

**The Social Gospel and Abolish Poverty, End Suffering**

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Many times, perhaps more often than not, theologies and belief systems of the past are eschewed for more updated and contemporary views. While the ecumenical church does need to keep moving forward, this does not mean the works of theologians of the past are no longer applicable and therefore should be ignored. Theologies and their resulting movements, such as the Social Gospel Movement and teachings of Walter Rauschenbusch, still hold relevance for us today if we would take the time to understand them. This essay will examine the Social Gospel in terms of the Kingdom of God and Christ as Initiator of the Kingdom, its relevance to the Community of Christ Mission Initiative Abolish Poverty, End Suffering, and how this can be extended to our youth through service learning.

### **The Social Gospel and Walter Rauschenbusch**

The Social Gospel Movement emerged out of Protestant Liberalism, a broad term for the theologies that grew from the works of Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albrecht Ritschl, and Adolf von Harnack. Protestant Liberals emphasized freedom and “the evolving of good toward the kingdom of God.”<sup>1</sup> The Social Gospel sought to bring about a new social order through the Church and was led by Walter Rauschenbusch, who began as a pastor in Hell’s Kitchen, New York City, and concluded his career as a professor of church history at a Baptist Seminary. He believed the Kingdom of God was not an apocalyptic vision, “but a prophetic call for society’s transformation in the here and now.”<sup>2</sup> Rauschenbusch realized that the Church was one of the most powerful influences in Western culture and sought to unite “the Christian spirit and the

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<sup>1</sup> Donald K. McKim, *The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 8<sup>th</sup> edition (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 255.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Paul Raushenbush (New York: Harper One, 2007), xi.

social consciousness in a new out-reaching toward God.<sup>3</sup> He saw this as one of the most pressing issues in the twentieth-century and viewed the Social Gospel as a way for God to bestow not just personal salvation of the individual but the whole of humanity.<sup>4</sup> By educating Christians on social issues of the day and raising their social awareness, the Church would be able to serve the whole of society. Ultimately, this would bring about the kingdom of God and new social order.

Rauschenbusch saw the doctrine of the Kingdom of God as a foundational concept of the Social Gospel which had been left behind. “Like Cinderella in the kitchen, it saw the other great dogmas furbished up for the ball, but no prince of theology restored it to its rightful place.”<sup>5</sup> He believed this doctrine lacked development in systematic theology to the detriment of Christian theology as a whole. Because of this lack of development, Rauschenbusch noted an increase in concern for the number of conversions in a church rather than issues of social justice and reform. Individual salvation was not seen in the greater context of society nor was it viewed as it related to the salvation of the social order. Rauschenbusch upheld that the Kingdom of God must be the ultimate purpose of the Church. Christians must see the Kingdom of God as “always coming, always pressing in on the present, always big with possibility, and always inviting immediate action.”<sup>6</sup> It was not just present within the confines of the Church, but pertained to the whole scope of human life. The Kingdom of God should be found in our home, our workplaces, our houses of worship, and our places of leisure.

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917; repr., New York: Cosimo Classics, 2012), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 290.

<sup>5</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 132.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

Rauschenbusch stated that Christ was the initiator of the Kingdom of God and “progressive social incarnation of God.”<sup>7</sup> In Christ was a person who incited loyalty and love, and set groundbreaking change in motion. The divinity of Christ, long debated among theologians, came not through the miracle of a virgin birth, but through Christ’s character. Rauschenbusch believed it should be based on “all that took place in the inner depths of his spirit when he communed with his Father and fought through the issues of his life.”<sup>8</sup> By seeing divinity in Jesus’s character and actions, Christians would be able to grasp that God is with us in all things. Jesus dealt with temptations and trials as the rest of humanity does and it was through his relationship with God and unity with the will of God that he overcame them.

The Social Gospel viewed sin as selfishness and the human task was to overcome this selfishness to work for the greater good. In counsel to his followers, Jesus placed greater importance on laws that involved action or inaction towards humanity.<sup>9</sup> One overcomes sin/selfishness by placing greater importance of social issues and humankind than on themselves. Rauschenbusch stated that Jesus had the capacity for selfishness as much as the rest of humanity and dealt with very real, very personal problems; however, Jesus did not give in to selfishness “because he succeeded in uniting the service of the common good with the affirmation of his self-hood.”<sup>10</sup> The example of Jesus should empower Christians to stand in unity with the will of God and seek the salvation of humanity. As more people embraced the Social Gospel, it would become “easier for others to reach the same unification of all relations in the great aim of the Kingdom of God.”<sup>11</sup> Rauschenbusch stated that “[e]ven if there had been no sin from which

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 148.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 150.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>11</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 288.

mankind had to be redeemed, the life of Jesus would have dated an epoch in the evolution of the race by the introduction of a new type and consequently new social standards.”<sup>12</sup>

### **Abolish Poverty, End Suffering**

Long before it was known as Community of Christ, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints was influenced by the Social Gospel. In the latter part of the nineteenth-century and into the twentieth-century, Prophet-President Joseph Smith, III, noticed societal shifts toward modernity, and with them new challenges to the body of the church.<sup>13</sup> In response to these challenges, Joseph III developed the Saints’ Home for the Aged, the Saints’ Children’s Home, the Independence Sanitarium and Hospital, and Mound Grove Cemetery.<sup>14</sup> The RLDS church and later Community of Christ continued the tradition of addressing the social needs of its members with expansion to communities worldwide. The Social Gospel is still applicable today through the mission initiative Abolish Poverty, End Suffering.

One of five “life-changing, church-changing, and world-changing Mission Initiatives,” Abolish Poverty, End Suffering focuses on Christ’s mission of compassion.<sup>15</sup> Community of Christ seeks to “serve the poor and hungry and stop conditions that diminish the worth of persons” through compassionate ministries.<sup>16</sup> It is impossible to ignore suffering and injustice in humanity and this awareness should spur all humanity into action. Rauschenbusch described this as solidaristic suffering: “when one man sins, other men suffer... when one social class sins, the

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<sup>12</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Scherer, *The Journey of a People: The Era of Reorganization, 1844 to 1946* (Independence, Missouri: Community of Christ Seminary Press, 2013), 198.

<sup>14</sup> For a more detailed discussion on these developments, see Scherer, 198-212.

<sup>15</sup> Community of Christ, *Sharing in Community of Christ: Exploring Identity, Mission, Message, and Beliefs* (Independence, Missouri: Herald Publishing House, 2012), 9.

<sup>16</sup> Community of Christ, “Mission Initiatives: God’s Vision Made Real in Christ,” copyright 2016, accessed December 10, 2016, [www.cofchrist.org/mission-initiatives](http://www.cofchrist.org/mission-initiatives).

other classes are involved... the more powerful a class is, the more will it be able to unload its own just suffering on the weaker classes.”<sup>17</sup> When we have a “sense of common humanity,” we can foster a society that comes together in solidarity for the greater good and all are enriched. On the other hand, if we have a society that allows abuses and injustices, those of lower classes are taken advantage of by the solidarity of the upper classes perpetuating these abuses.

Social suffering serves social healing. If the sense of common humanity is strong enough to set the entire social body in motion on behalf of those who suffer without just cause, then their troubles are eased and the whole body is preserved just and fraternal.<sup>18</sup>

Community of Christ works to create that common humanity to decrease the strain and suffering of others through its association with organizations such as Outreach International and World Accord, as well as team approaches such as the World Hunger and Tangible Love Team. The World Hunger and Tangible Love Team work to “encourage congregations and mission centers to consider ministries and projects that address the needs of those enmeshed in poverty, hunger, and injustice.”<sup>19</sup> Tangible Love Ministries in particular “support ministry that heightens access to fundamental human needs; increases environmental stewardship; advocates for human rights; and promotes reconciliation, peace, and justice for all creation.”<sup>20</sup> Through this specific ministry Community of Christ is working toward a social order where all will be able to achieve their highest success and as society where there is “redemption of social life from the cramping influence of religious bigotry, from the repression of self-assertion in the relation of upper and

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<sup>17</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 182.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>19</sup> World Hunger and Tangible Love Team, “2013-2016 World Church Team Report” (presented to the First Presidency and the World Conference in 2016), 1, accessed December 10, 2016, <https://www.cofchrist.org/common/cms/resources/Documents/2016-World-Hunger-Tangible-Love-Team-Report.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

lower classes, and from all forms of slavery in which human beings are treated as mere means to serve the ends of others.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Social Gospel and Service Learning in Youth**

As Children’s Minister for the North Pensacola Community of Christ Congregation in Pensacola, FL, I have the challenging, albeit fun, opportunity to teach the younger members of the body of Christ about our church and mission.<sup>22</sup> However, discussing outreach ministries and the importance of helping others in the context of a Sunday School or Junior Church classroom limits what the youth are absorbing. Through service learning, an approach that combines teaching and hands-on experience to address genuine community needs, the youth have the opportunity to gain a better understanding of *why* we care about social and economic needs of others.

A Children’s or Youth minister can begin collecting change during Sunday school and at monthly activities for an end-of-the-year project. Activities at various times throughout the year should have a focus on why we need to help others so that they can sustain that support on their own. An activity planned for the fall could include local farm animals brought to the church grounds so that the youth can interact with them and learn what these animals can do for a village that is unable to support itself currently. As the end of the year approaches, the money collected can be counted and the youth work together to decide what to purchase from the Outreach International Sustainable Gift Catalog. These activities are intended to plant the seeds of knowledge that the greater society is just as important as ours, and we need to pay close attention to the needs of others. If we begin these practices at a young age, the hope is that some

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<sup>21</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 142.

<sup>22</sup> North Pensacola Kids program focuses on first- through fifth-grade. Activities include Junior Church the second Sunday of the month, monthly to bi-monthly activities, and Vacation Bible School.

iota of the information will remain when they reach adulthood and are serving in positions of power and authority.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

One of the prevailing emphases of Rauschenbusch is that Jesus Christ and the ever-coming Kingdom of God are real, tangible, and vital to humanity. It is incredibly easy to read Rauschenbusch's writing, consider where we are right now as a society, and put the book down thinking it is all too much. It cannot be done. Rauschenbusch, however, never lost faith. He reminded readers of the seemingly hopeless situation Christ and the Twelve Apostles found themselves in, and to look at where we are now.<sup>23</sup> The Apostles walked by faith – faith in Christ, faith in themselves, faith in mission. Christ is calling us today to continue the mission with little assurance of success. All we know is that if we plant the seeds, one day they will bear fruit.

Walter Rauschenbusch pioneered the Social Gospel Movement on the faith that we could create a better humanity and new social order. His teachings are still applicable today, over one-hundred years later, particularly in Community of Christ and its mission to Abolish Poverty, End Suffering. If we start now, we can plant these seeds in our youth with the faith that they will impact future generations as we are trying to impact the current ones.

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<sup>23</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 333-334.

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