve other gods" — which you have not known —

14 then **you shall inquire, search out, and ask diligently.** And if it is indeed true and certain ...

We have willful ignorance among many of our church leaders. They don't know what's going on in the brotherhood because *they don't want to know*. If they knew, they might have to stand against friends or relatives.

- The easy way out is to stay ignorant – willfully ignorant.
- Hide behind the excuse of not wanting to meddle or gossip.
- Excuse themselves by saying they're too busy with their own congregation to bother with events in other congregations.

Beware. What's going on in the brotherhood will eventually come into your own congregation.

Rick Warren led the following closing prayer:

"Thank you that there is a movement, a stealth movement, that's flying beneath the radar, that's changing literally hundreds, even thousands of churches around the world." (Costella)

Church leaders need to be aware of any "stealth" program intended to fly "beneath the radar" in order to avoid detection.

- All Christians are to be vigilant (alert) (1 Pet 5:8).
- Leaders are to be especially watchful (Tit 1:9-14).
- All Christians are to love the brotherhood (1 Pet 2:17) – indicating we should be watchful for the entire brotherhood, not just our own local congregation.

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# QUESTIONS

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- 1) What is the "whole-man" concept?
- 2) Name three well-known "social gospelers."
- 3) What sorts of topics are considered "relevant" and what are considered "irrelevant" at Willow Creek?
- 4) Who is Saddleback Sam?
- 5) Whom did Rick Warren decide to stop pleasing?
- 6) According to the Bible, what are the three works God gave the church to do?
- 7) Why is vocal instrumentation and handclapping wrong in worship?
- 8) Why is the social gospel always tied to the Unity-In-Diversity belief?

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