

Kingdom coming: Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [November 27, 2007](#) issue

In the 1880s Walter Rauschenbusch was a Baptist pastor in the Hell's Kitchen district of New York City, where he served a poor, hurting, immigrant congregation and where he converted to the social gospel. His searing encounter with urban poverty, especially the funerals that he performed for children, drove him to political activism and a social-progressive understanding of Christianity.

He later recalled that during his early ministry he had six books in his head: five were scholarly, one was dangerous. Three times he tried to write the dangerous one but had to put it aside, and each time he came back to it, he found that he had outgrown the manuscript and had to start over.

In 1891 Rauschenbusch decided, with deep sadness, that he had to resign from the ministry because he was going deaf. A surflike roar in his ears made it very difficult to do pastoral tasks; he called it "physical loneliness." He was offered a teaching position at Rochester Theological Seminary, but doubted that teaching would work any better than ministry for a deaf person. His idea was to resign his position, go abroad for a year, write the dangerous book and launch a literary career. His congregation insisted, instead, that he take a paid sabbatical—which he gratefully did, in Germany.

There he labored on a book titled *Revolutionary Christianity*, which argued that Christianity should be essentially revolutionary, in the manner of Jesus. Until then Rauschenbusch had preached the liberal idea, derived from Albrecht Ritschl, of Christianity as an ellipse with two centers: eternal life as the goal of individual existence and the kingdom of God as the goal of humanity. The old pietism and the social-ethical Jesus of modern theology folded together. But in Germany it occurred to Rauschenbusch that Jesus had one center, the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaimed and launched a postmillennial idea of the coming reign of God, and the church was supposed to be a new kind of community that transformed the world by the power of

Christ's kingdom-bringing Spirit. Rauschenbusch later recalled: "Here was a concept that embraced everything. Here was something so big that absolutely nothing that interested me was excluded from it. . . . Wherever I went, whatever I touched, there was the kingdom of God. It carries God into everything that you do."

In *Revolutionary Christianity* Rauschenbusch contended that the kingdom of God is always at work toward the realized life of God. He stressed that this idea was beautiful, comprehensive, filled with justice-making ethical content *and* evangelical: "You have the authority of the Lord Jesus in it."

But the year passed, the book never quite came together, Rauschenbusch returned to his congregation, and the following year he married a schoolteacher, Pauline, who helped him cope with his worsening deafness. They made pastoral calls together, and their marriage was a sustained love affair, mutually supportive and affectionate. The next time Rochester Theological Seminary called, in 1897, Rauschenbusch felt that he was ready for an academic career. His father had headed the German department at Rochester Seminary for many years, and for five years Rauschenbusch carried on his father's work, teaching English and American literature, physiology, physics, civil government, political economy, astronomy, zoology and New Testament—all in German—in addition to raising money for the German department.

This exhausting regimen left no time for his own work, and the German-American community that he served was mostly hostile to the social gospel. Finally, in 1902, the seminary's position in church history opened up, and that is why the greatest works of the social gospel have such a strong historical bent.

While learning his new field of church history, Rauschenbusch spoke at civic groups and churches about the social gospel, helped to organize the Federal Council of Churches and wrote pamphlets for an outfit called the Brotherhood of the Kingdom (which, after a brief debate, admitted sister members). And he started thinking again about that big, dangerous book.

He went back to his sprawling manuscript to see what he could salvage from it, and he found a few things, especially the starting point: Jesus and his kingdom. That was the basis for a mostly new book that he finished in 1907: *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. The first part described the essential purpose of prophetic biblical religion as the transformation of human society into the kingdom of God. The second part

explained why the church had never carried out this mission. The third part urged that it was not too late for the church to follow Jesus.

Rauschenbusch realized that the key to the book was the second part, but he feared that the third part would get him fired. It had a blazing manifesto for socialism in a closing 80-page chapter titled "What to Do." For his analysis of what happened to Christianity, he leaned on Adolf von Harnack, but argued that no one had given a satisfactory answer. Rauschenbusch implied, but was too modest to say, "No one until now." In his view, every chapter of church history could be titled "How the Kingdom of God Was Misconstrued in This Era, or Replaced by Something Else."

Revolutionary Christianity had patches of labored writing and clumsy connections, but all was smooth and sparkling in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. The book enthralled a huge audience with its graceful flow of short, clear sentences, its charming metaphors and its vigorous pace. It was filled with sharp moral judgments, especially against priestly religion, capitalism and social oppression, but the book also showed Rauschenbusch's tender heart for individuals. His basic argument was that prophetic religion is the "beating heart" of scripture, that the prophetic spirit "rose from the dead" in Jesus and the early church, and that Christianity is supposed to be a prophetic Christ-following religion of the divine commonwealth.

Rauschenbusch knew about the recent apocalyptic turn in German scholarship, and he did not oppose it outright. He reasoned that Jesus undoubtedly shared some of the eschatological consciousness of a conquered people, just as he shared the commonplace belief in devils. But the apocalyptic thesis depended on a handful of "coming Son of Man sayings" that were overwhelmingly outnumbered by social-ethical sayings; Rauschenbusch judged that Mark 13 sounded more like the early church than like Jesus; and he held out for the social-ethical Jesus of the parables and the Sermon on the Mount.

Christianity and the Social Crisis was skillfully fashioned and perfectly timed. Instead of getting fired, Rauschenbusch returned from a sabbatical in Germany to find that his book was a supercharger for a movement. It went through 13 printings in five years, sold 50,000 copies and set a new standard for political theology. It built upon works by American social gospelers Washington Gladden, Josiah Strong, Richard Ely, Shailer Mathews and Francis G. Peabody, but nothing like Rauschenbusch's stunning conflation of historical, theological and political arguments had been seen previously. The book had a huge impact at liberal seminaries. Politically it was more

radical than the thought of most social gospelers, but it was rightly viewed from the beginning as the greatest statement of the social gospel movement.

That movement had many faults and limitations, some of which Rauschenbusch shared. Most of the movement was sentimental, moralistic, idealistic and politically naive. It preached a gospel of cultural optimism and a Jesus of middle-class idealism. It was culturally chauvinist and thoroughly late-Victorian. It spoke the language of triumphal missionary religion, sometimes baptized the Anglo-Saxon ideology of Manifest Destiny, and usually claimed that American imperialism was not really imperialism, since it had good intentions. The social gospel helped to build colleges and universities for African Americans, but only rarely did it demand justice for blacks; it supported suffrage for women, but that was the extent of its feminism. It created the ecumenical movement in the U.S., but it had a strongly Protestant, anti-Catholic idea of ecumenism, and Rauschenbusch was especially harsh on this topic. Most social gospel leaders vigorously opposed World War I until the U.S. intervened, whereupon they promptly ditched their opposition to war (with the brave exception of Rauschenbusch). After the war they overreacted by reducing the social gospel to pacifist idealism; by then Rauschenbusch was gone.

The succeeding generation was very hard on the social gospel. On occasion Reinhold Niebuhr allowed that Rauschenbusch was more prophetic and a bit less idealistic than the movement, but he never pressed the point, and he blasted both Rauschenbusch and the movement repeatedly. Niebuhr taught, wrongly, that the social gospel had no doctrine of sin and, more justly, that it was too middle class and idealistic to be a serious force in power politics. After Niebuhr's generation had passed, liberationists judged that the social gospel *and* Niebuhr's Christian realism were too middle class, white, male-dominated, nationalistic and socially privileged to be agents of liberation.

Yet for all its faults and limitations, the social gospel movement produced a greater progressive religious legacy than any generation before or after it. Christian realism inspired no hymns and built no lasting institutions. It was not even a movement, but rather a reaction to the social gospel—a reaction centered on one person, Reinhold Niebuhr. The social gospel, by contrast, was a 60-year movement and enduring perspective that paved the way for modern ecumenism and social Christianity. It had a tradition in the black churches led by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, Reverdy Ransom, Benjamin E. Mays and Mordecai Johnson. It had anti-imperialist, socialist and feminist advocates in addition to the mushy reformers. And it created the

ecumenical and social justice ministries that remain the heart of U.S. social Christianity.

The social gospel made a novel, radical and far-reaching contribution to Christianity and society by claiming that Christianity has a mission to transform the structures of society in the direction of equality, freedom and community. If there was such a thing as social structure, redemption had to be reconceptualized to take account of it; salvation had to be personal *and* social to be saving.

The greatest apostle of that gospel, Rauschenbusch did not rest on moral idealism alone; he had an answer to the apocalyptic thesis, though for decades he and the social gospel were ridiculed for holding out; his systematic theology had seven chapters on sin and what he called the kingdom of evil; and he preached the coming commonwealth of God with unparalleled brilliance and inspiration.

I close with two statements from *Christianity and the Social Crisis*. The first is a warning that moral idealism alone will never create a good society: “We must not blink at the fact that idealists alone have never carried through any great social change. . . . The possessing classes rule by force and longstanding power. They control nearly all property. The law is on their side, for they have made it. . . . For a definite historical victory a given truth must depend on the class which makes that truth its own and fights for it.”

But that was never his first or last word. First and last he always qualified the idealism in another way: that the commonwealth of God is the very life and word of the Lord Jesus, and that it must be struggled for even though it cannot be fully attained: “We shall never have a perfect social life, yet we must seek it with faith. . . . At best there is always an approximation to a perfect social order. The kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation to it is worthwhile.” That was the radical core of the social gospel.

This article is adapted from an address Gary Dorrien gave this fall at Union Theological Seminary to mark the 100th anniversary of the publication of Rauschenbusch's Christianity and the Social Crisis.