

History of America's Reengineering of Christianity:

Walter Rauschenbusch, the Social Gospel, and the Poor

It is my conviction that much of American Christianity is the product of being reengineered by forces on the political right and the political left. If we are not talking heat from the secular right (e.g., those devoted to Fox News) and the secular left (e.g., those devoted to CNN), then we are not following Jesus Christ. If we feel comfortable in the right or the left, then we are not following Jesus. Instead, we are living in an American engineered form of Christianity.

A great resource to help believers get out of the two tribes and back to following Jesus on social issues, is Timothy Keller's "Generous Justice." Here is an excerpt that covers some of the history of how Christianity had become reengineered by American social forces:

In the twentieth century the American church divided between the liberal mainline that stressed social justice and the fundamentalist churches that emphasized personal salvation. One of the founders of the Social Gospel movement was Walter Rauschenbusch, a German Baptist minister whose first pastorate was on the edge of New York City's Hell's Kitchen in the 1880s.

His firsthand acquaintance with the terrible poverty of his neighborhood led him to question traditional evangelism, which took pains to save people's souls but did nothing about the social systems locking them into poverty. Rauschenbusch began to minister to "both soul and body," but in tandem with this shift in method came a shift in theology. He rejected the traditional doctrines of Scripture and atonement. He taught that Jesus did not need to satisfy the justice of God, and therefore he died only to be an example of unselfishness.

In the mind of many orthodox Christians, therefore, "doing justice" is inextricably linked with the loss of sound doctrine and spiritual dynamism. However, Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century author of the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," was a staunch Calvinist and hardly anyone's idea of a "liberal." Yet in his discourse on "The Duty of Charity to the Poor," he concluded, "Where have we any command in the Bible laid

down in stronger terms, and in a more peremptory urgent manner, than the command of giving to the poor?"

Unlike Rauschenbusch, Edwards argued that you did not have to change the classic Biblical doctrine of salvation to do ministry to the poor. On the contrary, such ministry flows directly out of historic evangelical teaching. He saw involvement with the poor and classic Biblical doctrine as indissolubly intertwined. That combination is relatively rare today, but it shouldn't be. I am writing this book for people who don't see yet what Edwards saw, namely, that when the Spirit enables us to understand what Christ has done for us, the result is a life poured out in deeds of justice and compassion for the poor.

Others who I hope will give this book a hearing are the younger evangelicals who have "expanded their mission" to include social justice along with evangelism. Many of them have not only turned away from older forms of ministry, but also from traditional evangelical doctrines of Jesus's substitutionary atonement and of justification by faith alone, which are seen as too "individualistic."

These authors usually argue that changes in theological emphasis—or perhaps outright changes in theological doctrine—are necessary if the church is going to be more engaged in the pursuit of social justice. The scope of the present volume prevents us from looking at these debates about atonement and justification.

However, one of its main purposes is to show that such reengineering of doctrine is not only mistaken in itself, but also unnecessary. The most traditional formulation of evangelical doctrine, rightly understood, should lead its proponents to a life of doing justice in the world.

Keller, Timothy. *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* . Penguin Publishing Group, xv-xviii.