

STRONG, JOSIAH (1847–1916)

Josiah Strong was a minister, author, activist, and organizer who, from the 1880s through the 1910s, contributed to a religious movement in North America called the Social Gospel. The Social Gospel mixed Protestant Christian ideas about salvation, progress, perfectibility, and activism with scientific insights from economics, history, biology, and sociology. Strong was one of the first to advocate this mixture of religion and science as a guide for social reform. The scientific laws that applied to society, he argued, were revelations from God on par with revelations from the Bible. Strong believed this combination of scientific laws and spiritual laws could solve issues he believed were social problems. These issues included immigration, the growth of the city, racism, Catholicism, Mormonism, socialism, alcohol, poverty, and war. As an early leader of the Social Gospel, Strong helped attract others such as Walter Rauschenbusch, George D. Herron, William Gladden, and Robert Ely to the movement. By joining the Protestant focus on individual salvation with scientific principles to better society, Strong believed that the Social Gospel would improve humanity to a point when God would perfect it. The Social Gospel helped impart an optimistic belief in science and a faith in society's constant improvement to the later Progressive movement.

Strong was born in Naperville, Illinois, on January 19, 1847, to Josiah Strong and Elizabeth Strong, née Webster. In 1852, the family left their struggling farm and moved to Hudson, Ohio. Strong's father struggled as a furniture maker, and the family relied on the financial help of Strong's aunt who ran a school for young women. In Hudson, the Strong family met the radical abolitionist John Brown, and the young Josiah developed an early aversion to slavery. In 1869, Strong graduated from Western Reserve College. Next he took his doctorate of divinity from Lane Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. On September 8, 1871, the Congregational Church ordained Strong as a minister. He immediately married Alice Bisbee and began a two-year pastorate in Cheyenne, Wyoming. In 1873, Strong moved back to Ohio. There, he continued to progress through the ranks of the Congregational Church and investigate the nation's social problems. By 1881, Strong was secretary of the Ohio Home Missionary Society, which supported struggling Congregational churches in the Midwest. Strong's experience in Wyoming and the home missionary society along with his concern about contemporary social problems contributed to his later fame.

In 1885, the American Home Missionary Society published Strong's book, *Our Country: Its Possible Future and Its Present Crisis*. Strong believed that the end of the 1800s and beginning of the 1900s represented a major turning point in history. He cited the technological and scientific advancements of the 1800s as proof that humanity was progressing faster than ever before. He argued that the United States

soon would lead this advance, especially as it developed the West. The country, however, had to address what Strong considered threats to democracy and Christianity such as immigration, Catholicism, Mormonism, intemperance, socialism, wealth disparity, and urban problems. Strong contended that the solution for these problems and the hope of the United States for the entire world was the Anglo-Saxon race. *Our Country* claimed Anglo-Saxons embodied the two great concepts of democracy and genuine Christianity which were responsible for the rapid progress of the 1800s. Once the nation solved its problems, the United States as the country with the most Anglo-Saxons would “Anglo-Saxonize” the world. *Our Country* was Strong’s most popular publication. It accelerated his career and outlined the major themes that he developed through the rest of his life. In 1886, the Evangelical Alliance chose Strong as its general secretary. Strong revitalized the waning organization with his zeal for social reform and for broad Protestant cooperation. Strong wrote and published *The New Era* (1893) while general secretary. The book revisited many of the themes in *Our Country* but focused more on combining Christianity with science and changing the world, not just the United States.

Strong resigned from the Evangelical Alliance in 1898 and began the League for Social Service, which became the American Institute for Social Service. This remained his platform for supporting the broader Social Gospel movement until his death. Strong also published several more books. *The Twentieth Century City* (1898) sought to fight the consumerism and greed of cities with patriotism and the Social Gospel. Relatively silent about religion, *Expansion under New World Conditions* (1900) advocated the military and economic expansion of the United States. Additionally, Strong acknowledge the input of Alfred T. Mahan—a former U.S. admiral and advocate of aggressive expansion abroad—in writing the book. *Religious Movements for Social Betterment* (1900) and *The Next Great Awakening* (1902) identified different social reform movements and urged Christian support. Finally, the two-volume *Our World* (1913 and 1915) revisited *Our Country*, arguing that scientific and religious advancement was global and Christianity offered solutions to the world’s problems.

While Strong died in 1916, the social problems he identified and offered solutions for resonated with many Americans in the late 1800s and early 1900s. They worried that the tectonic changes to the country’s economy, society, and politics would fracture a cohesive American identity. Strong offered a prescription that assured them that recent scientific methods and eternal Christian truths could not only maintain that identity but also spread it to the world. From the 1880s to the 1910s, the Social Gospel brought many reformers together to build on Strong’s insights. Together, they addressed many of the problems he identified and ultimately offered a spiritual resolve to the Progressive movement.

Gregory Atkins