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In Search of His Hand

Christian Classics and Devotions



Doug Brown, Editor

In this regular feature column each issue's theme is approached via devotional classics and written prayers. Devotional classics are those reports or interpretations of Christian experience which have transcended their temporal and cultural origins.

A century ago, "social" had become the focus of economic, political, and religious debate. The lot of most had remained untouched as a feudal system gave way to an industrialized one. The powerful had ignored prophets - from Francis and Wesley to Dickens and Dostoyevsky - who dared describe existence "from underground." By our Civil War, the human price exacted by industrialization had stirred the conscience of a generation receptive to the innovative argument that dehumanizing exploitation is a social evil requiring social opposition as well as victim-by-victim care.

Scores of Christians, convinced that other-worldly religion played into the hands of the exploiters, felt compelled to leave the churches. Others remained, equally convinced that embedded in the origins of biblical religion would be found a theological and devotional foundation for confronting a social environment that had institutionalized inequity and injustice. On June 1, 1886, twenty-seven-year-old Walter Rauschenbusch joined their ranks when he began work with the Second German Church, a small immigrant congregation perched on the edge of New York's "Hell's Kitchen." This recent seminary graduate dwelt on the messages of Israel's prophets and on Jesus' revelation of the Kingdom.

A decade later, the social gospel's leading churchman reluctantly left local church ministry for a position on Rochester Theological Seminary's faculty.

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Among several publications Rauschenbusch's **Theology for the Social Gospel** (1917) called a Yale Divinity School audience and their counterparts across the land to provide theological rationale for Christians whose social conscience had been awakened. Lesser known, **His Prayers for the Social Awakening** (1910) emerged from a concern that

...the ordinary church hymnal rarely contains more than two or three hymns in which triumphant chords of social hope are struck. . . . Even men who have absorbed social ideals are apt to move within the traditional round in public prayer Prayer, like the hiss of escaping steam, has often dissipated moral energy If we had more prayer in common on the sins of modern society, there would be more social repentance and less resistance to the demands of justice and mercy.

Sensing a great craving for religious expression of the new social feeling, he began writing the prayers for **American** magazine that in time would be published as **Prayers for the Social Awakening**.

I feel some urgency to introduce this devotional classic to men and women leading the worship of the congregations among us awakening to "an almost painful compassion and longing" for peace and justice. Embarrassed by costly debates over proper use of church funds for the destitute and forced by a secular society to desegregate our schools (if not our congregations), three decades ago Churches of Christ had arise from their midst a few congregations and church leaders ready to absorb the judgment and direction of a free Word of God. Today we continue building on their

foundation. And at least one hymnal - **Great Songs of the Church** with its index entry for "Social Concern" - illustrates that worship practices can be altered.

Attending the immediate needs of a destitute person often uplifts. Challenging the violent social system that mass produces the destitute more often frustrates and fatigues. When they congregate, the advocates of freedom and justice must (1) receive a theological justification for their labors and (2) pray in a manner that integrates their worship with their ministry. **Prayers for the Social Awakening** - with reflections on the Lord's Prayer, petitions for persons

varying from children of the street to business leaders to inventors, expressions of wrath, thanksgiving for progress, reminders of the "larger vision" - shows how peacemakers can openly approach the Father.

I think the volume has one deficiency. Characteristic of his era, Rauschenbusch remained confident that a modernized society, when given the opportunity, would warmly receive the "kingdom" living Jesus announced. His prayers, correspondingly, lack extended expressions of repentance and of weariness in well - doing. The following prayer is an attempt to supplement Rauschenbusch's collection.

COMMON GUILT

O Compassionate God, I shy from calling you "my father" now that you have reunited me at last with your other children.

I had no idea how many and how near are my brothers and sisters who scavenge garbage cans in search for food, who cannot (or need not) read the list of ingredients on food cans, who steal to survive, who wake each day to a violent ordeal, who live "underground."

I had no idea how surely my closets, my refrigerator, my diet, my choices for work, my recreation, my morning bath, and my education undermine any debate about whether or not I am materially rich.

I had no idea how entangled my lifestyle is with an economy that titillates the fancies of the "have's" that ensures with charities and taxes an easy conscience for the morally sensitive, that continues to reap the benefits of exploiting powerless citizens and neighboring countries.

Why? Why had I not noticed the family resemblance? Was it embarrassment? Haste? Warnings against "social gospel"? Fear? A subtle surrender to idolatry? Economic prejudice? The momentum from my church's rise in a few generations to socioeconomic respectability? Ignorance of the law and prophets? A reassuring equation of "church" and "kingdom"? The ease rich interpreters enjoy in spiritualizing "rich" and "poor"?

Still I lie prostrate before you without excuse. Your other children are dulled by repeated blows to their body and spirit. I have unwittingly added to the breath that has blown out your light in their eyes. You were patient with my misguided and guilt-ridden insistence that they join the "have's." I have only now realized that the task is not to make them materially rich, yet another form of slavery. The task is to make them free, . . . free to dream, to hope, to risk, to rest, to love.

By your grace

my soul will remain disturbed by the price in human dignity that "getting rich" and "staying rich" exact

my self will endure the pain a free Word of God inflicts upon values and habits

my lifestyle will be cleansed to maximize the diversity of people who feel welcome in my home

my possessions will be rid of any thing that I value more than "one of the least of these" my

brethren my prayers will express fright at being materially rich my ministry will promote your Kingdom in which "there is neither rich nor poor."

Through Christ my Lord, Amen.

- Douglas Brown