

“Walter Rauschenbusch’s Theology of the Common Good: The Optimism of his Social Gospel and Its Pervasive Impact on Society”

One can argue that among Baptist theologians Walter Rauschenbusch has had the greatest impact on the “common good,” as his social gospel theology attempted to improve all aspects of society. Considered by many to be the leading voice of the Social Gospel movement in America, Walter Rauschenbusch and his theology of the social gospel, launched a new era in the mission of the church. Like many of his turn-of-the-twentieth-century-peers, Rauschenbusch was optimistic that the church had a great opportunity to change the world for the better. Rauschenbusch had great hopes for the work of the Church and did not anticipate nor expect any assistance from the established political system in order for the Church to accomplish its goal of transforming society. His theology was all-encompassing and included a critical examination of numerous challenges facing society in his day including land ownership, living wages, union organization, public recreation, and family stability. This paper will explore Rauschenbusch’s optimistic ecclesiology as evident in the all-encompassing nature of his theology, as he believed the church had the potential to transform all aspects of society. In order to accomplish this task, this paper is not limited to Rauschenbusch’s *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, but examines all of his published works.

This paper opens with a discussion of Rauschenbusch’s belief in the church as “leaven.” In his landmark work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch opened with a look at the social dimension of the church throughout history.¹ His interpretation of the teaching ministry of Jesus and the actions of the early church served as keys for his expectation of the church in his day. He wrote, “The Spirit of the primitive Christianity did not spread only sweet peace and tender charity, but the leaven of social unrest. It disturbed the patriotism and loyalty of citizens for their country, and intervened between the sovereign State and its subjects.”² He opened a lesson known essay, “Christianity is Revolutionary,” by demonstrating his belief in the radical nature of the Christian faith as he wrote, “Christianity is in its nature revolutionary.”³ Rauschenbusch believed that the church had the unique opportunity to change society for the betterment of humanity. By preaching a gospel that had an impact on and was relevant to all aspects of society and not solely the salvation of individual souls, the church would then be able to transform society.

The second portion of the paper focuses on Rauschenbusch’s belief that the church of his age was poised to enter a new era of Christian history. His understanding of the church as “leaven” led him to believe that the church had the opportunity to communicate a more complete gospel that provided social as well as individual salvation. He wrote, “the present crisis presents one of the greatest opportunities for its own growth and development that have even been offered to

¹Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, (New York: Macmillan, 1907).

²Ibid., 139.

³Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, ed. Max Stackhouse (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 70.

Christianity. The present historical situation is a high summons of the Eternal to enter on a larger duty, and thereby inherit a larger life.”⁴ In order to inherit the “larger life” he wrote of, the church had to serve as a key change agent in transforming America into a better nation. Rauschenbusch believed the more complete presentation of the gospel included proclaiming salvation and grace into all aspects of life.

THE CHURCH AS LEAVEN

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) came to national prominence with the publication of *Christianity and the Social Crisis* in 1907.⁵ In the introduction to his work, Rauschenbusch asserted that the Church in America was just starting to recognize the social crisis that existed but had yet to come to some conclusions on how to address the problems. He believed the conscience of the Church was aroused over the social concerns but remained, “perplexed by contradicting voices.” It was the hope of Walter Rauschenbusch that *Christianity and the Social Crisis* would “serve as a contribution to this discussion” and he made clear that he wanted his work to convince the Church of their responsibility to respond to the existing social crisis.⁶ Written while Rauschenbusch was a professor of Church History at Rochester Theological Seminary, the impetus for his work did not come from his academic study but was birthed out of his own pastoral experience in New York City.⁷ From June 1886 until 1897 Rauschenbusch served as Pastor of the Second German Baptist Church in the section of New York City affectionately referred to as “Hell’s Kitchen.” As Pastor to the urban immigrant congregation, Rauschenbusch witnessed first-hand the many challenges faced by his German congregation including low wages, dangerous working conditions, and high rent costs that resulted in extreme poverty for many of his parishioners.⁸ The hardship experienced by many members of his congregation as well as other citizens of New York City prompted Rauschenbusch to question the traditional message of the gospel that emphasized the personal and individual nature of salvation. Rauschenbusch began to address the social problems in his pulpit at the Second German Baptist Church as well through writing and delivering papers. During his New York pastorate, Rauschenbusch found numerous avenues to express his concern for the social welfare of his

⁴Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 332.

⁵For an excellent thorough biography of Rauschenbusch see Christopher H. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always but Coming* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

⁶Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), xiii.

⁷On the development of Rauschenbusch’s theology see, Donovan E. Smucker, *The Origins of Walter Rauschenbusch’s Social Ethics* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994).

⁸The impact of Rauschenbusch’s pastoral ministry in New York City on his theology cannot be overstated. In the concluding paragraph of his introduction to *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, Rauschenbusch admitted that he wrote the book, “to discharge a debt” (xv) to his parishioners whose difficult circumstances served as a lasting influence on his life.

parishioners including presenting papers at the meetings of the Baptist Congress⁹ as well founding the periodical, *For the Right*.¹⁰

Rauschenbusch did not have the opportunity to explore fully the implications of his developing theology until he left the pastorate of the Second German Baptist Church to teach at his alma mater, Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York, in 1897. The teaching appointment gave Rauschenbusch the time necessary to produce manuscripts that detailed the harsh realities that Rauschenbusch himself had witnessed and that he believed the church needed to address.¹¹

In order to combat the social evils that existed, Rauschenbusch believed it was necessary for the church to follow the example of Jesus and act as “leaven” in order to transform the social system that needed to be changed. Rauschenbusch understood Jesus to be a subversive revolutionary that attempted to change the world around him, not through overthrowing the established government, but through his innovative teaching and healing ministry that could eventually bring about radical change. The teaching ministry of Jesus focused on the Kingdom of God and the church needed to recapture the concept of the Kingdom of God and apply it to all aspects of life.

Rauschenbusch did not believe the Kingdom of God was something that would arrive instantaneously and impose itself on the world, but rather the Kingdom of God was present and ready to be unleashed in order to transform the world. In the teaching ministry of Jesus he observed the expectation that the Kingdom of God transformed the world from within. Specifically in Jesus’ parables, Rauschenbusch believed patience was necessary because Jesus himself did not always demand immediate action from his followers but hoped for a gradual transformation as the principles of the Kingdom of God infused society in what Rauschenbusch called, “an organic growth slowly making its way.”¹² Rauschenbusch interpreted Jesus’ teaching ministry to conclude that the Kingdom of God was not an eventual possibility to be anticipated but already present “germinating in their hearts, pulsating in their common thoughts, reversing their valuation of things...and quietly

⁹Rauschenbusch participated in numerous meetings of the Baptist Congress and usually addressed social problems. For example in 1895 he participated in a panel discussing the state’s responsibility to employees of semi-public corporations. See “The Relation of the State to Semi-Public Corporations and Their Employees” in *Thirteenth Annual Session of the Baptist Congress For the Discussion of Current Questions Held in Providence, R. I.* (New York: Baptist Congress Publishing Co., 1898) 107-134. In 1898 he presented a paper discussing the responsibility of the state to assist its citizens. See Walter Rauschenbusch, “State Help vs. Self Help; or Paternalism in Government” in *The Sixteenth Annual Session of the Baptist Congress For the Discussion of Current Questions Held in The Delaware Avenue Baptist Church, Buffalo, N.Y.* (New York: Baptist Congress Publishing Co., 1899) 107-116. For an insightful look at the Baptist Congress see William H. Brackney, “The Frontier of Free Exchange of Ideas: The Baptist Congress as a Forum for Baptist Concerns, 1881-1913,” *Baptist History & Heritage Society* 38 (Summer-Fall 2003): 8-27.

¹⁰*For The Right*, gave Rauschenbusch and other like-minded pastors the opportunity to address the social problems they observed in the lives of their parishioners.

¹¹His most significant works included *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1912), and *A Theology For the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1917).

¹² Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 64.

creating a new world.”¹³ As the followers of Jesus applied the moral and ethical teachings of Jesus to their own lives, society and culture would be transformed by virtue of their participation. Rauschenbusch was convinced that the church of his era needed to recapture the ethos of Jesus and the early church if it hoped to transform society.

For Rauschenbusch, the early church functioned as a change agent in society in large part because of its autonomy from the established government. This point is elucidated in his critique of the post-Constantinian church found in *Christianizing the Social Order* in which he lamented the church’s desire for institutional legitimacy.¹⁴ The church found additional support for its new-found emphasis of self preservation in the political theology of Augustine’s *City of God*. Rauschenbusch believed Augustine’s presentation of the church as the realm of God and the state as the realm of Satan resulted in an unnecessary separation between the two that ruptured the church’s ability to transform society and “discouraged faith in the possibility of a Christian civil order.”¹⁵ Instead of following the example of Jesus and the early church who attempted to transform society from within, the church was negatively affected by Augustine’s political theology that viewed the state as something to be withdrawn from.

Rauschenbusch’s interpretation of church history led him to be critical of the church of the Middle Ages because it failed to focus on the principles of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus. Instead, Rauschenbusch believed that, “Christianity was embodied in an all-absorbing and all-dominating ecclesiastical organization, its social effectiveness was crippled....Its organizing ability was spent on strengthening its own organization. Its influence on the State was used to secure benefits for itself rather than for the people.”¹⁶ Evidence of God’s reign, specifically, the existence of the Kingdom of God was impeded by the devotion and attention given to building up the institution of the church.

Rauschenbusch’s belief in the power of the church to transform society is also evident in his understanding of the relationship between the Church and State. The Church had a great opportunity to influence the government, but Rauschenbusch did not expect the church to be directly involved in the realm of politics in order to help Christianize society. In order to maintain its proper identity and role, the church was to remain separate from the State and stay in constant tension with it. He wrote, “the marching of Church and State must be kept separate, but the output of each must mingle with the other to make social life increasingly wholesome and normal.”¹⁷ Both institutions, the Church and State enjoyed the same

¹³Ibid., 65.

¹⁴See particularly Chapter III, “The Eclipse of The Social Ideal” pps. 69-82 in which Rauschenbusch explained how Constantine’s legitimization of the church resulted in the church changing its focus from transforming society to establishing and maintaining itself as an organization.

¹⁵Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 79.

¹⁶Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 185.

¹⁷Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 380.

goal but Rauschenbusch was convinced that the State could not provide for the betterment of society without the guiding influence of the Church. The church was to steer the state onto the true path by “nudging the reluctant State along like an enlightened pedagogue.”¹⁸

Without the guiding influence of the Church, the State was inadequately prepared to provide for the social needs of humanity. The State lacked the moral guidance that the Church enjoyed by following the example of and the teachings of Jesus. Jesus focused on the reality of the Kingdom of God and it was the application of kingdom principles into the individual lives of the church members that could positively influence society. Rauschenbusch wrote, “the mission of the church is to implant the divine life in the souls of men, and from these regenerated individuals forces of righteousness will silently radiate, and evil customs and institutions will melt away without any propaganda.”¹⁹

While Rauschenbusch recognized that both Church and State are capable of contributing to the common good of society, he argued that the Church needed to play the role of the instigator in achieving the goal of providing for the social needs of humanity. It was the assessment of Rauschenbusch that, “the State is representative of things as they are. The church is the representative of things as they ought to be. In so far as it is loyal to this duty, it must be in perpetual but friendly conflict with the State, pushing it on to even higher lives of duty.”²⁰ Without the gentle prodding and provocation from the Church, the State would maintain the status quo and would not seek to improve its capacity to meet the social needs of humanity.

Rauschenbusch’s confidence that the Social Gospel could transform society is also demonstrated by his participation, or lack thereof, in the political realm. Many proponents of the Social Gospel turned their attention to the political sphere and joined the Socialist Party of America.²¹ The communalistic ideals of the Socialist Party had much in common with the goals of the adherents of the Social Gospel. As Robert Handy observed, in the advocates of the Social Gospel “the Socialist Party found rich soil in which to grow.”²² Rauschenbusch’s most recent biographer, Christopher C. Evans, pointed out however, that throughout his life he “remained clear about his intentions not to join the party.”²³ His decision to not join the National Socialist Party was not popular with many party leaders who hoped he would officially join their ranks. As Jacob Dorn noted,

¹⁸Ibid., 187.

¹⁹Ibid., 151.

²⁰Ibid., 186.

²¹For an evaluation of the relationship between Progressive Protestants and the Socialist Party see, Robert T. Handy, “Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920,” *Church History* 21 (1952): 39-54. Handy notes that the membership in the National Socialist Party increased from 25,000 in 1904 to 25,000 in 1912, see page 39.

²²Ibid., 39.

²³Christopher C. Evans, *The Kingdom is Always But Coming: A Life of Walter Rauschenbusch* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 243.

noted Socialist Vida Scudder practically begged Rauschenbusch to officially align himself with Socialist party. She wrote, “Nothing but party-membership convinces those men that one is in earnest. I covet you for the party. My being in it doesn’t count except to myself. Yours would. It would draw many, & we could get a political socialism of a better type.”²⁴ His refusal to become a member of the National Socialist Party, whose ideals were very similar to his own, demonstrated his conviction that as a follower of Jesus he needed to work through the church in an effort to transform society from within.

Despite the reluctant admission that Rauschenbusch “never joined the party” John C. Cort, inaccurately labeled him to be a “Christian socialist.”²⁵ To label Rauschenbusch a “Christian socialist” is to misunderstand his belief in the power of the church to influence the state. The term “socialist” is most commonly used to describe a member of the Socialist political party and that does not describe Walter Rauschenbusch. As illustrated by his refusal to join the Socialist party, Rauschenbusch never believed the political realm had the power to usher in changes that he believed only the church could help bring about. Despite the fact that Rauschenbusch never did join the Socialist Party of America, it is clear that he did have an appreciation for the ideals and goals of the organization. In his essay “Christian Socialism,” Rauschenbusch commented on the growing influence of the Socialist movement. He observed, “the spread of diluted Socialist ideas on many religious leaders has been one of the most fruitful religious influences of the last forty years.”²⁶ His praise for organized Socialism is also found in *Christianizing the Social Order* where he argued that Socialism offered “the most thorough and consistent economic elaboration of the Christian social ideal.”²⁷ Rauschenbusch’s assessment was later affirmed by noted historian Gary Dorrien who asserted, “it was the socialists, far more than the churches, who struggled to fulfill the biblical vision of a just social order.”²⁸

Rauschenbusch was not impressed by the growing numbers and the accompanying political influence of the National Socialist Party but he was appreciative of the ideals that united the organization. In *Christianizing the Social Order* he wrote, “The important fact is not the growing political power of the socialists, but the moral power of their cause.”²⁹ He

²⁴Vida D. Scudder to Rauschenbusch, 21 Sept. 1912, Box 93, Rauschenbusch Family Manuscript Collection, American Baptist-Samuel Colgate Historical Library at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, Rochester, New York, as cited in Jacob H. Dorn, “The Social Gospel and Socialism: A Comparison of the Thought of Francis Greenwood Peabody, Washington Gladden, and Walter Rauschenbusch,” *Church History* 62 (March 1993): 99.

²⁵John C. Cort, *Christian Socialism: An Informal History*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1988), 247. Handy also takes exception to the label “Christian socialist” and suggested that it should not be applied to Rauschenbusch or any other advocate of the Social gospel. See Handy, 42-43.

²⁶Walter Rauschenbusch, “Christian Socialism,” in *A Dictionary of Religion and Ethics*, eds., Mathews & Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 90.

²⁷Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 397.

²⁸Gary J. Dorrien, *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 26.

²⁹Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 395.

even went so far as to compare the ideals of the Socialists to the monastic communities of the Middle Ages. He wrote, “Today socialism is seeking to establish on a world-wide scale some of the essential principles of the monastic societies, the abolition of rank, the duty of work, the combination of manual and spiritual labor and fraternal property rights.”³⁰

Rauschenbusch’s admiration for the efforts and goals of the Socialists is also clearly demonstrated in *Christianizing the Social Order* where he concluded that God ordained Socialism as part of his plan for transforming society. He wrote, “God had to raise up Socialism because the organized Church was too blind, or too slow, to realize God’s ends.”³¹

Rauschenbusch recognized the virtues of the Socialists but could not join them in their political efforts because the organization did not have the principles of the kingdom of God as its foundation. For Rauschenbusch, the key to transforming society was through the individual application of the principles of the Kingdom of God into one’s life. The political goals of the Socialists were in many ways consistent with the aims of Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, but the fact that they did not have the same foundational motivation was too much for Rauschenbusch to ignore. In a letter to a friend, in which he defended his appreciation for the Socialist ideals, he made his position clear. He wrote, “I am not going to tell the Socialists that I expect them to remain atheists. I shall tell them that they are now religious in spite of themselves and that an increased approach to religion is inevitable as they emerge from the age of polemics and dogmatism.”³² In the opinion of Rauschenbusch, the National Socialist Party had no hope for long-term sustainable success because it failed to have as its foundation, the reality of the kingdom of God. The platform of the National Socialist Party did not include transforming individuals from within so they could then participate in transforming society around them. Only a life centered on the principles of the Kingdom of God would be able to transform society. The foundational convictions of its individual members did not matter to the National Socialist party, but it was of paramount concern for Rauschenbusch. He wrote, “It is not this thing or that thing our nation needs, but a new mind and heart, a new conception of the way we all ought to live together, a new conviction about the worth of a human life and the use God wants us to make of our own lives. We want a revolution both inside and outside.”³³

In his examination of the relationship between Christianity and Socialism in the beginning decades of the twentieth century, Robert Handy observed that for many advocates of the Social Gospel the emphasis on the coming kingdom of God necessitated a diminished view of the church. He wrote, “The great concern of the Christians in socialism with the coming

³⁰Ibid., 381.

³¹Ibid., 405.

³²Walter Rauschenbusch to Francis Peabody, December 14, 1912, Rauschenbusch Family Manuscript Collection, box 26 as cited in Evans, 241.

³³Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 459.

kingdom led them to neglect the doctrine of the church.”³⁴ While that assessment may be true for some advocates of the Social Gospel, I contend that it is inaccurate to conclude that Rauschenbusch neglected the church. It is true that Rauschenbusch could be critical of the church when he believed it failed to live up to its divine calling but he was also convinced that it was the mission of the church to embrace the reality of the Kingdom of God in order to transform society.

His belief in the power of the Church to influence the State demonstrated Rauschenbusch’s optimism in the power inherent within the Social Gospel to provide for the social needs of humanity. The same optimism however, served as Rauschenbusch’s critique of the church because the social crisis occurred, at least in part, because the church failed to live up to its task of properly influencing and guiding the State. Rauschenbusch never hesitated to rebuke or admonish the church for failing to live up to its God-given responsibility of transforming society from within. Without the infusion of the Kingdom of God within it, the church had no hope of transforming society and would in fact contribute to society’s destruction. Rauschenbusch made this point clear in *A Theology For the Social Gospel*. He wrote, “Unless the church is vitalized by the ever nascent forces of the Kingdom within her, she deadens instead of begetting.”³⁵

In an essay entitled, “Walter Rauschenbusch and the Saving of America,” Stanley Hauerwas correctly summarized Rauschenbusch’s great expectation for the church, as he wrote, “A saved church is the beginning of the salvation of the nation.”³⁶ Ultimately, the church had to decide whether or not to participate in transforming society into what God wanted and hoped it would be. In the same way that revivalists contemporaries of Rauschenbusch called upon individuals to make a personal decision for Christ, Rauschenbusch appealed to the church to make a corporate decision to participate in the transformation of society. The prophetic call from Rauschenbusch to the church was not asking for a one-time decision, but was in fact a continual call that urged the church to constantly choose to participate in the transformation of society. Rauschenbusch did not assume that the church was part of the solution to the social crisis and admitted that the church could in fact contribute to the social decline. He stated, “The Church has the power to save in so far as the Kingdom of God is present in it. If the Church is not living for the kingdom, its institutions are part of the ‘world.’”³⁷ If the church refused to urge society on towards God’s desire for humanity then the church itself was part of the problem and not part of the solution. In order to be a part of the solution to help end the social crisis that existed it was essential that the church embrace the principles of the Kingdom of God in order to gradually infuse them into society.

³⁴Handy, “Christianity and Socialism in America, 1900-1920,” 50.

³⁵Rauschenbusch. *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 130.

³⁶Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2000), 82.

³⁷Rauschenbusch, *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 144.

Although Rauschenbusch sharply criticized the church for its failure to recognize its God-given task to “Christianize” the social order, he also expressed supreme optimism that the church was primed and ready to recapture its identity and make a dramatic impact on society. His writings exude confidence that the mistakes made by the church throughout history could be corrected by the church of his era. He did not think that the church was capable of correcting its previous mistakes simply because he informed the church of the pressing issues that existed, but rather believed strongly that God had orchestrated history in such a way that the church was on the verge of entering into a new era in the history of the church. If the church decided to recognize its social responsibility and intentionally infuse society with the principles of the Kingdom of God then society would be transformed. His excitement regarding the future is part of his prophetic challenge to the church. They had the choice to be part of this new era in the history of the church or they could opt out of participating in the new movement directed by God. “The Church must either condemn the world and seek to change it or tolerate the world and conform to it. In the latter case it surrenders its holiness and its mission. The other possibility has never yet been tried with full faith on a large scale.”³⁸

NEW ERA IN CHURCH HISTORY

Rauschenbusch was prepared and ready to take the lead in ushering in this new era in the history of the church. Rauschenbusch spent his life writing and speaking about the social responsibility of the church and he believed the church was finally prepared to live up to its God-given responsibility. The question that haunted Rauschenbusch throughout his life was whether or not the church would take advantage of the great opportunity to reclaim the social elements of the gospel. The social crisis had reached a climax and Rauschenbusch was optimistic that the church would finally embrace the fullness of the gospel, including the social responsibility he believed to be inherent within the gospel. In contrast to other generations, Rauschenbusch believed that the church of his era had the unique opportunity to have greater influence on society than the church of any previous era. He wrote, “the present crisis presents one of the greatest opportunities for its own growth and development that have even been offered to Christianity. The present historical situation is a high summons of the Eternal to enter on a larger duty, and thereby inherit a larger life.”³⁹

By recognizing and embracing the full social implications of the gospel as taught by Jesus, the church had the tools to have a greater sphere of influence on society than ever before and therefore enter into the “larger duty” and “larger life” that God envisioned for the church. The all-encompassing nature of his theology is apparent in the introduction to the book that launched him onto the international stage. “The essential purpose of Christianity is to transform human society into the

³⁸Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 342.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 332.

Kingdom of God by regenerating all human relations and reconstituting them in accordance with the will of God.”⁴⁰ He believed that the salvation and grace within the gospel applied to all human interactions with one another including all economic, social, and political activities. As a result, it was the responsibility of the church to help bring salvation to the economic, social, and political realms.

For Rauschenbusch, the economic system was in desperate need of redemption as it served as the point of origin for many of the challenges and obstacles faced by many working-class Americans of his era. His critique of capitalism is clear throughout his writings and it received significant attention in *Christianizing the Social Order*.⁴¹ Not only did he believe the capitalistic system to be unfair to many citizens in society but he was also convinced that the structure of the system tempted individuals to sin in order to make up for the economic hardship that did exist. He wrote, “An unchristian economic order tempts men and debases character, sets individuals and classes into unfraternal antagonism to one another, and institutionalizes wide-spread disloyalty to the common good.”⁴² The aggressive nature of the capitalistic system fashioned individuals into competitors who looked out for their own selfish interests and did not care for the common good of society. The direct competition inherent within the capitalistic system stands in opposition to the spirit of community and cooperation that are part of the Kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch wanted his readers to recognize the extensive nature of the economic problem and offered his own interpretation of the situation in *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.⁴³ The capitalistic system resulted in an unjust society that was not consistent with what God wanted for his people.

In contrast to the economic system that existed, Rauschenbusch urged the church to infuse society with the principles of the Kingdom of God in order to form a Christian economic order. “A Christian economic order must organize all workers in systematic and friendly cooperation and so create the material basis for Christian fraternity.”⁴⁴ His belief in the cooperative nature of the Kingdom of God led Rauschenbusch to be supportive of economic cooperatives. Cooperatives operated in a democratic fashion in which all participants were equal and influence was not determined by financial

⁴⁰Ibid., xiii.

⁴¹Part IV, “The Invasion of God’s Country,” and Part V, “The Direction of Progress” offer Rauschenbusch’s most exhaustive critique of capitalism. His critique against capitalism is perhaps best summed up in that it is “unfraternal, the opposite of cooperation and teamwork”(311).

⁴²Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 372.

⁴³In Chapter V, “The Present Crisis,” Rauschenbusch expressed his interpretation of the social problems that existed as a result of capitalism. His argument centered on the privatization of land which created an unfair disparity between individuals who owned land and those who did not. This difference led to an unequal distribution of wealth because the land or business owners did not share their profits with their workers. The political systems also favored the wealthy as special interest groups lobbied congress on behalf of the wealthy and the working-class did not have the resources to speak out for their needs. The privatization of land also led to overcrowded conditions in urban areas which resulted in unsanitary living conditions for many of the working-class. Lastly, the economic situation also undermined the family because many women and child were forced to find jobs in order to help support their families. *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 211-286.

⁴⁴Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 373.

resources.⁴⁵ The members of the cooperatives shared the work as well as the profits. The personal interests of the individuals were secondary to the mutual interests of the community. Along with the elements of equality present in an economic cooperative, Rauschenbusch also praised cooperatives for the elements of brotherhood and community they instilled in their members. His praise for the cooperatives is evident as he wrote, “the co-operatives develop men and educate community in helpful loyalty and comradeship.”⁴⁶ The cooperatives were consistent with the principles of the Kingdom of God because they elevated the interests of the community above that of the individual members.

Rauschenbusch’s belief in the fraternal nature of the Kingdom of God also resulted in his support of labor unions. The cooperative spirit, sense of brotherhood, and selflessness that characterized the labor unions paralleled Rauschenbusch’s hopes for a Christianized society. He even concluded that the sin of the organized union was less than that of the selfish individual because they substituted “the principle of solidarity for that of competitive selfishness.”⁴⁷ He continued, “the group selfishness of the unions is at least a larger and nobler selfishness than that of the strike breaker whom the public sentiment of capitalism praises and rewards.”⁴⁸ For Rauschenbusch, an organized strike was to be commended for its exemplification of Christian brotherhood as, “Thousands of men and women giving up their job, their slender hold on subsistence, imperiling the bread and butter of their families for the sake of men in another trade with whom they have only a distant economic connection”⁴⁹ His praise for labor unions and their efforts is presented in contrast with the selfish nature of the church that has been concerned primarily with self-preservation. In a clear critique of the church he asked, “where in church life do we find such heroic self-sacrifice of great bodies or men and women for a common cause?”⁵⁰ Even though the actions of the labor unions were at times controversial, Rauschenbusch appreciated their efforts and praised their existence because they personified the attributes of the Kingdom. “Where men live in the consciousness of solidarity and in the actual practice of love with their fellow-men, they are not far from the Kingdom of God.”⁵¹

Despite his obvious frustration regarding the economic order, Rauschenbusch remained confident that the church was on the verge of bringing about a radical change in the social order that was consistent with the principles of the Kingdom

⁴⁵Ibid., 386.

⁴⁶Rauschenbusch, *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 112.

⁴⁷Ibid., 388.

⁴⁸Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 389.

⁴⁹Ibid., 389-390.

⁵⁰Ibid., 390.

⁵¹Rauschenbusch, *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 165-166.

of God. “Our civilization is passing through a great historic transition. We are at the parting of the ways.”⁵² One factor that contributed to his confidence was the spirit of democracy that existed not only in America but throughout the world.

Rauschenbusch was convinced that the vast number of Christians would be able to use the democratic process in order to infuse society with the principles of the Kingdom of God and therefore transform society from within.

The early church serves as the exemplar for Christians of future generations to follow and Rauschenbusch considered the democratic nature of the early church to be one of the keys to its success in transforming society. The congregations of the early church recognized the equality of each of its members and the democratic nature of the churches is part of what set the Christians apart from the rest of society. He also believed the democratic ethos was part of the gospel message. He argued that Christianity “brought with it a strong leaven of democracy and protest which unsettled men. It created social unrest and carried disturbance in its train.”⁵³ Rauschenbusch hoped that the church of his era would recognize its potential and follow the example of the early church by infusing society with the principles of the Kingdom of God resulting in a transformed social order.

Rauschenbusch’s application of the term democracy has reemerged in recent debates regarding political theology. In his article, “The Democratic Policing of Christianity” Stanley Hauerwas argues that the democratic spirit has harmed the witness of the church.⁵⁴ According to Hauerwas, the democratic spirit has not been a useful tool for the church in its quest to transform society and in reality the democratic spirit has for all practical purposes pushed the church out of the discussion regarding the welfare of society. Hauerwas rightly recognizes that Rauschenbusch did not envision the religious pluralism that exists in America today. He concluded, “Rauschenbusch simply had not yet come to terms as we must with ‘pluralism.’”⁵⁵ While he may not have correctly anticipated the pluralism that exists today it is wrong to assume that the church is no longer able to infuse society with the principles of the Kingdom of God which would transform even a pluralistic society. Throughout his works, Rauschenbusch praised the early church for their efforts to transform society from within and the early church enjoyed success in religiously pluralistic and often hostile environments. The church of his era was blessed with the opportunity to follow the example of the early church in a country that operated under democratic ideals, which in the assessment of Rauschenbusch provided a greater opportunity for the church of his era to transform society.

That Hauerwas dismisses Rauschenbusch’s belief in the transformative power of democracy because of the reality of pluralism is curious because Hauerwas himself offers a different reason why the church has failed in its efforts to transform

⁵²Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 40.

⁵³Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and Social Crisis*, 133.

⁵⁴Stanley Hauerwas, “The Democratic Policing of Christianity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (Spring 1994): 222.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 222.

society. In the same article Hauerwas contends that the real problem with democracy is not pluralism but “is quite simply the American people.” It is the contention of Hauerwas that democracy has failed the American people because the people themselves believe that “their task is to pursue their own interests.”⁵⁶ Ironically, Hauerwas offers a similar conclusion to Rauschenbusch who throughout his works critiqued the church for failing to put principles of the Kingdom of God, including brotherhood and a cooperative spirit, above their personal interests. In the mind of Rauschenbusch, the democratic nature of American society presented the church with a great opportunity to transform society from within by embodying the principles of the Kingdom of God and infusing them into society.

In another work, Hauerwas laments Rauschenbusch’s low ecclesiology contending that for Rauschenbusch, “the church, became increasingly irrelevant for the project of changing America.”⁵⁷ Admittedly, Rauschenbusch was critical of the church for not embracing the principles of the Kingdom of God however he remained confident that the church was going to recognize its responsibility of transforming society from within. He was certain a new day had dawned in the history of the church. His optimism that the church was ready to embrace the social reality of the gospel is unquestioned. He wrote, “Those who come after us will judge how well or ill we played our part, but whenever men hereafter write the story of how Christendom became Christian, they have to begin a new chapter at the years in which we are now living.”⁵⁸ Hauerwas’s dismissal of Rauschenbusch’s ecclesiology is surprising considering Rauschenbusch’s unequivocal optimism that the church was going to play a major role in transforming society by embracing the principles of the Kingdom of God. Rauschenbusch made clear that the church played a vital role in transforming society as he stated, “The Church is the social factor in salvation.”⁵⁹ The church served as Rauschenbusch’s audience whom he hoped to inspire and educate regarding their responsibility to proclaim the social implications of the gospel. That the church failed to respond to his prophetic call to embrace and embody the principles of the Kingdom of God cannot be laid at the feet of Rauschenbusch. His writings exude confidence that the church of his generation was poised to usher in a new era in the history of the church.

Rauschenbusch’s confidence that the church would reclaim its responsibility of transforming society is so pervasive throughout his writings that his work was dismissed by other theologians for being too idealistic regarding what can be accomplished on earth.⁶⁰ Recently, theologians have viewed Rauschenbusch’s optimism and the pervasive nature of his

⁵⁶Ibid., 230.

⁵⁷Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, 107.

⁵⁸Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 29.

⁵⁹Rauschenbusch, *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 119.

⁶⁰Rauschenbusch as well as other advocates of the social gospel were considered unrealistic utopians who did not take seriously the presence of sin within society. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Walter Rauschenbusch in Historical Perspective,” *Religion In Life* 27 (Autumn 1958): 527-536. See also Chapter 7 “The Underlying Theology of the Social Gospel,” in W. A. Visser’t Hooft, *The Background of the Social Gospel in America* (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink & Zoon, 1928): 169-187.

theology in a far more favorable light.⁶¹ Notre Dame theologian Mary Doak suggests Rauschenbusch served as an arbiter of hope for the church and laments the fact that utopian idealists such as Rauschenbusch have been removed from the public square.⁶² In the articles she argues, “I am convinced that the rejection of utopian thinking is a closing of the American imagination that not only blinds us to the deep flaws in our social institutions but even endangers those very institutions that we refuse to think beyond.”⁶³ Doak understands Rauschenbusch to be a hope-filled utopian that encouraged his peers to imagine more than they could see with the naked eye. Doak rightly concludes that Rauschenbusch’s idealism “should not be rejected as naïve optimism but rather embraced as a virtue necessary for socio-political action.”⁶⁴

Rauschenbusch himself recognized the high expectations his theology placed upon the church but he was also a pragmatist knowing that true perfection was not a realistic goal in this life. The high expectations reminded the church of their responsibility and in the mind of Rauschenbusch spurred the church on to action. He wrote, “We shall demand perfection and never expect to get it. But by demanding it we shall get more than we now have.”⁶⁵ He hoped that the church would infuse the principles of the Kingdom of God into society so that the social order would be transformed from within. Despite his occasional critique of Rauschenbusch Hauerwas appreciates his high expectations for the church when he notes that Rauschenbusch’s theology of the social gospel “sought nothing less than the saving of America.”⁶⁶ He had lofty hopes for the church but remained aware of the fact that the sinfulness of humanity would preclude society from achieving perfection. He admitted, “We shall never have a perfect social life, yet we must seek it with faith. The Kingdom of God is always but coming. But every approximation to it is worthwhile.”⁶⁷

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Walter Rauschenbusch believed the social gospel embodied the common good for society. He was confident that the church of his era could have a positive impact on society by following the example of Jesus and that of the early church by reforming society from within. The only way the church could transform society was by adopting and proclaiming the principles of the Kingdom of God. If the church embodied the principles of the Kingdom of God then its

⁶¹Gary J. Dorrien, preeminent historian of American Liberal Theology understands Rauschenbusch as the forerunner of the liberation theologians. He sees in Rauschenbusch’s social gospel “the most instructive precedent for the modern liberationist project.” *Reconstructing the Common Good: Theology and the Social Order* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990) 17.

⁶²Mary Doak, “Hope, Eschatology, and Public Life: The Contributions of Rauschenbusch, Mathews, and Niebuhr to Reopening the American Imagination,” *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 23 (May 2002): 108-128.

⁶³Ibid., 109.

⁶⁴Ibid., 120.

⁶⁵Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 126.

⁶⁶Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources For a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, 71.

⁶⁷Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, 420-421.

members would function as leaven within society. Like leaven in dough, slowly but surely the church would affect everything it touched. If the church recognized its social responsibility and proclaimed the social aspects of the gospel then all of society would be transformed. The pervasive nature of his theology is what attracted him to the Socialist movement within the United States. The emphasis of the Socialists on fraternity, equality, and cooperation within society were similar to his interpretation of the message of Jesus and the example of the early church who put the needs of the community ahead of their individual desires. His theological emphasis on mutuality and equality is what led him to criticize capitalism and appreciate socialistic organizations such as economic cooperatives as well as labor unions that emphasized the greater good of the community over that of the individual. In order for his goal of transforming society to be accomplished the church had to help its members put the needs of the common good ahead of their own individual needs. For Rauschenbusch, individuals discovered salvation and emulated God when they put the needs of others before their own. “But in some germinal and rudimentary form salvation must turn us from a life centered on ourselves toward a life going out toward God and men. God is the all-embracing source and exponent of the common life and good of mankind.”⁶⁸

Rauschenbusch was confident that the church of his generation was on the threshold of a new era in the history of the church. The stage was set for the church to recognize its responsibility and proclaim a gospel not only concerned with the salvation of individuals but also with the salvation of all society. The gospel message as proclaimed by Jesus and modeled by the early church was all-inclusive and Rauschenbusch was certain the church of his generation was ready to proclaim the gospel in its entirety. By proclaiming a complete gospel the church was primed to transform the social order from within by infusing society with the principles of the Kingdom of God. As the truth of the principles of the Kingdom of God spread throughout the citizenry, the populace would be affected by the gospel and they would be transformed. Society would then would follow the teachings of Jesus and embody the Kingdom of God by putting the needs of the community ahead of the needs of its individual members. His writings burst with confidence that the church was prepared to recognize its potential to impact all areas of life. There was no doubt in his mind that the church was ready and able to model the principles of the Kingdom of God that placed the needs of the common good ahead of the individual needs of each citizen. Rauschenbusch’s social gospel informed the church of the social problems that existed and called the church to action. For Walter Rauschenbusch, his theology of the social gospel represented what was best for all of society. The complete gospel, including its social dimensions, provided salvation for all aspects of society which equated to the common good for all persons.

⁶⁸Rauschenbusch, *A Theology For the Social Gospel*, 98-99.

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