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Walter Rauschenbusch: Bringing the Kingdom of God to Alleviate Poverty in Christianity and the Social Crisis

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Abstract

Industrialization and the Gilded Age exacerbated the gap between the wealthy and the extremely poor who inhabited major American cities like New York. Walter Rauschenbusch, a German Baptist pastor who served a parish in the Hell's Kitchen neighborhood of New York City, began his ministry focusing on individual salvation and piety. After seeing the tangible effects of poverty, including the all-too-common deaths of young children, Rauschenbusch attempted to articulate the social ramifications of Christianity. The best-known example of his understanding of the Kingdom of God was *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, which became a seminal text in social gospel literature in the early twentieth century that drew upon the thinking of the German theologian Albrecht Ritschl. This paper analyzes the major arguments Rauschenbusch made in his attempt to alleviate poverty through the coming of the Kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch never abandoned essential orthodoxy, yet his beliefs and teachings raised concerns on the part of more conservative Christian thinkers.

Keywords

Walter Rauschenbusch, Kingdom of God, social gospel, Christianity, theology

Cover Page Footnote

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The so-called Gilded Age that covered the last third of the nineteenth century was an era of massive contrasts. There was a great deal of technological advancement and attendant urbanization, yet the United States was still largely an agrarian society. Transcontinental railroads began to tie the continent together. Standards of living tended to increase for many, if not most, people, yet there were extremes in living standards. The Andrew Carnegies, Cornelius Vanderbilts, and John D. Rockefellers lived in opulent conditions, while impoverished members of the working-class lived hand to mouth in shabby tenements.[1] Attempts to alleviate the difficult living conditions of impoverished factory workers via legislation tended to fail. Courts held to a strict view of "freedom of contract" that prohibited protections for workers such as limits to working hours and workplace safety laws. The New York Supreme Court set a precedent when it struck down a law that prohibited cigar makers from working within tenement housing. To say that working conditions were poor would be an understatement. In one tenement, two cigar workers from an immigrant family might work from 6:00 in the morning until at least 10:00 in the evening and produce 2,800 cigars a week. They would earn between $4.25 and $6.00 for their efforts, and their landlord would deduct between $7.00 and $9.00 each month for rent.[2] One hardscrabble working-class neighborhood in New York City had a particularly bad reputation. Otho Cartwright, a social worker, wrote of it in 1912:

> The district of which we write has been known for many years as the scene of disorders, of disregard of property rights and public peace. Certain it is that in the minds of New Yorkers who live outside the district . . . as well as in the minds of the police authorities, there still lingers a tendency and doubtless a liking to think and speak of the district by the nickname that disorders, rioting, and crime won for it in the early days of its settlement, namely "Hell's Kitchen."[3]

It was in this environment that Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch took a pastorate in the late Gilded Age. The new parson found himself deeply troubled

[1] For an overview of Gilded Age America, see Richard White, *The Republic for Which it Stands: The United States during Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[2] Mary O. Furner, "Defining the Public Good in the U. S. Gilded Age, 1883-1898: 'Freedom of Contract' vs. 'Internal Police' in the Tortured History of Employment Law and Regulation," *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 17, no. 2 (April 2018): 241-275.
[3] Joseph J. Varga, *Hell's Kitchen and the Battle for Urban Space: Class Struggle and Progressive Reform in New York City, 1894-1914* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2013), 19.

by the stark economic realities he found in the infamous Hell's Kitchen. Walter Rauschenbusch attempted to find a solution to the problem of widespread poverty through his understanding of the kingdom of God. As the leading proponent of the social gospel movement that predominated during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, Rauschenbusch continues to draw interest on the part of scholars. In recent years, as wealth disparities have tended to increase along with social unease, his viewpoint has received renewed attention.

Rauschenbusch's Background and Environment

Walter Rauschenbusch was an influential pastor and writer in the years straddling the turn of the twentieth century. He was the seventh in a line of Rauschenbusches who served as ministers. The first Rauschenbusch pastor, Esaias, became a Lutheran minister in mid-seventeenth century Westphalia. The next four generations continued to minister in the state-supported Lutheran church. Over time, the family came under the influence of German pietists, and Walter's father, August, had a pietist conversion after studying at the University of Berlin. His conversion eventually led him to take up work as a missionary among German immigrants in the United States in 1846. He began his work with the American Tract Society and distributed religious literature to German immigrants. In 1850, August Rauschenbusch went under the waters of the Mississippi River and became a Baptist, a church he felt embodied the primitive New Testament model. He took over the pastorate of the German Baptist church in Pine Oak Creek, Missouri, a frontier city. The elder Rauschenbusch was uncomfortable with the fact that slavery was legal in Missouri and became an abolitionist. After having earlier turned down an offer to work in the German department of the newly founded Rochester Theological Seminary, a Baptist seminary in Rochester, New York, August Rauschenbusch accepted the call and moved east in the summer of 1858.[4]

It was while August Rauschenbusch taught at Rochester Theological Seminary that his son, Walther (later Anglicized to Walter), was born in 1861. The elder Rauschenbusch became a leading figure in the German Baptist movement in both the United States and Germany. However, relations with his wife were strained, and Caroline Rauschenbusch left Rochester and her husband for Germany in 1865. Walter spent four years of his youth in his father's homeland, but it was not until 1868 that August joined the family in Germany, although he spent much of the year away from his family while conducting research on the Anabaptist movement at various German universities. In 1869, the Rauschenbusch family returned to Rochester. Walter grew up in an economically comfortable, middle-

[4] Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2004), 1-11.

class existence, and he underwent a conversion experience and baptism in his senior year of high school.[5]

After graduation from high school, August sent his son to a German gymnasium in an attempt that ultimately failed to protect him from the liberal theology that was then ascendant. The American education the younger Rauschenbusch received left him lacking in language study, yet he avoided any remediation requirements. After graduating from the gymnasium, Walter returned to the US and began simultaneous study at the University of Rochester and Rochester Theological Seminary. His studies in Germany provided him with advanced standing, and his first year of seminary study was also his final year of university study. After completing his bachelor's degree, Rauschenbusch took a summer pastorate serving a German Baptist congregation in Louisville, Kentucky.[6]

Rauschenbusch continued in the pietist tradition of his father and tended to emphasize a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. His mentor at Rochester Theological Seminary, Augustus Strong, had concerns that Rauschenbusch allowed liberal influences into his thinking. Strong was, at the time, one of the leading proponents of more traditional, conservative theology at RTS. Despite Strong's worries, Rauschenbusch did not really abandon orthodox positions on most of the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith.[7] Indeed, when the fundamentalist Baptist firebrand William Bell Riley attempted to draw Rauschenbusch into conflict regarding the latter's orthodoxy regarding the divinity of Christ, Rauschenbusch responded, "It so happens, dear Dr. Riley, that on this point I am entirely orthodox, and that if you deny the growth of the body and mind of Jesus, you are denying the true humanity of our Lord and are yourself the heretic." This correspondence took place in 1914, quite late in Rauschenbusch's career.[8]

Upon his graduation from seminary in 1886, Walther Rauschenbusch took a position as pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in New York City. He was a mere 24 years old when he accepted the position. Despite the concern of Strong and his parents regarding his orthodoxy, the young pastor passed his ordination with ease. His new church had about 125 congregants when he arrived, and its location butted up against the infamous Hell's Kitchen referenced above. Many of the members in his congregation were from a working-class background and dwelled in the tenements that were prevalent in the area. Rauschenbusch's early sermons tended to focus upon traditional evangelical topics, among which were frequent references to man's sinfulness and the need for personal conversion.

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[5] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 13-17.
[6] Ibid., 22-36.
[7] Ibid., 40. This is one of many instances in Evans' biography that indicate Strong's concern over Rauschenbusch's belief. See also Roger E. Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology: From Reconstruction to Deconstruction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 163.
[8] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming*, 258.

Having to perform the funerals of children was one of the major reasons for his later emphasis on social conceptions of Christianity. Many children in his community died because of diseases that were related to poverty.[9]

Adherence to social Darwinist views of the poor was prevalent in Rauschenbusch's day. Many conservative scholars like the British philosopher Herbert Spencer and the American political scientist William Graham Sumner used the idea of natural selection to support the established order of the day. Spencer popularized the term "survival of the fittest." Those who held these beliefs tended to view the poor immigrant communities in urban areas as primarily unfit. Therefore, they deserved no assistance.[10] Henry F. May argued that even ministers in Gilded-Age America who were considered forward-thinking in theological matters (read liberal or modernist), such as Henry Ward Beecher, tended to adhere to a *laissez faire* attitude when it came to political economy, at least before working-class violence started to arise in 1877. These ministers believed that attempts to raise wages or working conditions were opposed to the natural laws set up by God to rule the market.[11] Jean Miller Schmidt noted that Protestants in the nineteenth century tended to agree that pursuit of personal holiness as espoused by Charles Grandison Finney was the proper method for improving society. The salvation of individuals would change their behavior and improve society as a result. Schmidt argued for a largely monolithic Protestantism in nineteenth-century America, as the early adherents of the social gospel like Washington Gladden and Lyman Abbott joined with conservatives like Charles Hodge and A. J. Gordon and celebrity ministers like Henry Ward Beecher in lending support to Dwight L. Moody's evangelistic efforts.[12] This was the theological milieu that Walther Rauschenbusch moved about in the late nineteenth century. However, the Gilded Age concern over urban poverty continued into the twentieth century and the Progressive Era. This was the problem that Rauschenbusch would spend his life trying to solve from an economic and a theological standpoint.

Rauschenbusch's Solution to Poverty

In attempting to understand Rauschenbusch's solution to poverty, it is useful to understand his view of one important theological topic—the millennium. Differing views of this topic do not generally fall into the realm of heresy.

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[9] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 57-62.
[10] For a discussion of social Darwinism, see Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
[11] Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949).
[12] Jean Miller Schmidt, *Souls or the Social Order: The Two-Party System in American Protestantism* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991), 48.

Therefore, Rauschenbusch's understanding would not fall outside the orthodox theological mainstream. He held to a postmillennial view of the coming of the kingdom of God. The millennium refers to a period mentioned in Revelation 20:1-6, and the definition of the term is one thousand years. Premillennialists believe that Jesus Christ will return before he inaugurates a literal one-thousand-year reign. Rauschenbusch held a different view, that of postmillennialism. Postmillennialists believe that there will be a one-thousand-year period of spiritual progress. This is effectively the kingdom on earth, and Jesus will return at the end of this era of spiritual prosperity.[13]

Postmillennialism has a long history in North America. The Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards, considered by some the "most brilliant of all American theologians," held to a postmillennial view. While he did not believe that he was living in the millennium himself, Edwards believed that the revival fires that burned in New England and across the Atlantic in the mother country might be "the beginning or forerunner of something vastly great," although as the revival waned, he believed his earlier view was overly optimistic in that regard.[14] James H. Moorhead noted that postmillennialism was the prevalent view of many Americans during the nineteenth century. The belief in the possibility of continuous progress was a common thread in postmillennial eschatology, and this led to a focus on improving the situation on the ground in late nineteenth-century cities.[15] However, the increased popularity of dispensational premillennialism contributed to a view, especially on the part of more conservative Christians, that the world was about to end. Therefore, those who held to these dispensational beliefs frequently argued that attempting to improve the conditions of the poor and downtrodden was useless because Christ would return in the very near future.[16]

As a result, theological liberals tended toward the postmillennial view, and conservatives generally gravitated toward a dispensational premillennial understanding of eschatology. Although he essentially held to orthodoxy, Walther Rauschenbusch still had some liberal leanings. While studying in Germany in 1891,

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[13] *Essential Bible Dictionary*, s.v. "millennium," accessed April 29, 2021, http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/zonbible/millennium/0?institutionId=5072

[14] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003), 1, 265-276, 292.

[15] James H. Moorhead, *Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880-1925* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[16] George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). For an in-depth presentation of dispensationalism, along with other eschatological systems, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1964). A more recent critique of dispensational theology is Daniel G. Hummel, *The Rise and Fall of Dispensationalism: How the Evangelical Battle over the End Times Shaped a Nation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2023).

Rauschenbusch came under the teaching of followers of Albrecht Ritschl, who focused "on the ethical kingdom of God as the heart and soul of the gospel."[17] This view of the kingdom of God came to define Rauschenbusch's teaching after he returned to the United States.

Roger Olson argued that Ritschl "was virtually synonymous with liberal Protestantism" between 1875 and 1925,[18] which encompassed the era in which Rauschenbusch was active. In his theology, Ritschl tended to ignore God himself and dealt more with the kingdom of God. The German theologian identified the kingdom of God as "the unity of humanity organized according to love." Effectively, he viewed the kingdom as a social order.[19] This idea would greatly influence the young Rauschenbusch when he returned to the states after his sabbatical in Germany.

As already noted, Rauschenbusch ministered in one of the rougher and more poverty-stricken areas of New York City. This environment would have been far from his conception of an ideal Ritschlian understanding of the kingdom of God. From his pastoral standpoint, the young minister "realized that in order to serve the spiritual needs of his congregation he had to address the whole of their lives."[20] However, it was not until after he moved from parish ministry to his *alma mater*, Rochester Theological Seminary, that Rauschenbusch would produce his most influential work toward alleviating the widespread poverty he observed and interacted with in Hell's Kitchen.

While still in based in New York City, Rauschenbusch had completed a manuscript he titled "Christianity Revolutionary." It is likely that he completed this book during his German sojourn while staying in Berlin in 1891. He did not send the manuscript out for publication at the time, and it was only published in 1968 as *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*. "Christianity Revolutionary" emphasized what Rauschenbusch understood as the social ministry of Jesus, which he saw as bringing a "radical redistribution of political and social power." He saw this kingdom coming in a gradual sense, not as an immediate event. However, he felt that Christians would contribute to the inauguration of the kingdom of God, based primarily on the overarching motive of love.[21]

Much of the thought contributed by Rauschenbusch's most famous treatise came from the unrevised manuscript "Christianity Revolutionary" and several articles he published in the intervening years. In September 1906, he sent a draft chapter of the book *Christianity and the Social Crisis* to the Macmillan Company,

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[17] Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology*, 163.
[18] Ibid., 148.
[19] Ibid., 153.
[20] Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21st Century*, ed. Paul Raushenbush (New York: HarperOne, 2007), xi.
[21] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always But Coming*, 93-98.

which accepted the entire manuscript in November and published it in 1907.[22] In the introduction of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch laid out the direction his book would take. The professor of church history at Rochester Theological Seminary attempted to cover historical developments from the Old Testament through the early church age to find what he called the "original and fundamental purpose of the great Christian movement in history." Then, he decided to ask why the church had not attempted to achieve this purpose in the intervening years. He intended that his fifth chapter would bring to the fore the conditions of what he perceived as the social crisis of his day. He argued that Christianity should provide the "moral and religious power which it was destined to furnish." The last two chapters argued the steps that the church might take should it decide to exert the power he perceived it as having in dealing with the social crisis.[23]

In discussing the Old Testament order in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch noted that the religion of the prophets was ethical. Therefore, he argued that it had a social component. He pointed to Micah 6 as justification for his argument, providing the assessment that God required his people "to do justly."[24] He then noted his belief that the morality of the Old Testament era was not primarily private, but public, because the prophets were men who made their pronouncements largely in the public sphere. Additionally, Rauschenbusch portrayed the prophets as "champions of the poor." Amos 2:6 was a passage to which he referred in this argument. The prophet spoke against those who "sold the righteous for silver, and the poor for a pair of shoes."[25] For Rauschenbusch, the turn toward a more individualized Israelite religion began with Jeremiah, which he did not oppose. However, he then began to take a Hegelian turn in his analysis by arguing that this was a new, flawed synthesis. He noted that the synthesis between the more communitarian religion of the older prophets and the newer individualist view propagated by Jeremiah tended to forget the value of community.[26]

From his coverage of the Old Testament, Rauschenbusch moved to a chapter titled "The Social Aims of Jesus." Interestingly for a man who concerned himself with the social questions of the day, Rauschenbusch did not argue that Jesus was a social reformer, at least not one in a modern sense. Rather, he held that Jesus "saw the evil in the life of men and their sufferings, but he approached these facts purely from the moral, and not from the economic or historical point of view. He wanted men to live a right life in common."[27] Rauschenbusch focused on the idea of the kingdom of God in relation to Jesus. He argued that Jesus was not primarily

[22] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 175-177.
[23] Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, xx-xxi.
[24] Ibid., 3-4.
[25] Ibid., 6-9.
[26] Ibid., 20-21.
[27] Ibid., 39-41.

interested with "the new soul, but the new society," a theocratic kingdom that grew as people entered the life of Jesus.[28] When it came to wealth, Rauschenbusch held to the belief that Jesus found "a profound danger to the better self in the pursuit of wealth," rather, he wanted to create a "true human society." Rauschenbusch argued that Jesus saw wealth as keeping people from depending upon their fellow men while also helping them avoid a feeling of responsibility to others.[29] In *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Jesus's occupation as a carpenter showed that he was one of the commoners of his day. Furthermore, Rauschenbusch saw Jesus as a revolutionary figure, both toward political and religious figures, although he held that this revolutionary nature did not really have a violent characteristic.[30] Indeed, Rauschenbusch may have been projecting his views onto Jesus here. When World War I broke out, he was outspoken in supporting a policy of neutrality on the part of the United States.[31]

When looking at the early Christian community, Rauschenbusch argued that they saw the millennium as a sort of utopia that would arise after a struggle with Rome. After the end of the empire, Christ's kingdom would be set up. His views came from historicizing John's Revelation. However, Rauschenbusch was somewhat critical of Paul's letters. Paul did not oppose the state as John appeared to do, and according to Rauschenbusch, he wrote of the return of Jesus in more spiritual terms:

> In Paul's program of the future there is no room for a millennium of happiness on this present earth. Only the dogmatic theory that all scripture writers must hold the same views can wedge the millennium into Paul's scheme of coming events. His outlook is almost devoid of social elements. To him the spirit was all. This material world could be saved only by ceasing to exist.[32]

This view of Paul seems to hold his writings in lower esteem than John's writing, merely because they did not comport with Rauschenbusch's understanding of the kingdom of God as a social order. Rather, Rauschenbusch argued that the early Christians anticipated a new political order; the churches were that new social order that would take over political power.[33] However, over the centuries, Christianity lost much of its revolutionary character in the mind of Rauschenbusch. In asking why the church had never attempted social reconstruction, *Christianity and the*

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[28] Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis,* 46-50.
[29] Ibid., 60-61.
[30] Ibid., 66-69.
[31] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 287-289.
[32] Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis,* 88-94. Block quote is on page 89.
[33] Ibid., 94-95.

Social Crisis points to the shift from the Hebrew emphasis on the present life and a desire for "social righteousness and the hope of a Messianic reign on earth" to a Greco-Roman emphasis on the life to come.[34]

It was not until Chapter Five of his *magnum opus* that Rauschenbusch began to discuss the crisis in twentieth-century America as he saw it. Unsurprisingly, the problem largely revolved around the conditions created in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. The advent of heavy machinery required people to move to the location of the machines—the cities. This caused the cost of land and rent to increase. It also meant that only the capitalists had access to the means of production. Most men had no property rights in the system, according to Rauschenbusch. Wages were poor, as was the morale of workers because they had no claim to the profits they produced. He pointed to the poor living and working conditions in the big cities that contributed to the poor health of the working class. Furthermore, he lamented what he saw as the decline in political democracy, citing the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt in a coal strike and the perceived threat that said intervention held for his political career because of the powerful interests that opposed him. Additionally, Rauschenbusch argued that the conditions in his day tended to corrupt the morals of the nation and undermine the family. He noted the increasing age of marriage in American society and the fact that many never married, blaming it on the fact that "hard times are always marked by a downward curve in the percentage of marriages."[35]

Walter Rauschenbusch believed that the church could not be indifferent toward the poverty in American cities.[36] The final chapter in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* created an action plan that he believed might help alleviate the problem of poverty and contribute to the coming kingdom of God. He believed that men must repent and believe the gospel for personal salvation. When applied to the social order, he called on men to repent for social sins and to have "faith in the possibility of a new social order." Rauschenbusch believed that regeneration also included a "revaluation of social values" because those regenerated would come to be dominated by Christ's spirit.[37] He called for evangelization toward a new social order and new human relations. He believed that Christians could overcome evil in the world, "not by withdrawing from [it], but by revolutionizing it." Walter Rauschenbusch believed that those who called for social justice were a new apostolate, arguing that they alone were in danger of persecution. He pointed to the lack of persecution of heretics in his day and age, only persecution of those who preached against mammon.[38] This emphasis on money contributed to the poverty

[34] Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 136.
[35] Ibid., 220. Outside of the quote, this paragraph is a summary of Chapter Five.
[36] Ibid., 247.
[37] Ibid., 285-286.
[38] Ibid., 331-339.

that Rauschenbusch wanted to alleviate through his calls for committing to bringing about the kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch remained optimistic that progress toward this goal could continue until the outbreak of World War I. As the United States moved toward an active role in the hostilities, many of Rauschenbusch's friends in the social gospel movement came to believe that the defeat of Germany was a prerequisite for continuing to build the kingdom of God in America. Rauschenbusch did not agree and came to be more pessimistic that he would see the full flowering of the kingdom in his lifetime.[39]

A Biblical Analysis of *Christianity and the Social Crisis*

In looking at Rauschenbusch's *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in the light of the Bible, there are some areas in which he drew attention to problems that were ignored by many religious leaders of the day. However, there were also areas in which he failed to consider the whole counsel of the Scriptures. In looking at the problem of exploitation and poverty, Rauschenbusch was correct in bringing the attention of his readers to the Old Testament prophets. Amos is one clear example that he used who condemned the injustice then prevalent in the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Amos wrote of Israel: "They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed. Father and son use the same girl and so profane my holy name. They lie down beside every altar on garments taken in pledge. In the house of their god they drink wine taken as fines" (Amos 2:6-8 ESV). The judgment of God came upon Israel, at least partly because of the injustice that was common in the kingdom. This is only one of the clearest examples from the Old Testament that God takes issues of justice toward the poor seriously. Additionally, Proverbs 14:31 states, "Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker, but he who is generous to the needy honors him." This indicates that oppression of the poor is possible and indeed happens, and it also declares that when this oppression takes place, it is an affront to God.

In looking at the ministry of Jesus, he also encouraged just treatment toward the poor. In overthrowing the tables of the money changers, he condemned them for making the temple "a den of robbers" (Matt. 21:13). In the context, the money changers made money from poor Jews who wanted to make the proper sacrifices. Additionally, when Jesus referred to the Great Commandment that his followers should love their neighbors as themselves (Matt. 22:39), it implies that they would not oppress them. Paul noted in 1 Timothy 6:10 that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil," and James 2 encourages believers to show no favoritism to the wealthy. These are just a handful of examples from the Bible that show that proper

[39] Evans, *The Kingdom Is Always but Coming*, 269-270.

treatment of the poor is near to God's heart. America during the Gilded Age was an era in which extreme poverty was widespread. Additionally, many in positions of power had no problem with the plight of the poor.

When it comes to Rauschenbusch's call to help the poor through bringing about the kingdom of God, his view was consistent with his postmillennial view of eschatology. However, this view of the timing of the kingdom is problematic when compared with the biblical witness. The witness of Scripture does not seem to indicate that things will get better before the ultimate return of Christ. Matthew 24 does not paint an attractive picture of what Jesus called "the beginning of the birth pains." Wars, rumors of wars, famines, and false Christs will predominate. Paul wrote that in the last days "times of difficulty" (2 Tim. 3:1 ESV) would come. People in this era will be lovers of self and lovers of money. Paul also wrote in his second epistle to the Thessalonians that there would be a great apostasy before the coming of the Lord. These are just a few of the passages that indicate the situation on earth will get worse, rather than better, before the return of Jesus. While Christians should work toward justice and love their neighbors as themselves, they should not expect the mass of humanity to follow suit in bringing the kingdom.

One final conflict between the biblical witness and Rauschenbusch's thought is related to the perceived dichotomy between the apocalypse in Revelation and the Pauline corpus. The writings of John and Paul are not in opposition as the prominent social gospel advocate posited. Rather, they are complementary. A premillennial understanding argues that the return of Christ is what leads to the consummation of the kingdom. He will set things right. This opposes the idea that the consummated kingdom, brought about by a Christianized society, will not result in the return of Christ.

Conclusion

Historian Bill Pitts argues that without *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, it would be unlikely that anyone would remember Walter Rauschenbusch today. However, since its publication and the attention that his views received because of its popularity, Rauschenbusch became a major influence on later social reformers. Martin Luther King Jr. noted the impact of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* on his thinking. The civil rights leader argued that the gospel at its best looked after the material well-being of man, not just his spirit. Interest in Rauschenbusch's writings has only increased in recent years. Pitts pointed to the call of Carl F. H. Henry to conservative Protestants to engage in social discussions as an example of the broader impact of Rauschenbusch and the social gospel.[40] Walter Rauschenbusch saw a problem during his ministry in New York City. There was widespread

[40] Bill Pitts, "Walter Rauschenbusch: A Centennial Legacy," *Baptist History & Heritage* 53, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 63-78.

poverty, and members of his congregation frequently lived in squalor. Illness wracked the youngest and most vulnerable, and the young minister wanted to find solutions. The teaching of Albrecht Ritschl regarding the kingdom of God provided a foundation for a theology that attempted to solve social questions, and Rauschenbusch applied it to his day. He believed that building the kingdom of God in America would create an ideal society. His personal hopes were largely dashed with the outbreak of World War I, but his teaching continues to hold influence to the present.

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