

One New Book for the Preacher

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THE KINGDOM IS ALWAYS BUT COMING: A LIFE OF WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH by Christopher H. Evans. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. 348 pages.

The name of Walter Rauschenbusch is almost a slogan for “social gospel,” but in fact little is known among us about him and little attention is paid to him. This extensive and careful biography is a worthy read, precisely because Rauschenbusch merits our attentiveness, and because our culture—even our church culture—is prone to amnesia. We confess “the communion of Saints,” but characteristically we name none that are beyond a close circle of our beloved dead. Well, Rauschenbusch is one of our beloved dead who merits attention.

Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) was born in a German-American Baptist family dominated by his father August, a conservative Baptist pietist. Rauschenbusch himself was deeply situated in that same pietistic tradition and was, because of his father’s sustained insistence, educated in the best traditions of high German culture, receiving much of his education in Germany. The plot line of his life concerns the ongoing negotiation he practiced between his father’s deep pietism and his own growing and compelling awareness of the economic crisis of U.S. society that required and informed evangelical response. In many ways Rauschenbusch remained situated in his inherited pietism, but moved beyond it in his social passion, so that he became a focal point of fresh missional energy and inevitably a target of criticism from more conservative Christians. Rauschenbusch was born in Rochester, New York, served over a decade in the parish in “Hell’s Kitchen” in New York City, and then returned to Rochester Seminary where he taught church history for most of his adult life. A decade of ministry in New York City alerted him to the economic crisis of wealth and poverty he experienced firsthand. In the midst of the industrial revolution he became aware of the high human cost of acquisitive wealth that so flourished at the turn of the century.

Rauschenbusch had a remarkable capacity, so Evans reports, to operate on a large “secular” scene with reference to economic issues, though admittedly that “secular” scene at the turn of the century was almost completely Christian. While he traversed with muckrakers of his time, he also managed to stay in close contact with the Rockefellers and others of great wealth who funded much of his work. And all the while he remained rooted in the vigilant culture of Baptist theology and ministry.

The book traces the way in which Rauschenbusch gradually became a national figure who traveled incessantly, spoke everywhere, and exercised immense influence in church culture. Alongside his primary preoccupation with the presence of poverty amid great wealth, Rauschenbusch, in his later years, was much preoccupied with World War I. Largely because of his close connections for and sympathy with German culture, he opposed the war and concluded that U.S. assaults on Germany were without proper grounding. For his anti-war stand, he was much abused.

The book gives access to the human side of his life. In addition to his missional

passion, one of the reasons he traveled so much was that he was characteristically short of cash. Great attention is given to his children with whom he was attentively engaged. Of particular interest is his relationship to his eldest daughter, Winifred, who was closely connected to him but who moved in an emancipated feminist direction that Rauschenbusch found difficult to understand. He did, however, remain connected to her and in his later years kept growing and adapting to take her new directions seriously.

I believe this book to be an important read for us, because it gives important background for the current “wars” in the church. On the one hand, it lets us see how current issues have been shaped long-term in U.S. religion. On the other hand, it lets us see a simpler day when there was still a large consensus in the U.S. church that had not yet been distorted by ideological extremity.

One final note. In a terse footnote on page 320, Evans observes that Rauschenbusch’s daughter, Winifred, was the mother of Richard Rorty, the prominent left-wing philosopher. It boggles my mind to think that *Richard Rorty* is the grandson of *Walter Rauschenbusch*. But then I suspect that relationship is a metaphor of what has happened to many Christian “liberals,” especially pastors, whose children receive the *social vision* of the parents but eschew the *faith rootage*. Perhaps that is the destiny of liberal faith or perhaps we need to think again about nurture in faith in a polarized culture. I do not know. We may be very glad for Rorty’s social passion and social vision, except that Rorty lacks rootage that would make his argument more compelling. He might have learned more from his grandfather. The rest of us as well might pause for instruction from this great saint who held it all together in the lifetime of faithful passion and urgent practice. Rauschenbusch knew very well, against the easy caricatures of the social gospel, that he could not “usher in the kingdom.” He saw rather that the kingdom is “always coming.” But he was in its vanguard and still summons the likes of us to follow in his daring path.