

# Passion, Realism Necessary in Working for Social Justice

A fervent desire for social justice exists today among many Christians, but realism about the extent to which change can happen is often lacking.

To address this issue two things are required. First, an inspiring call to advance the common good that is rooted in the teachings of Jesus.

Second, a realistic understanding of human sin and the limitations this places on even our best efforts and most fruitful initiatives.

The combined reflections of two social ethicists, perhaps less familiar to younger generations, provide helpful guidance: Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971).

While Rauschenbusch is often critiqued for being overly optimistic and Niebuhr is sometimes thought to be too pessimistic, neither assessment is precise in my view.

Rauschenbusch devoted six chapters in “A Theology for the Social Gospel” to individual and collective sin and evil, for example.

Taken as a whole, however, the social gospel movement, in some ways a predecessor of today’s social justice emphasis, was often too optimistic about the progress that could be made.

By contrast, in “An Interpretation on Christian Ethics,” Niebuhr emphasized the importance of embodying Jesus’ love ethic-labeled the “impossible possibility.”

Nonetheless, because this is accompanied by a sober assessment of human sinfulness, critics often concluded that sin was his primary focus and that he was too pessimistic about human nature.

For me, their writings complement each other, offering a hopeful, yet realistic vision of how Christians can seek to embody Jesus’ ethics in the world today.

Rauschenbusch’s focus on Jesus’ ethical teachings, the centrality of the kingdom

of God to Christian faith and practice, and the importance of the local church hold the possibility of breathing new life into one's faith, as they have for mine.

In recent years, however, I've noted a growing disillusionment within myself regarding the progress that is possible.

This has led me to begin reading Niebuhr's social ethics, which urge social engagement while emphasizing that even the highest human achievements will fall short of God's ultimate purposes.

Niebuhr's insights provide a much-needed balance for Christians excited about the possibilities of social justice initiatives and the efforts humanity can make toward creating a better world.

His writings are particularly relevant when humanity seems to be quickly backpedaling from whatever progress has been made.

For example, in recent weeks the daily news has become overwhelming, almost unbearable to read. Many stories could be highlighted, but a few stories making headlines across the world should illustrate the point:

â'' Conflict in Gaza, South Sudan, Libya and Nigeria

â'' ISIS' violent actions in Iraq and Syria

â'' A Malaysian Airlines flight becoming a war casualty in the ongoing Ukraine-Russia quasi-war

â'' Central American violence leading to a large influx of undocumented, unaccompanied children to the United States with no constructive solutions being offered

â'' High levels of gun violence in Chicago, continuing a tragic trend in the city and throughout the nation

Optimism in humanity's progress toward a utopian era, or even a better future, is not enough to sustain us when faced with such challenging times. This insufficient ethic will inevitably lead to disappointment or despair.

A healthy recognition of sin and the limits it places on human possibility, coupled with an equally robust sense of calling to embody the will of God as best we are

able, is required.

A constructive Christian ethic must hold together the tension of the “always, but coming” nature of God’s kingdom.

While both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr seek this balance, I find that their combined reflections are more effective than their individual efforts.

Christians can look to Rauschenbusch to be reminded that salvation involves not only individuals but also systems and structures, and that the pursuit of justice in the social order is central to our calling.

This can help us avoid a faith that either focuses primarily on life beyond death or despairs of making any positive impact in the world.

Niebuhr can be turned to when we need to recall that God’s ideal for the world (the kingdom of God) always stands over and above human progress—both inspiring and judging it.

This prevents us from putting too much confidence in human progress, from confusing what is with what ought to be, and from losing hope when faced with halted progress or even regression.

Perhaps (re-) discovering and reflecting on the writings of these Christian social ethicists will aid the essential work of maintaining this balance by inspiring and contextualizing our efforts to advance the common good.

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