

For God and the People
Consistent Ethics to Challenge the Present

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Introduction

The late 1800's and early 1900's was a time of intense social change in America. The Industrial Revolution impacted the Northeast of the country with the proliferation of factory work. With the new economy booming, mistreatment of the working class was ubiquitous with work. There were many who fought for the rights of the poor and working class, but those who preached the Social Gospel saw the Gospel of Jesus as more than a Sunday service. The Gospel showed us how to treat employees as well as the common man.

Walter Rauschenbusch saw the salvation of the Bible as more than an individual, personal decision. This salvation was for the community, a community he saw being held down by greedy and ungodly business owners. With the help of his co-laborers, Rauschenbusch put together this book of prayers for the people. Rauschenbusch has two focuses in this book of prayers: To reform the way Christians work and the way Christians live.

The Social Reformers

The second focus of these prayers was to build up a strong community with integrity. Rauschenbusch was deeply embedded in his community and saw the damage that debauchery caused. The Social Gospel movement championed Prohibition and wanted to remove the vices from communities. By eliminating alcohol and sex work, in addition to proper training, a poor community could find stability.

Alcohol was a vehicle to degrade the working class. The cycle of work and drink was detrimental to the community. Prohibitionists saw the family system crumble with the rise of alcohol abuse. The working class was tired - and found rest in the bar. Rauschenbusch, and other Prohibitionists, saw the Gospel as incompatible with alcohol.

Impurity was another vice the working class used to the destruction of the community. Rauschenbusch calls for the married to continue to be strong in their relationships. Sex outside the bond of marriage was considered a shame because, at the bottom of the experience, was the humiliation of the individual and the community. “Grant me a steadfast scorn for pleasure bought by human degradation. May no reckless word or wanton look from me kindle the slow fires of wayward passion that will char and consume the divine beauties of any soul.”¹

Once the community was able to remove these vices, they could start to build themselves up strong character. This character is founded on the integrity, value of each individual, and the need for justice across social and economic class. For Rauschenbusch, these were not empty platitudes. His reading of the Gospels, informed with his lived experience in the slums of New York City, required each Christian to struggle for the same values for all.

Those Who Lord and Labor

Rauschenbusch spends most of his energy talking about how men should labor and how those in authority should treat their employees. Misuse and poor working practices were rampant in America during the Industrial Revolution, and he had a front row seat serving as a pastor in Hell’s Kitchen. Rauschenbusch doesn’t call for the abolition of the capitalist economy that was thriving. Rather, he calls both the bosses and the employees to live lives founded on Christian principles.

Those who worked were called to organize to help uplift everyone in the community. This would consist of both neighborhoods looking out for each other as well as formal labor

¹ Rauschenbusch, 61.

unions. In both instances, it was the obligation of each Christian to live like Jesus - not in piety alone, but in practice.

“If any of them is tempted to sell the birthright of his class for a mess of pottage for himself, give him a wider outlook and a nobler sympathy with his fellows. Teach them to keep step in a steady onward march, and in their own way to fulfil the law of Christ by bearing the common burdens. Grant the organizations of labor quiet patience and prudence in all disputes, and fairness to see the other side. Save them from malice and bitterness. Save them from the headlong folly which ruins a fair cause, and give them wisdom resolutely to put aside the two-edged sword of violence that turns on those who seize it. Raise up for them still more leaders of able mind and large heart, and give them grace to follow the wiser counsel.”²

The law of Christ is to bear common burdens. This idea of commonality of the joys and struggles can be seen throughout the New Testament. This was a hallmark of the Apostles and the Early Church. Rauschenbusch picked up on this idea and adapted it for the turn of the 20th century. His prayer is that organized labor would be fair in their disputes with employers and in solidarity with those who are fighting for justice.

We can see the same ideas in the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King Jr. - and much of the Black Church - also sees the necessity of social reform in the call of the Gospel. King disavowed violence and utilized boycotts and peaceful protests. This tactic laid down the sword that Jesus condemns Peter for in the garden (Lk. 22:49-51) and instead used organized, weaponized nonviolence to pressure changes by the authorities. While this was a strong tactic, it was not unjust. The organized exercise of the free market in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 led to reforms of the laws that brought Black Americans closer to equality.

When examining and encouraging employers, Rauschenbusch does not call for their downfall. This would be against the character of his Christianity. Even a bad boss is in the community, and the community is charged with holding the burdens of all. Instead, he calls for

² Rauschenbusch, Walter. For God and the People. CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition. 35-36.

the employers to use discretion, patience, and love to treat employees with respect and dignity. “Since they hold power over the bread, the safety, and the hopes of the workers, may they wield their powers justly and with love, as older brothers and leaders in the great fellowship of labor. Suffer not the heavenly light of compassion for the weak and the old to be quenched in their hearts.”³

The employers are warned to resist the natural evil of being in position of power: the dehumanization of those whom they employ. “When they are tempted to follow the ruthless ways of others, and to sacrifice human health and life for profit, do thou strengthen their will in the hour of need... May they not sin against the Christ by using the bodies and souls of men as mere tools to make things, forgetting the human hearts and longings of these their brothers.”⁴ Both the employers and the employees are in danger of sinning against Christ by the way they treat the other. There is a need to remember the humanity of those you disagree with - or in some cases, those who actively work against you.

Modern Conservatism

There is much in these prayers that ring true to the modern Liberal or Progressive in America. The importance of social issues and real justice for the poor and working class can be seen in today’s progressive churches. Rauschenbusch's plea for collective action, in both community life as well as in formal labor unions, are becoming more popular as the America Church finds a new voice. The hesitancy for war, with this work published in 1909, is a warning that is still often ignored. These ideas are important to both Progressive Christians as well as non-religious Progressive political movements.

³ Rauschenbusch, 38.

⁴ Ibid.

However, much of the ideas are at odds with progressive politics. Rauschenbusch is seemingly in favor of Christian morals leading social norms. Prohibition, purity, and marriage are three issues touched on in this collection of prayers that would be viewed as conservative and outdated in our current Liberal America.

How does a Liberal Christian in America justify both the commonalities and the differences in Rauschenbusch's work? The Black Church in America has a rich history of living a conservative religion with an emphasis on justice. The Liberal Christian - often White Mainline Protestant - has a tradition that doesn't devalue piety for social reform. In a world of black and white, there is a Church who constantly finds the grey. And while I disagree with Rauschenbusch's solution for some of the issues plaguing society, it is important to interact with these conservative voices and remind myself that those who I disagree with are also deserving of respect and dignity. This was the ultimate call from Rauschenbusch.

References

Rauschenbusch, Walter. For God and the People (p. 61). CrossReach Publications. Kindle Edition.