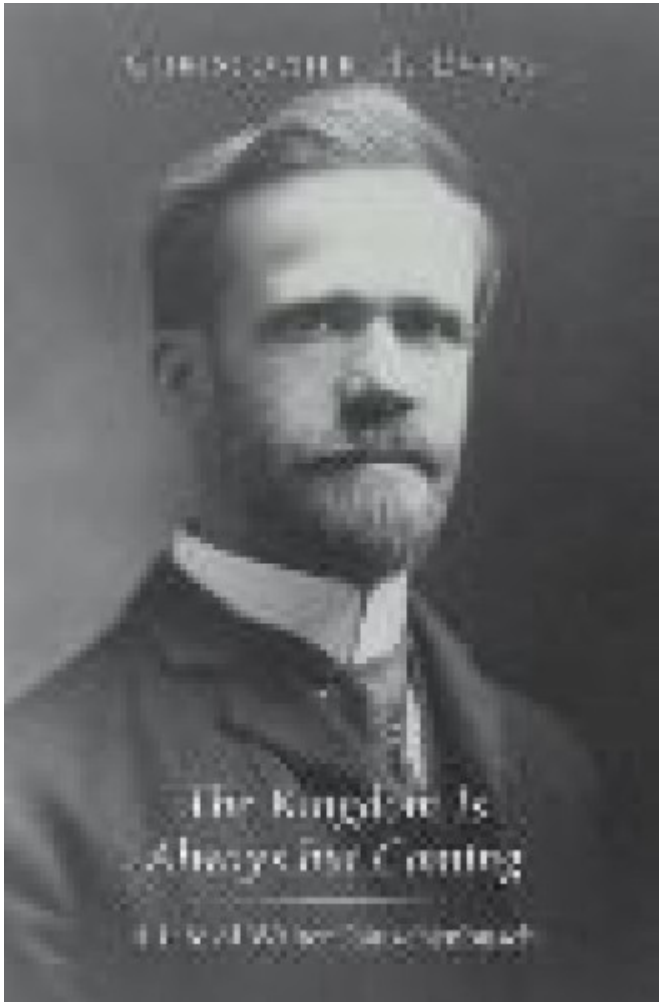


Kingdom coming

By [Max Stackhouse](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

In Review



The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch

Christopher H. Evans
Eerdmans

We have needed a good biography of Walter Rauschenbusch for some time, and Christopher Evans has provided us with the best one so far. *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming* covers not only the personal life of the founder of the Social Gospel movement as it developed from the 1880s through the 1920s, but also the intellectual and social history of the Progressive Era. The movement Rauschenbusch helped spawn has deeply shaped ecumenical Protestantism, especially in North America and also in many of the churches Protestants planted elsewhere as part of their 19th-century missionary efforts. At home, the Social Gospel has influenced the Christian realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, the civil rights activism of Martin Luther King Jr., the work of no small number of liberation thinkers, and today's public theology.

Evans sets Rauschenbusch and the sociotheological tradition he engendered in a stream of free-church Protestantism that is distinct from that of novelist Charles Sheldon, whose *In His Steps* prefigured today's "What Would Jesus Do?" form of personal, evangelical moralism. This form of Protestantism is also distinct from that of Rauschenbusch's teacher, Josiah Strong, whose *Our Country* signaled the rise of a religious nationalism that also continues today. On social issues Rauschenbusch was neither as benignly irenic as Ohio pastor Washington Gladden, as radical as Iowa college professor George Herron, nor as directly political as Wellesley activist-scholar Vida Scudder—to name just some of the other giants of the movement.

Rauschenbusch's thought was closer to that of Shailer Mathews and Shirley Jackson Case of the University of Chicago Divinity School, who developed the biblical perspectives that fed the more theological or sociological approaches of others. Most Social Gospelers had evangelical roots and were critical of both Catholicism and the emerging fundamentalism of the period. Evans shows how they selectively drew elements from American Puritanism, German theology, British Fabian social thought, emerging schools of economic theory (including the work of thinkers from Henry George to Karl Marx) and the reform movements of the previous generation, which had promoted temperance, educational reform, women's rights and the abolition of slavery, as well as incorporating motifs from revivalist and holiness experientialism. But there was no vision of how to unite these elements into a coherent social theology.

Rauschenbusch's early life marked him deeply. His German immigrant parents, who were literate, bilingual and deeply pious, shifted from their Lutheran heritage to the vigorously democratic American Baptist tradition. His student days at Rochester

Theological Seminary were characterized by growth, excellence and an awareness of the impending split between the liberal “new theology” and “orthodox” evangelicalism. Later he returned to his parents’ native land for further study and became more widely aware of international developments in society and culture as well as in theology. (Evans artfully refers to Rauschenbusch as “Walther” when writing of his German background, studies abroad, ministry in an immigrant church and teaching on Rochester’s German faculty; he then switches to “Walter” when writing of Rauschenbusch’s appointment to the English faculty at Rochester, where he would become professor of church history—the position Evans now holds.)

Rauschenbusch became pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in the Hell’s Kitchen section of New York City in 1886. Although his Rochester upbringing and European studies had exposed him to diverse peoples and conditions, his intimate encounter with poor immigrants as the U.S. went through the shock of rapid industrialization spurred him to explore a number of social ministries and to form alliances with others to address social issues—especially his longtime friends Leighton Williams and Nathaniel Schmidt, cofounders of the Brotherhood of the Kingdom, which published, for a time, the reform-oriented periodical *For the Right*.

The concept of the kingdom would gradually come to be not only the centerpiece of his preaching but the integrating principle of the social Christianity that he sought to forge. He drafted a book-length manuscript on the subject during these years but never published it; its parts were scattered among his papers, later to be reassembled in archives, recognized as an early book and published in the 1960s as *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*.

For most of his life Rauschenbusch was occupied with the demanding duties of pastoral life in a needy congregation and with his relationship with the love of his life, Pauline Rother. She became a model pastor’s wife, as expected in that environment, and all indications are that theirs was a happy relationship. Together they had five children.

As Rauschenbusch grew more deaf, they had to draw their pastoral ministry to a close. In the late 1890s he resigned from the pastorate and accepted a position as professor at his old school. It was when he returned to Rochester that he began to draw together his many interests and influences into the view that became widely known through his *Christianity and the Social Crisis, Christianizing the Social Order* (which Evans rightly treats as a kind of progress report on the growth of the

movement), *The Social Principles of Jesus*, *Prayers of the Social Awakening* and eventually *A Theology for the Social Gospel*. These works made him the outstanding spokesman for the cause and made the movement influential among the next generation of (especially mainline, middle-class) clergy and social activists.

In all these works and in his many lectures Rauschenbusch shows an affinity for Ernst Troeltsch's conviction that theology and history are necessarily intertwined, "each half dependent on the other," that history needs to be read with alertness to sociological factors, and that theology should be formed with an eye to its social as well as its personal meanings. Indeed, this accent may have shaped Rauschenbusch's theology even more than the theological ethics of Albrecht Ritschl did.

To my knowledge, Evans more than any other writer on Rauschenbusch has traced the contemporary critiques of the Social Gospel and offered a measured assessment of them, pointing out where the criticisms have been valid. Evans clearly admires Rauschenbusch, but he does not beatify him. He is aware that Rauschenbusch had certain personal failures (including a rigidity in some social relationships), that he was ignorant of economic theory and business practices at several points (even though he wrote much about how they look from the underside), and that he had conflicting views on the use of the military in international politics (evidenced by his positions on the Spanish-American War and World War I).

Rauschenbusch is often characterized, even caricatured, as believing that the kingdom of God could be actualized in history and that sin and evil could be finally abolished if only Christians would apply Christ's teachings to social life more vigorously. Evans suggests a different view, beginning with his title, a quote from *Christianizing the Social Order*: "The Kingdom Is Always but Coming." As Evans points out, Rauschenbusch held that the downward path is the natural one and that only God's power, known in the kingdom's presence in history, can form a new ethic and new social institutions so that the common life can be sustained, injustice reduced and love more fully manifested, making an open future a real possibility. This puts Rauschenbusch closer to the Catholic and Reformed traditions than he thought he was—and than his critics have believed.

In spite of a few quibbles readers might have here and there, this is a fine book that should be read in every seminary.