

Walter Rauschenbusch and The Social Gospel

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By the turn of the last century a new theology emerged within the United States called the social gospel. Walter Rauschenbusch, the son of German immigrants and a Baptist, was the major proponent of this new theology. The social gospel sought to address issues of sin and salvation within the context of the Industrial Revolution and the great poverty it spawned in urban centers. The social gospel asked Christians and their churches to become advocates for the “least of these” in a society that had abandoned the poor. Rauschenbusch’s theology was optimistic. He saw human progress as an event always moving forward with the great potential for improvement of the human condition. The social gospel became the dominant theology within American churches until the optimism it expressed collapsed under the weight of two world wars and a growing sense among Christians that human progress was not always a forward event. Despite its shortcoming the Social Gospel remains one of the most important theological movements of the modern era and even today continues to impact the work of mainline Christian churches. There is much that we can learn from this theology and incorporate into the lives of our modern churches.

Rauschenbusch was born in 1861 in New York.¹ His father was a former Lutheran minister who had converted and become Baptist after leaving Germany and settling in New York with his family. He became a professor at Rochester Theological Seminary and this is where Walter Rauschenbusch spent his childhood. Walter Rauschenbusch took a fairly traditional path and followed his father into the ministry. He was sent to study in Germany for four years and then returned to take degrees at the University of Rochester and Rochester

¹ William M. Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1986), p 10.

Theological Seminary.² After seminary he seriously considered undertaking missionary work in India but instead accepted a calling with a congregation of German immigrants outside a slum in New York City known as Hell's Kitchen.³ Max L. Stackhouse writes that he was actually turned down for missionary work "because of his 'unorthodox' interpretation of the message of the biblical prophets."⁴ Regardless, it was in New York that he was fully exposed to the harsh realities of urban life among immigrants. He often said it was not his formal education that developed his passion for social reform:

It came from the outside. It came through personal contact with poverty, and when I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard, toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in hard times; how little children died – oh, the children's funerals! They gripped my heart.⁵

The Industrial Revolution had not been kind to workers. This was the period before Progressive Era reforms had taken effect. There were no rights protecting workers who wanted to organize into unions. Widows and orphans had no protection afforded them if their husband was killed on the job. The elderly had nothing like social security to use as a cushion after they became too old to be useful in the factories. Rauschenbusch noticed that those benefiting from industrialization also called themselves Christians and decided that sin had more to do with just the social sins (drinking, dancing, gambling) denounced by many preachers. He felt a call "to minister to the victims of social indifference,

² Ibid., p 11.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Christopher H. Evans (editor), *The Social Gospel Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p 157.

⁵ Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets*, p 12.

political corruption, and economic greed.”⁶ How could Christians who owned these factories, he wondered, not see that people suffered for their wealth? Christopher H. Evans offers a good synopsis of the connection between Rauschenbusch’s Christian faith and these social issues:

Of paramount importance to the social gospel was that the pressing social issues of the day – the elimination of child labor, the alleviation of economic and educational disparities between the rich and poor, the establishment of a safe working environment, and the creation of a living wage for every working American – were not simply problems that warranted political solutions. They were deeply moral and spiritual issues that could only be addressed and solved from a faith-based perspective. As expressed by William McGuire King, what united many adherents of the social gospel was their belief that “knowledge of God was only available when theological reflection become one with social action and with participation in the social struggles of humanity.”⁷

Rauschenbusch’s first major published work, Christianity and the Social Crisis, appeared in 1907. Class divisions and tensions were on the rise during this period and a political movement, known as the Progressive Movement, was attempting to address in political terms what Rauschenbusch was addressing in theological terms. Rauschenbusch’s first important exposure to this political movement came from a tax reformer by the name of Henry George.⁸ Rauschenbusch took from George a vision of “want destroyed, with greed changed to noble passions; with the fraternity that is born of equality taking the place of the jealousy and fear that now array men against other men.”⁹ George’s vision reminded Rauschenbusch of the Kingdom of God and he sought in his writings to tie the problems of modern urban life with the teaching of Jesus on the

⁶ Ibid., p 13.

⁷ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p. 6.

⁸ Ramsay, *Four Modern Prophets*, p 13.

⁹ Ibid.

Kingdom. The problems faced in the cities were overwhelming. A 1907 article written by Edwin Markham for *Cosmopolitan Magazine* captures some of the problems people like those in Rauschenbusch's congregation coped with:

In unaired rooms, mothers and fathers sew by day and by night. Those in the home sweatshop must work cheaper than those in the factory sweatshop....And children are called in from play to drive and drudge beside their elders...All the year in New York and in other cities you may watch children radiating to and from such pitiful homes. Nearly any hour on the East Side of New York City you can see them – their faces dulled, their backs under a heavy load of garments piled on head and shoulders, the muscles of the whole frame in a long strain.... Is it not a cruel civilization that allows little hearts and little shoulders to strain under these grown-up responsibilities, while in the same city, a pet cur is jeweled and pampered and aired on a fine lady's velvet lap on the beautiful boulevards?¹⁰

"The church," writes John Douglass Hall, "can become theologically alive and an obedient disciple community only as it permits it's thinking to be receptive to and reformed by the realities of this world."¹¹ Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel was a faithful attempt to recognize the new realities faced by people. He concentrated his writings around issues of sin, salvation, the Kingdom of God, and the role of Jesus within the context in which he lived. He would have agreed with Hall's observation. "If theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die," Rauschenbusch wrote.¹²

Rauschenbusch discerned that there were three different levels of sin: "sensuousness, selfishness, and godlessness, - are ascending and expanding

¹⁰ Howard Zinn, *A People's History of the United States* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p 331.

¹¹ John Douglass Hall, *Thinking the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1991), p 85.

¹² Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p 1.

stages (of sin), in which we sin against our higher self, against the good of men, and against the universal good.”¹³ It was these last two categories of sin that he primarily concerned himself with. His 1910 book Prayers of the Social Awakening attests to this. He wrote few prayers about individual sin (sensuousness) but offers a long list of prayers concerning the plight of children, workers rights, and for immigrants. Issues like alcoholism and other “personal sins” take a back seat to his concerns about social injustice. Even his one prayer against alcoholism is directed more at those who sell alcohol than those who consume it. “May those who now entrap the feet of the weak and make their living by the degradation of men, thrust away their shameful gains and stand clear,” Rauschenbusch prays.¹⁴

Sin is essentially selfishness. That definition is more in harmony with the social gospel than with any individualistic type of religion. The sinful mind, then, is the unsocial and anti-social mind. To find the climax of sin we must not linger over a man who swears, or sneers at religion, or denies the mystery of the trinity, but put our hands on the social groups who have turned the patrimony of a nation into the private property of a small class, or have left the peasant labourers cowed, degraded, demoralized, and without rights in the land. When we find such in history, or in present-day life, we shall know we have struck real rebellion against God on the higher level of sin.¹⁵

Harlan Beckley, professor of religion at Washington and Lee and author of a book on the social gospel, does offer an analysis of Rauschenbusch’s writings on sin that raises some serious concerns. Rauschenbusch, Beckley writes, understood sin to be, in part, genetically transferred from one generation to the

¹³ Ibid., p .47.

¹⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Prayers of the Social Awakening* (Boston: The Pilgrim Press, 1909), p 111.

¹⁵ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p 50.

next.¹⁶ Some people are more genetically inclined to sin than others. Rauschenbusch makes the point in *Christianity and the Social Crisis* that “raising the moral stature of humanity depends upon propagation of the fittest.”¹⁷ One cannot help hearing that and pause to consider the impact similar thinking would have on German political and religious leaders as fascism swept the birthplace of modern liberal Protestantism (where Rauschenbusch first studied). This is a serious flaw in Rauschenbusch’s thinking.

Salvation, like sin, has both personal and communal aspects, writes Rauschenbusch. Christians need to be concerned with personal salvation, salvation of “super-personal forces,” and the role of the church in salvation. In terms of personal salvation, Rauschenbusch wants Christians to be aware that more is required than a personal conversion from your own sinful past. “In many cases it is also a break with the sinful past of a social group,” he writes.¹⁸

Suppose a boy has been joining in cruel or lustful actions because his gang regards such things as fine and manly. If later he breaks with such with such actions, he will not only have to wrestle with his own habits, but with the social attractiveness and influence of his little humanity. If a workingman becomes an abstainer, he will find out that intolerance is not confined to the good. In primitive Christianity baptism stood for a conscious break with pagan society. This gave it a powerful spiritual reaction. Conversion is most valuable if it throws a revealing light not only across our own past, but across the social life of which we are part, and makes our repentance a vicarious sorrow for all. The prophets felt so about the sins of their nation. Jesus felt so about Jerusalem, and Paul about unbelieving Israel.¹⁹

¹⁶ Harlan Beckley, *A Passion for Justice* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p 79.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, p 99.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

The “social life of which we are a part” is also termed by Rauschenbusch “a super-personal entity, dominating the individual, assimilating him to its moral standards, and enforcing them by social sanctions of approval or disapproval.”²⁰ Rauschenbusch illustrates this point by discussing two different models for economic progress: capitalism and co-operatives. Capitalism, he notes, can bring economic progress for some. But it leaves in its wake “human wreckage” and “has impressed a materialistic spirit on our whole civilization.”²¹ The co-operative model of economic development, on the other hand, organizes “not primarily for profit but for the satisfaction of human wants, and the aim is to distribute ownership, control, and economic benefits to a large number of co-operators.”²² Rauschenbusch sees the difference between these two models as the difference between “saved and unsaved organizations. The one class (co-operatives) is under the law of Christ, the other (capitalism) under the law of mammon.”²³ A fair argument could be made that Rauschenbusch is too simplistic in his analysis, but it is also true that the effects of Capitalism impacted his time negatively in the same way that economic globalization (another form of Capitalism) impacts much of our world today. Capitalism puts the needs of the individual before God. “Super-personal forces are saved when they come under the law of Christ,” writes Rauschenbusch.²⁴

²⁰ Ibid., p 110.

²¹ Ibid., p 111.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid., p 113.

²⁴ Ibid.

What then is the roll of the church in the process of salvation? “The Church is the social factor in salvation. It brings social forces to bear on evil.”²⁵ When the individual sins and when super-personal forces are tugging society toward evil the church can play the role of a counter balance that points toward the Kingdom and away from sin. Rauschenbusch is quick to note that the church does not always fulfill that role and that advocates of the social gospel are often times critics of the church. But if the church has a role to play it is working to help free society from sin and the evil that brings it.

Rauschenbusch felt that if the problem of sin could be addressed there was the real possibility of achieving the Kingdom of God in the here and now. “To those whose minds live in the social gospel, the Kingdom of God is a dear truth, the marrow of the gospel, just as the incarnation was to Athanasius, justification by faith alone to Luther, and the sovereignty of God to Jonathan Edwards,” he wrote.²⁶ Bringing about the Kingdom was the primary concern of Jesus, Rauschenbusch asserted, but unfortunately, his disciples and the early church leaders largely abandoned this concern for the more immediate issue of establishing the church. The doctrine of the Kingdom was supplanted. Rauschenbusch argues that this was a central mistake of the early church and in A Theology for the Social Gospel he makes the case that this disconnect with Jesus’ teaching allowed the church to ignore Jesus’ ethical concerns. It also allowed issues like the practice of worship to become more important than justice. “The prophets and Jesus had cried down sacrifices and ceremonial

²⁵ Ibid., p 119.

²⁶ Ibid., p 131.

performances, and cried up righteousness, mercy and solidarity,” he wrote. “Theology now reserved this, and by its theoretical discussions did its best to stimulate sacramental actions and priestly importance. Thus the religious energy and enthusiasm which might have saved mankind from its greatest sins, were used up in hearing and endowing masses, or in maintaining competitive church organizations, while mankind is still stuck in the mud.”²⁷

When Rauschenbusch published his first major work in 1907, Christianity and the Social Crisis, a chief task of his work was introducing the social gospel to the American public. Within a year the book had found great prominence and the social gospel quickly became the dominant theological viewpoint expressed by American Protestant churches. This was reflected vividly in two statements issued by American church bodies. In 1908, the Methodist Episcopal Church (North) adopted their first social creed.²⁸ It reflected the contemporary concerns that Rauschenbusch was addressing in his writings. That same year the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America also adopted a statement of social principles. They advocated for the “abolition of child labor, better working conditions for women, one day off during the week, and the right of every worker to a living wage.” The council represented Protestant churches in the United States and the adoption of such statements normally reflects some level of theological consensus among church leaders. “Between 1908 and 1912, five denominations – American Baptist, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Methodist Episcopal, and Presbyterian – took official action on the Social Creed of the

²⁷ Ibid., p 134.

²⁸ United Methodist Church, “Social Principles”, available from <http://www.umc.org/interior.asp?ptid=1&mid=1686>; Internet; accessed November 2004.

Federal Council of Churches,” writes Janet Forsythe Fishburn.²⁹ The United Methodist Church, the successor to the Methodist Episcopal Church (North), continues to publish their Social Principles each four years and it largely remains a progressive document. Rauschenbusch published A Theology for the Social Gospel in 1917. By this time he was able to assert that the social gospel was indeed a major theological movement.

We need not waste words to prove that the social gospel is being preached. It is no longer a prophetic and occasional note. It is a novelty only in backward social or religious communities. The social gospel has become orthodox.

It is not only preached. It has set new problems for local church work, and has turned the pastoral and organizing work of the ministry into new and constructive directions. It has imparted a wider vision and a more statesman like grasp to the foreign mission enterprise....³⁰

Conservative denominations have formally committed themselves to the fundamental ideas of the social gospel and their practical application. The plans of great interdenominational organizations are inspired by it. It has become a constructive force in American politics.³¹

In Christianity and the Social Gospel, Rauschenbusch explored in practical terms how the issues raised by the social gospel might be addressed. He warned that we could not simply “reform modern society on biblical models.”³² Economic and social reforms had to address the current context; he stressed, and could not be based on the agricultural and ancient society of the Bible. Rauschenbusch was frustrated with Christians who claimed reform could wait for

²⁹ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p 129.

³⁰ Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, p 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p 3.

³² Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), p 345.

the end times. “One of the most persistent mistakes of Christian men has been to postpone social regeneration to a future ear to be inaugurated by the return of Christ,” he wrote.³³ “The element of postponement in to-day means a lack of faith in the present power of Christ and paralyzes the religious initiative.”³⁴ Rauschenbusch argued the goal of churches should not be to control the social reform movement but to be the inspiration for it.³⁵ He called on ministers to educate their congregations about social ills from the pulpit, but to do so in a way that always makes the connection between the Christian faith and justice. “It is the business of a preacher to connect all that he thinks and says with the mind and will of God, to give the religious interpretation to all human relations and question, and to infuse the divine sympathy and passion into all moral discussion,” said Rauschenbusch. “If he fails in that, he is to that extent not a minister of religion.”³⁶ Rauschenbusch advocated that the “spiritual force of Christianity should be turned against that materialism and mammonism of our industrial and social order.”³⁷ He saw all these steps as building up the Kingdom.

Actually believing that achieving the Kingdom on earth was a possibility became difficult for believers in the post-War War One era. Human progress seemed almost a quaint concept after two world wars, the Depression and the Holocaust. Enlightenment thinkers had allowed two world wars and a genocide. Rauschenbusch’s theology seemed impractical after such events. “In the twenties and thirties, the political attack on the social gospel focused on its

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p 346.

³⁵ Ibid., p 348.

³⁶ Ibid., p 364.

³⁷ Ibid., p 369.

aversion to violence and coercion, while more recent critics have added to this indictment its endorsement of “Victorian” values, its silence on the race issue, and its alleged anti-feminism. All these charges boil down to the central charge of moralism, usually associated with a condemnation of liberal theology that traces these political errors to a sentimental view of human nature,” wrote Christopher Lasch in his essay *Religious Contributions to Social Movements: Walter Rauschenbusch, The Social Gospel, and its Critics*.³⁸ Proponents of the Neo-orthodoxy (a theological movement reacting to excesses in theological liberalism), led by figures like Reinhold Niebuhr and H. Richard Niebuhr, called into question Rauschenbusch’s central themes in light of new experiences and found the Social Gospel to be seriously flawed.

Neither Reinhold Niebuhr nor his younger brother Richard simply rejected this vision. Both wanted to preserve its commitment to social justice; moreover, the “ethic of Jesus” and the notion of God’s dynamic activity in history remain very prominent respectively in Reinhold’s and Richard’s theological ethics. But these legacies are remarkably revised in the light of some incisive criticisms. In distinct ways, each of the Niebuhr’s thought that the social gospel was insufficiently attentive to the reality of God in the fullness of God’s work. For Reinhold Niebuhr, the theology of the Kingdom of God was developed at too much of a remove from a careful understanding of the universality of sin in history and God’s thoroughgoing judgment of human vice and pretension. Consequently, the call to education and the appeal to Jesus’ love ethic could tend toward a naïve and moralistic idealism in social ethics that offered little help in a world characterized by social conflict between self-interest groups. H. Reinhold Niebuhr questioned the social gospel’s idea that the Kingdom of God as a moral idea toward which we make an evolutionary progress. He pointed to the eschatological vision of Jesus, who does not engineer a direct route to some oral goal but who rather prepares for a gift through “repentance, faith, forgiveness, and innocence suffering for guilt” – through, that is, the anticipation of divine

³⁸ Christopher Lasch, *Religious Contributions to Social Movements: Walter Rauschenbusch, The Social Gospel, and its Critics* (The Journal of Religious Ethics, 2001).

judgment and the trust in divine deliverance. For both thinkers, there was a great danger in the drift toward identifying some institutional or political scheme, such as “democracy,” with the gospel ethic. One may lose thereby a theologically appropriate critical distance from the scheme, or even render the gospel a mere instrument in the realization and preservation of the social system itself.³⁹

Reinhold Niebuhr graduated from Eden Theological Seminary (as did H. Richard Niebuhr), a school associated with the Evangelical and Reform Church (which later became the United Church of Christ). He later taught at Union Seminary in New York City after working as a pastor in intercity Detroit.⁴⁰ The Niebuhr brothers shared a German heritage (both personal and theological) with Rauschenbusch. Lasch writes that what Reinhold Niebuhr offers the debate concerning the social gospel is “a chastening critique of utopian illusions.”⁴¹ A principle concern of Niebuhr’s, expressed in his 1951 book *Christ and Culture* is that “Christ’s answers to the problem of human culture is one thing, Christian answers are another.”⁴² Niebuhr believed that Rauschenbusch and other liberal theologians confused the two and therefore elevated human institutions or proposals to the level of God. Rauschenbusch, after all, believed that achieving the Kingdom of God was within the realm of human possibility in the here and now. Even Evans, a modern day advocate for a corrected version social gospel, notes that “what we commonly remember about the social gospel is its often myopic vision of a church that was dedicated to making America, and by extension, the world, conform to the hegemonic cultural values associated with

³⁹ David Ford (editor), *The Modern Theologians* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) p 312.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p 313.

⁴¹ Lasch, *Religious Contributions to Social Movements: Walter Rauschenbusch, The Social Gospel, and its Critics*, p 16.

⁴² H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1956) p 2.

American Protestantism of that time.”⁴³ Niebuhr’s warning did not mean that he abandoned human institutions as a source for justice. For Niebuhr the “quest for justice in the social order stands in tension with the demands for the preservation of order and maintaining freedom,” writes William Werpehowki.⁴⁴

Given the inevitable conjoining of justice and power, moreover, that quest must include the realistic conviction that the power of some must be checked by others. Niebuhr’s argument for democratic dispersal and balance of power relied on this last point. “Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary... If men are inclined to deal unjustly with their fellows, the possession of power aggravates this inclination. That is why irresponsible and uncontrolled power is the greatest source of injustice.” Even in this case Niebuhr warned against identifying our democratic ideals with the ultimate values of life.⁴⁵

As Evans notes, there are other weakness in Rauschenbusch’s theology besides those pointed out by neo-orthodoxy. The social gospel can fairly be termed a theology concerned primarily with justice as it relates to economics. Rauschenbusch was writing and preaching during a time of great economic upheaval. He was also writing, however, during the start of the women’s suffrage movement and during a time where racism still gripped the nation. Rauschenbusch wrote from within his own context. He was a white American male of European dissent who studied under other white men. Rauschenbusch worked in churches populated by European immigrants. His theology often failed to notice the concerns of women or racial minorities. Rauschenbusch’s own time and context also limited his understanding of religious pluralism and theologies of justice related to environmentalism and sexual equality. Some of this can

⁴³ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p 5.

⁴⁴ Ford, *Modern Theologians*, p 314.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

obviously be forgiven (gays rights, for example, just were not understood as they are today) but Rauschenbusch's oversights need to be considered.

"On a purely historical level," writes Evans, "the social gospel is dead."⁴⁶ What would be the purpose of examining it further, particularly in light of the faults noted by the Niebuhr brothers and others? Rauschenbusch took the Bible out of the hands of the comfortable and powerful and made Scripture relevant to the causes of those who suffer at the hands of modernity. Many of our churches have returned to a pre-social gospel period where the Bible is used by the powerful to justify their own positions in society. Millions of Americans today follow a theology of prosperity which maintains that wealth is a blessing bestowed by God on the righteous. Poverty, it follows, is a punishment. This is the message given by many televangelists and conservative evangelicals and it has enormous appeal. However, it is a theology that is far removed from the Gospel as preached by Rauschenbusch. Christians need to reclaim the social gospel part of our heritage. "The issue at stake for our time is how do we recover, critique, and reappropriate the social gospel legacy in ways that avoid a myopic treatment of the past, yet also take seriously the vital questions of faith and meaning that face a diverse array of early twenty-first-century Christian faith communities," writes Evans.⁴⁷

The social gospel injected in Western theology an insistence that theological questions pertaining to sin and salvation were in separable from one's struggle to work for social justice. Even amidst the hostile reaction against the social gospel by neo-orthodoxy in the 1930s, no less a theologian than H. Niebuhr recognized that there was something theologically powerful about

⁴⁶ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p 13.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p 10.

the social gospel that was distinctively liberal, yet was also in continuity with historical Christianity. What Niebuhr found promising about the social gospel (even amidst his concerns about the tradition's liberal-anthropomorphic theology) was that it offered a new and distinctive way for Christianity to revision the relationship between more traditional notions of soteriology and the contemporary imperative for social action.⁴⁸

This means that to reintroduce those parts of the social gospel that are relevant for our context it is important to note where the social gospel failed. Neo-orthodoxy noted failures that related to the role of Christ in culture and for what came to be seen as inappropriate optimism in people. More modern criticism has explored the relationship between gender and racial equality and the social gospel. Economic conditions for women were arguably worse than they were for men during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Men of European descent at least had some political power through what unions existed and the right to vote. Women were afforded no political power. Most men in this period valued the social systems in place that kept women from achieving political authority. Howard Zinn relates the story in his book A People's History of the United States of how Rose Schneiderman, a trade unionist with the Garment Workers, once responded to a male politician who declared giving women the right to vote would negatively impact their femininity. "Women in the laundries...stand thirteen or fourteen hours in the terrible steam and heat with their hands in hot starch. Surely these women won't lose any more of their beauty and charm by putting a ballot in a ballot box once and a year than they are likely to lose standing in foundries or laundries all year around," replied

⁴⁸ Ibid., p 5.

Schneiderman to the politician.⁴⁹ Susan Hill Lindley, professor of religion at St. Olaf College, writes that “while the traditional leadership (of the social gospel) expressed some concern for other groups, like African Americans and women factory workers, such attention was peripheral or at best secondary to its central project. Yet these white men were not the only persons who perceived a disjunction between Christian beliefs and structural injustice in their day, nor were white male factory workers the only ones who suffered from contemporary economic and political systems.”⁵⁰ Women’s voices and roles were, however, largely left out of social gospel movement as it occurred and the history of the movement that was written. Lindley asserts those stories of women social gospel advocates need to be recovered to more fully grasp the impact of the movement.

Evans writes that while Rauschenbusch supported women’s suffrage “he repeatedly displayed an ambivalence about the advisability of women assuming roles in the public sphere of American society.”⁵¹ Rauschenbusch’s writings concerning women could hardly be considered to be enlightened. He worried that women (particularly those living in poverty) could not maintain a moral center because of their cravings for “the clothing, the trinkets, the pleasures that glitter about them.”⁵² Women faced with difficult circumstances would allow themselves to be sexually exploited by men to obtain material things. “The girls themselves

⁴⁹ Zinn, *People’s History*, p 336.

⁵⁰ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p 18.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p 53.

⁵² Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, p 278.

have the womanly desire for the company and love of men,” he wrote.⁵³ Rauschenbusch blamed the women’s movement for the increase in divorce.⁵⁴ His overall feelings about women are summarized in a few sentences concerning Corinth. “Paul in one of his bold, prophetic strains asserted that in Christ all the old distinctions of race and social standing would disappear, including the difference between men and women. The spirit of Christianity has accomplished that result in the slow progress of the centuries, and our women are now free and our equals,” he wrote with a gross misunderstanding of the conditions faced by women. “If these Corinthian women tried to take at once that heritage of liberty which was to be theirs eventually, we cannot help sympathizing with them. But we can also understand the unusual vexation and distress in Paul’s mind when he heard of this disorder, and agree with his prudence in bidding them keep within the bounds of customary modesty and restraint.”⁵⁵ Lindley comments:

In one sense, historiography of the social gospel movement, like other particular historical foci, is a microcosm of scholarship on American history as a whole. One may envision the changes precipitated by greater sensitivity to the “white male bias” of history in two stages. First is the necessary work of recovering the neglected stories, the lives, problems, and contributions of those who by reason of class, race, gender, or geographical location of been underrepresented and underappreciated. In terms of the social gospel, an excellent start has been made on this stage, though further work, of course, remains to be done, particularly among the rank and file – the men and women who through church groups and other local organizations heard or read the social gospel ideas and tried to act upon them in their immediate setting. A second stage is, however, much more difficult: to produce an account that genuinely integrates the “new” (in terms of historical awareness) stories into the traditional account as that it becomes a new story for all, not simply the old story with a few more asides

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p 135.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

and footnotes. In the case of the social gospel, this is particularly challenging because of the varieties of theological viewpoints, goals, and methods even within traditional understandings of the movement, not to mention the results of revisionist scholarship. Yet this is a critical goal, both for historical integrity and because the “new” voices may contribute different perspectives and insights valuable for current theology and action.

Women took leadership positions during the social gospel movement most notably in church mission boards and schools. Union Theological Seminary’s Rosemary Skinner Keller recounts that during this period “when women’s presence was not welcomed, indeed prohibited, on the governing boards of established church institutions, women formed their own organizations to express their Christian commitment.”⁵⁶ One such program, the Chicago Training School, was started “to train young women who could address the spiritual and social needs of the unchristian, non-Protestant, and underprivileged immigrants pouring into the cities.”⁵⁷ Respect for religious pluralism obviously was not a concern of the Chicago Training School, but it operated on the social gospel principles advocated by Rauschenbusch: principles grounded in the belief that sin could be addressed and the Kingdom brought about by human institutions. “From 1870 until the turn of the century, more than 140 deaconess homes were opened in the United States,” writes Keller.⁵⁸ These homes, where women were trained to operate charitable groups, schools, and hospitals, were another example of the social gospel movement putting theology into practice. Women like Lucy Rider Meyer helped create a network of social groups run by women that provided

⁵⁶ Evans, *The Social Gospel Today*, p 67.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p 68.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p 69.

basic human services.⁵⁹ Their work helped alleviate suffering and took seriously the charge in Matthew 25 to serve the “least of these.” Women had the ability to serve as theological peers in a way Rauschenbusch never understood.

Rauschenbusch offered the early 1900s a vision of Christianity that was clearly different. The social gospel took seriously the economic upheaval of the modern era. Rauschenbusch expanded how sin and salvation were defined. He called on churches and church leaders to be prophetic in how they approached issues of justice. Churches responded and Rauschenbusch became one of the dominant voices of theology. His writings impact churches even today (particularly mainline churches). The critiques offered by the neo-orthodoxy movement were largely correct and so are critiques that question how the social gospel addressed issues of equality for women and racial minorities. Rauschenbusch had little respect for religious pluralism (maybe this would have been somewhat different had he spent time in India as he once hoped). These criticisms, while appropriate, should not overshadow the positive impact the social gospel had on American Christianity. Rauschenbusch challenged the dominant economic paradigm. He essentially declared capitalism as being unchristian. Those same economic systems are in place today and we are still told that capitalism is the way to salvation.

Our churches could today take up the banner of the social gospel (modified to take seriously Rauschenbusch’s own words that “if theology stops growing or is unable to adjust itself to its modern environment and to meet its present tasks, it will die”). A modern criticism of mainline churches (compared to

⁵⁹ Ibid., p 71.

conservative evangelical churches) is that we are unable to offer absolutes to the social concerns raised by parishioners. Conservative evangelicals can tell you what is right and what is wrong. Mainline churches have that same capability on important theological issues related to war, poverty and the environment. A challenge for mainline churches would be to issue a new social creed that takes seriously the strengths of Rauschenbusch's theology, the weakness we have since learned to take seriously, and the new modern issues Rauschenbusch never thought to address. "The social gospel, especially in the history of American Protestantism, served as the prototypical model for twentieth-century churches that believed that working toward the goal of social transformation was the primary imperative for Christianity," writes Evans. "Even as historical circumstances over the past one hundred years have changed, the social gospel's insistence that Christian faith must engage contemporary social issues in order to utilize the full force of the gospel remains a central, and taken-for-granted, principle among many denominations at the opening of the twenty-first century."⁶⁰ Our churches should more fully reclaim this part of our legacy.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p 172.