WASHINGTON GLADDEN

Prophet of the Social Gospel

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How many people in the room tonight have ever heard of Washington Gladden?

How many have heard of the Social Gospel?

Let me start by talking about Gladden himself, which, quite frankly, is a lot easier for me to do than explaining the Social Gospel, when we have several clergy folk present, and my own ecclesiastic credentials being limited, to say the least.

I'd thought, that there was a good chance that Gladden might have been one of the founding members of Kit-Kat in 1911, but, according to David Owen's little blue-book history of the Club, he apparently never was, which is too bad because, as I hope you'll all agree before the evening is over, he would have been a quintessential member.

Gladden was born in 1836, and grew up in Owego, New York, a town on the Susquehanna between Binghamton and Elmira. He went to Williams College, class of 1859, and he wrote the Williams alma mater, "The Mountains," which my Williams guests and I promise not to close tonight's meeting by singing. Gladden also wrote "Oh Master Let Me Walk With Thee," of which we could all presumably manage a good chorus. By the close of the 19th century, Washington Gladden was perhaps the most nationally known citizen of Columbus. He had been the pastor of the First Congregational Church since 1882, when the church was located across Broad Street from the state capitol, and he would continue at First Church, as its members still call it, until his death 18 years later in 1918.

In his lifetime, Gladden had 66 published books and pamphlets and 91 magazine and newspaper articles. He lectured all over the country and abroad, even though he wasn't thought to be a particularly good speaker. And his reputation for fairness was so widespread that he was invited by mayors and governors across the land to arbitrate major labor disputes.

He was elected president of the University of Illinois, but he chose to stay in Columbus. A few years later he almost became president of the Ohio State University, where former U.S. president Rutherford B. Hayes was chairman of the board. Why he didn't get the OSU position will come out later in the essay. In 1900 he was elected to Columbus city council despite the fact that he did no campaigning.

Of the eleven presidents of the United States in his lifetime beginning with Lincoln, Gladden had met at least eight, and he was on a first name basis (or its nineteenth century equivalent) with at least six. When he died in 1918, President Wilson wrote Gladden's family that "His death has impoverished us." Gladden would, of course, have known all the Ohio governors

since coming to Columbus, and he was particularly admiring of Governor Jacob Dolson Cox, under whose portrait downstairs we were having cocktails tonight. In contrast to President Grant, Cox was the kind of liberal Republican that Gladden liked. Gladden was a Republican, but, as he said, he wore his "Republican party uniform rather loosely." You'll understand this better as we go on.

I once asked John Buchanan, a former Kit-Katter and one of David VanDyke's predecessors at Broad Street Presbyterian, if he knew of any clergy persons today who were playing in big leagues of the secular world to the extent that Gladden had. After a long pause, John responded, "No white ones." He could think of Martin Luther King and Jesse Jackson and perhaps Bishop Tutu, but—apparently dismissing the leaders of the Christian right—he couldn't come up with any others. Washington Gladden was indeed a giant in his time.

So having now established that Gladden was an important historic Columbus figure, the question remains as to *why* he was so important—why did so many people, here and abroad, know and respect him. We'll get to that shortly, but first let me explain why Gladden is important to me and to our family. My great-grandfather, whose marble bust is in the library below, and his wife were staunch members of the First Congregational Church, so staunch, in fact, that they had named their eldest son, my grandfather, after Gladden's predecessor. When the First Church pastorate became vacant in 1882, Francis Sessions, a Columbus banker who had financed my great-grandfather in what later became The Jeffrey Manufacturing Co., headed the search committee for a new pastor. Having come himself from Springfield, Mass., where Gladden currently had a church, Sessions was aware of Gladden's growing national reputation, and he convinced the committee that Gladden should be their man. And so he was for the next thirty-six years, which is probably some kind of record in itself.

Gladden came to Columbus preaching what came to be widely known, both in his time and long thereafter in theological circles, as the Social Gospel. Gladden had a major influence on my great-grandfather, although the effect was probably much greater on her than he. And it was she who encouraged her husband to manage his growing young business according to the preachings of Gladden's Social Gospel. Jeffrey Manufacturing was one of the first shops of its kind to have a company hospital on site to deal with workplace accidents. It was one of the first to have its own building and loan society to encourage employees to own their own homes. It was one of the first to have an on site cafeteria. And it had a company store and bakery right up into my time that offered first class merchandise at good prices. I suppose this was paternalism, but it was paternalism at its very best. (Some of what I've just referred to is pictured and described in something we put together two years ago for a big family reunion. Those who're interested can pick up a copy on your way out tonight.)

I'm quite certain that these forward thinking human relations policies stemmed from seeds planted by Gladden's preachings of the Social Gospel, which were then watered and fertilized over the years by the founder's wife's continuing interest. That Jeffrey never had a labor union until the 1950s, and that even today there are people around town who recall that

"Jeffrey was a good place to work," are evidences of the Gladden influence.

Chuck Lazarus could no doubt tell us similar things about his family's company, and I wouldn't be surprised if he said that Gladden had also influenced his great-grandfather, even though he hadn't been going to Gladden's church.

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So let me move on now to the much thinner ice (for me!) of trying to explain the Social Gospel.

Gladden's principal biographer, Jacob Henry Dorn, said that: "Theological liberalism and the Social Gospel shared so completely a common ideology that it is often difficult in reading Gladden's sermons and books to decide whether his ideas belong more properly to theology or social theory." And to this comment Gladden would presumably have uttered a hearty *"Of course!,"* because Gladden couldn't believe in a theology that didn't have a societal purpose and thus social results.

I'm going to try to let Gladden explain the Social Gospel in his own words by quoting from *Recollections*, a very readable autobiography that he wrote in 1909:

- "Church-going didn't help me solve my religious problems [referring to his youth]....In fact, it just made those problems more and more tangled and troublesome."
- "Religion is summed up in the word Friendship,... just being friends with the Father above and the brother by our side...."
- "The preaching was almost wholly evangelistic [still referring to his pre-Civil War youth]. The conversion of sinners was supposed to be the preacher's main business,...and the appeal therefore was almost wholly individualistic [because it] directed the thoughts of men to the consideration of their own personal welfare."
- "The business of religion [in those days] was to fill the hearts of men with fear, [which Gladden referred to as the] blighting consequence of a bad theology."
- "Theology must be moral. Every doctrine must have an ethical foundation."
- "The relations of man to man...is the primary business of Christianity."
- "A religion which has no room in it for social questions cannot be the Christian religion."
- "It is far more important that young ministers should understand how men ought to live together...than it is that they should be familiar with the Gnostic philosophy of the second century."
- "It was not an individualistic pietism that appealed to me; it was a religion that laid hold of life with both hands, and proposed, first and foremost, to realize the Kingdom of God in *this* world.... I wanted to be—if I could make myself fit—the minister of a church like that."
- "We must not doubt, as religious teachers, that on the whole, in the long run, the safest thing to tell the people is the truth....We [clergy] are sometimes too apprehensive about

the risk we run in telling the truth [about the infallibility of the Bible]."

- Regarding the conflicts between Genesis and geology, he said: "They cannot be reconciled.... Genesis is not science...it's a beautiful hymn...." "The records written on the rocks by the Creator Himself can be no less veracious than those written upon parchment by human hands; science gives us the word of God no less authoritatively than revelation...."
- "The things that men have said about [Christ] concern me less and less; the things he himself has said concern me more and more. A correct theory of [Christ's] person is of much less consequence than obedience to his words."
- "The Golden Rule is... the only workable rule of life," to which biographer Dorn added:

"The Social Gospel presupposed the applicability of the Golden Rule to all spheres of human activity, whether domestic, ecclesiastic, political, economic, or international.... There was no social, economic, or political disease for which the social gospelers did not think that the Golden Rule was an adequate cure. [The Golden Rule] was the unifying thread that ran through Gladden's interest in industrial organization, charity, Negro education, urban politics, and international peace."

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Gladden's role model and mentor from afar was Horace Bushnell, a highly controversial New England Congregationalist, whom Gladden called "the greatest theological genius of the American church in the 19th century."

In Bushnell's writings, he found "an emancipation proclamation that delivered him at once and forever from the bondage of an immoral theology." Bushnell's heresy, in Gladden's words, was "his unfaltering belief that God is just." It was unthinkable to Bushnell—and certainly to Gladden— "that men should be judged and doomed before they were born; that men should be held blameworthy and punishable for what was done by their ancestors; that justice could be secured by the punishment of one for the sin of another."

But unthinkable or not, "'Bushnellism'—not unlike Unitarianism somewhat later—was a name with which no ambitious minister [in a conventional church] could afford to be branded [in 1866]." But notwithstanding a very real danger of being blackballed by the selection committee, Gladden had the courage to invite Bushnell to preach at his installation as the new pastor of the First Congregational Church in North Adams, Mass. Bushnell told Gladden that he was making a serious career mistake in tying himself to such a controversial figure, but Gladden insisted, and Bushnell came, joining with Mark Hopkins, the president of nearby Williams College in welcoming Gladden to North Adams.

In thanking Bushnell, who was then old and not in good health, Gladden said Bushnell "had fought and won the battle for the moralization of theology." What he especially liked about Bushnell was "his meditating on the mysteries of the heavens above and the earth beneath." It was, of course, the "earth beneath" that Gladden believed was his mission to serve.

Not surprisingly, another of Gladden's role models was David Swing, a popular Chicago

Presbyterian pastor who was convicted of heresy in 1874 by a church court for failing to accept, *ipsissimis verbis,* all the statements of the confession of faith, a charge of which Gladden would also have been clearly guilty. Gladden admired Swing because "he knew how to mediate between the church and the great outside multitude.... While he treated the dogmas of the church with great freedom, yet he sought to present the essential truths of religion in a manner so untechnical that they should commend themselves to the commonsense of man." Like Swing, Gladden was a communicator. He talked about "*applied* Christianity," which prompted important questions like the following:

- "How to mix Christianity with human affairs;
- "How to bring salvation to the people who needed it the most;
- "How to bring peace between the employers and the workmen;
- "How to help the poor without pauperizing them;
- "How to remove the curse of drunkenness;
- "How to get the Church into closer relations with the people to whom Christ preached the Gospel;
- "How to keep our religion from degenerating into art, or evaporating into ecstasy, or stiffening into dogmatism, and to make it a regenerating force in human society."

The last point—"How to keep our religion from degenerating into art, or evaporating into ecstasy, or stiffening into dogmatism, and to make it a regenerating force in human society."— would seem to neatly summarize Gladden's theology. In plain language, he seems to be saying: "Let's spend less time on the props of religion, and concentrate on what can be done in *this* life with and for the *people.*

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So we move on now from the theology underlying the Social Gospel to how the Social Gospel manifested itself in the secular world, which Gladden believed so strongly was the workshop for an *ethical* theology. Again, where possible, I'll try to let Gladden speak for himself:

Tolerance. Gladden despised the nativist Know Nothing movement of the 1850s, saying that "prejudices so rank and noxious ought not to grow upon American soil." And he opposed a constitutional amendment in 1873 to make the United States a "Christian nation." And it was his out-spoken leadership in criticizing the activities of the anti-Catholic American Protective Association in 1892 in Columbus that made his nomination for the presidency of Ohio State University politically unacceptable to the legislature, which had to approve the appointment.

Post Civil War Reconstruction. Gladden was a passionate admirer of Lincoln, about whose death he said: "I know of no great historical event which is so hard for me to reconcile with the doctrine of a wise and good Providence." To Gladden, the reconstruction period "was a blight on the whole subsequent history of this nation," which he believed would never have

occurred had Lincoln lived. "If I ever cherished my fond belief in the infallibility of the populace, that allusion was forever dispelled by the spectacle of those [reconstruction] days.

Democracy. Gladden, like de Toqueville, was ambivalent about the people's ability to govern themselves. "That entire populations are subject to epidemics of unreason is historically true. And the only hope for this democracy is in the rise of a class of leaders who have the courage to visit the mob, and to speak the truth in the days when the truth is the last thing the people want to hear...."

Referring to the Boss Tweed scandals in New York in the 1870s, Gladden wrote: "If [the voters] cannot find out what their servants in office are doing, they are too stupid to govern themselves; [and] if they know about it and can't stop it, they are too weak to govern themselves."

Negroes. Certainly by present day standards, Gladden was also ambivalent on the "Negro problem," as it was termed in his day. Though he had been very opposed in the 1850s to the repeal of the Missouri Compromise (that opened more of the west to slavery) and the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law, after the war, he favored only gradual enfranchisement of negroes. "The ballot," he said, "in the hands of voters who are utterly unfit to use it, has no magical power to transform them into useful citizens." But he goes on to devote a whole chapter in *Recollections* to advocating vastly better education for the Negroes, which concludes with the powerful statement that "little by little a body of opinion...will assert and maintain *the right of the negro to be a man,* with all that implies."

Biographer Dorn, however, makes this comment: "The progressive movement, of which the Social Gospel was an integral part, was essentially blind to America's oldest and most persistent social dilemma," the racial problem. Gladden would no doubt have taken issue with this criticism of the Social Gospel, but, as we all know, the reality is that not a lot of progress was made in this respect until many years later, and we're not there yet, as Warren Tyler's essay reminded us two months ago.

Labor Relations. Dorn tells us that Gladden's "attempts at impartiality [between labor and management] resulted, by his own testimony, in employers regarding him as 'a regular walking delegate [of the unions]', and workers accusing him of being 'a mere tool of the capitalists.'" I don't think this is surprising given Gladden's belief that labor and management must work together for the common good following the Golden Rule. Gladden would certainly never have been of the "you're either with us or against us" school, as witness the following:

"God has not made men to be associated for any purpose on a purely egoistic [selfish] basis, and we must learn God's laws and obey them. It must be possible to shape the organization of our industries in such a way that it shall be the daily habit of the workman to think in the interest of the employer, and of the employer to think in the interest of the workman."

In his earlier years, Gladden was only lukewarm about unions, but as companies grew bigger and managements became more violently anti-union, Gladden's union sympathies increased because he believed there needed to be a good balance of strength between the two sides. He

was a strong advocate of compulsory arbitration of labor disputes, a position that tended not to endear him to management. And he also believed in fairly constructed profit-sharing plans.

Socialism. As with so many other issues, Gladden was also ambivalent about socialism. On the one hand, he said, "No form of society can march hellward faster than a democracy under the banner of unbridled individualism." But then he says, "[As] an excessive reaction to individualism, socialism was likely to make the state not a "Guardian of Liberties" and "Guarantor of Equal Opportunities" but [rather] a "Colossal Providence." He told his congregation, "The trouble with the socialistic scheme is that it proposes to do what the infinite Benevolence refuses to do. It is not worth while to try to be kinder and better than God." And he noted that socialism "gives no adequate play to [man's] self-regarding motives."

But he was also an advocate of nationalizing the railroads, the telephone and telegraph, and the coal mines, saying "there must be no monopolies of goods and services necessary to the life of the people which the people do not themselves control. If democracy is to endure, it must assert and maintain this prerogative."

Gladden held that neither individualism nor socialism furnished an adequate basis for industrial society. But if he had to choose between the two, he said he would choose socialism.

I would guess that my great-grandfather left First Church on more than a few Sundays shaking his head.

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Theological liberalism and the Social Gospel began to run into increasing challenges after the turn of the century. While the term, fundamentalist, wasn't coined until 1920, the conservative movement had begun, or, more accurately, was being revived from pre-Civil War times. Dorn suggests that this may have been prompted in part by the increasing concern about evolution, an heretical concept to the fundamentalists, but with which Gladden was completely comfortable.

By 1910 or so Gladden and the "social gospelers" were being attacked by Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and even some Congregationalists on very pragmatic grounds. As Dorn explains: "Liberalism [in their view] led straight to spiritual deadness, it dried up the sources of support for evangelism and foreign missions, and it consisted of a refined but effete, emasculated message that contributed to infidelity and secularism." In laymen's language, many churches were simply saying that theological liberalism was bad for their business.

Adding fuel to this fire was Gladden's outspoken leadership in opposing Billy Sunday's coming to Columbus in 1912 to conduct an extended series of revival meetings. To Gladden, Sunday exaggerated all the worst features of the revivalists. In his view, Sunday's theology was a crude form of "medievalism"; his financial methods were self-serving; and his

personal conduct and speech were violent and vulgar. Gladden understood the need for a religious awakening, but he didn't want to achieve it with "some great, spectacular, evangelistic meetings," especially of the type based on "auctioneer methods" that repelled reasonable people. [Note the reference to "reasonable people."] To Gladden, Billy Sunday represented everything that Gladden believed was wrong with traditional theology which he had spent fifty years trying to correct.

But working against Gladden was the important reality that, by appealing, not to the "reasonable people" that Gladden had cited, but rather to the emotions and base instincts of the general populace, revivals had proven to be a very effective marketing ploy for the churches in areas where they were held. And just about every church, then as now, was looking for more members and more financial support. And so, despite Gladden's very public opposition, a substantial majority of Columbus Protestant churches supported Sunday's coming. When he came, Sunday's wife said, "We'll roll right over old Dr. Gladden," and Sunday himself implied that Gladden was just a closet Unitarian, and called him a "bald-headed old mutt."

Gladden was 77 when he lost this battle with Sunday and the fundamentalists. What he saw as an "unethical theology" had become more appealing to the general public than the "ethical theology" that he had spent fifty years evolving, which just goes to show that in religion, like politics and fashions, the pendulum swings, and what is appealing to one generation is rejected by another. As Dorn says: "Gladden was simply out-voted by American Protestants."

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Gladden died on July 2, 1918. "For two hours on the day of his funeral a steady stream of admirers, representing all classes and religions, filed silently past his coffin in the church. One bouquet of roses bore the special inscription, "A Token of Catholic Gratitude." Local clergymen formed an escort of honor, and the chimes of Trinity Episcopal Church across the street pealed out Gladden's favorite hymns, and the assembled mourners sang, "O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee."

My mentor at Williams College, Professor Charles R. Keller, spoke in 1977 at the bicentennial of the First Congregational Church in North Adams where Gladden had been the pastor. Keller said, "Washington Gladden, like Robert Frost, had 'a lover's quarrel with the world.'" And he added, "I like people who have lover's quarrels." And so do I, which is why I chose Gladden to be the subject of this Kit-Kat essay.

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