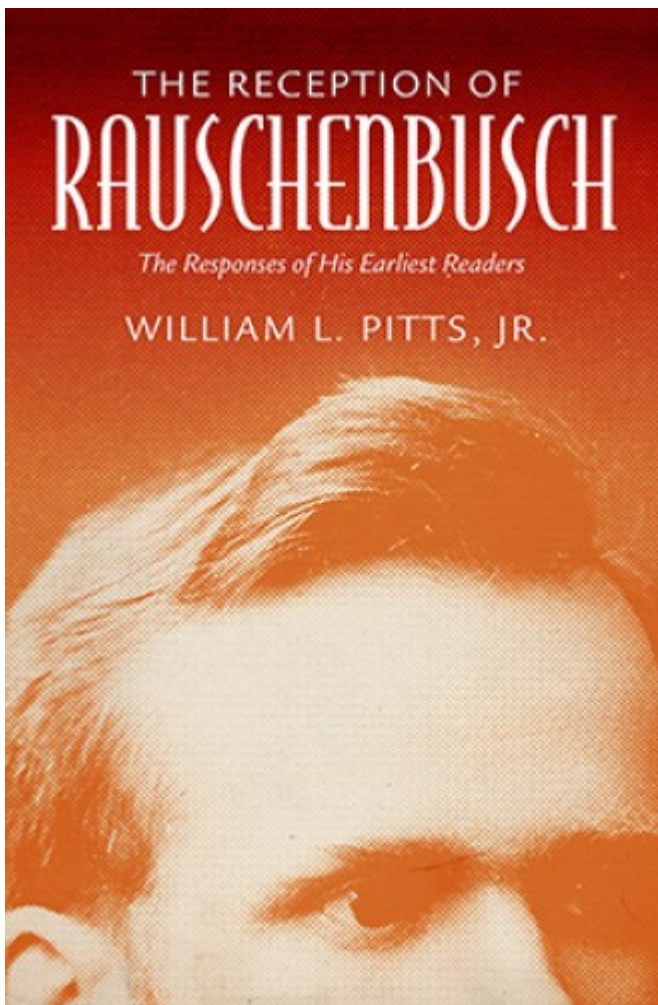


Walter Rauschenbusch then and now

## **William Pitts examines the era when the Social Gospel was new—and controversial.**

by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [March 13, 2019](#) issue

### **In Review**



### **The Reception of Rauschenbusch**

The Responses of His Earliest Readers

By William L. Pitts Jr.  
Mercer University Press

For theological liberals, the name of Walter Rauschenbusch is often reduced to a hashtag for “social gospel.” William Pitts’s carefully researched exploration of the richness and complexity of Rauschenbusch’s life, thought, and witness refuses any such simplistic reduction. It is worth a careful read, because Rauschenbusch is indeed the godfather of much of today’s theology that focuses on issues of justice.

Pitts identifies several conversions that marked Rauschenbusch’s journey from his German pietist childhood faith to an intellectually informed engagement with history and culture. As Rauschenbusch embraced historical criticism in his study of scripture and doctrine, he began to see that the claims of the gospel had to be radically reformulated in new social contexts.

His first assignment as a pastor was in a Baptist congregation at the edge of Hell’s Kitchen in New York City. There Rauschenbusch ministered to German immigrants and came into daily contact with social ailments, including ignorance, poverty, bad hygiene, starvation, and intemperance. At the same time, he met social critics like Jacob Riis and advocates of Christian socialism like F. D. Maurice. These relationships led Rauschenbusch to rearticulate the gospel in terms of economic realities and the social structures that sustain those realities.

Out of these experiences Rauschenbusch wrote a manifesto in 1891, *Revolutionary Christianity*. Though it was not published until 1968, it outlined the stance that he would continue to develop for the rest of his life: that Jesus’ declaration of the Kingdom of God concerns this-worldly neighborly justice. This profound awareness led him to his signature 1907 book, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, where he engages in class analysis and concludes that “the extremes of wealth and poverty are much farther apart than formerly.” This book made him something of a celebrity and an influential writer and speaker until his death in 1918.

The enormous success of the book is indicated by the avalanche of appreciative mail that Rauschenbusch received. Pitts cites many of these letters. Edmund Fontaine, a machinist by trade, wrote of his own economic struggles and affirmed of the book, “It is a piece of real constructive work for social betterment.” Church leaders such as Herbert Bacon Hutchins of Maine and Albert Williams of Connecticut wrote that while they’d had a vague sense of Christian social obligation, Rauschenbusch’s book

clarified that obligation and made it inescapable. A Senate clerk, John Erickson, termed the book “a true interpretation of Christianity as a social religion.” For many readers, the book was a fresh dawning of conscience.

Pitts shows how Rauschenbusch played several roles in the latter part of his life: pastor-scholar in New York City, leader in national and local Baptist circles, faculty member at Rochester Baptist Seminary, and “public Protestant.” His deep rootage in Baptist tradition made him a strong advocate for intellectual and religious liberty. That commitment led him to positive regard for the Catholic theologian Ignaz Doellinger, who argued against papal infallibility. Rauschenbusch also played a significant role in the Federal Council of Churches, leading that part of American Protestantism toward public witness for justice.

I was struck, reading Pitts’s narrative, by the generous collegiality with which Rauschenbusch practiced his faith. He was a both-and Christian, knowing that the quest for social justice is accompanied by an urgency about personal salvation and the practice of genuine piety. He was as irenic as he was energetic, bearing burdens for the well-being of his colleagues and the church that he loved.

Rauschenbusch did not shrink from Christian socialism, even though he knew it to be a hot-button issue. He insisted that the community has priority over the individual, stating, “I prefer to vest the property rights in the community and then work out the problem how to give the ablest fellows elbow-room and incentive to serve the rest.”

Pitts includes a torrent of responses to Rauschenbusch—both negative dismissals and eager embraces.

On the one hand, Rauschenbusch was reprimanded and dismissed by those who limited the gospel to personal salvation and accused him of reducing theology to sociology. A review in the *Pony Express* simply rejected Rauschenbusch’s social emphasis and insisted that the gospel is an “appeal to souls.” The writer repeated the convenient claim that the gospel is about the “poor in spirit” and not “the poor.” In a more sober review, John Wright Buckham proposed that the book lacked “sufficient emphasis on the Living Christ as the vital Power in bringing in the new social order.” More vigorously, a review in *The Presbyterian* accused Rauschenbusch of “pruning or expanding all other doctrines” to harmonize the gospel with his social accent.

On the other hand, many were empowered, encouraged, and instructed by Rauschenbusch in the ways of social justice. Among those who have followed Rauschenbusch in a progressive direction are John Bennett, Martin Luther King Jr., and in our day, Gary Dorrien. Rauschenbusch occupies an important place in the sequence of progressive Christian leaders. He learned much from Horace Bushnell concerning theories of atonement, and he in turn influenced many who came after him, notably Harry Emerson Fosdick and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Rauschenbusch is easily critiqued (and was by Niebuhr) as naive because he trusted in the power of persuasion and had no sense of strategy about how to bring the force of the gospel. Yet he decisively altered the conversation within American Protestantism. He apparently understood this, as he called his great book of 1907 a “dangerous book.”

Pitts’s study invites us to consider how Rauschenbusch might now inflect his dangerous sense of the gospel if he were still alive. In many ways, the issues have not changed from his days in Hell’s Kitchen. In other ways, the move from the industrial revolution to the technological revolution requires fresh articulation of the message of *Revolutionary Christianity*. We have Rauschenbusch’s work to continue.