

At the heart of the Social Gospel movement in North America was a sharp response to the unfair working conditions for laborers and unequal distribution of wealth and resources caused by the industrial revolution. Protestant and Catholic persons responded with a theology that focused on the teachings and life of Jesus and called for the redemption of society, as well as the individual soul. Dorothy Day was a prominent voice among the Catholic Worker movement, aiming to alleviate the effects of the class war raging in America. Walter Rauschenbush, who preceded Day by approximately 30 years, emphasized the “Christianization” of society’s values and practices.

Dorothy Day, who was an avid pacifist, drew tremendous criticism because of her vocal opposition to Christian support of World War II. Day called Christians, instead of supporting war, to honor the peace-making message of the Sermon on the Mount and to engage the violence occurring between the classes of American citizens instead. “We have lived in the midst of this (class) war now these many years. It is a war not recognized by the majority of our comfortable people. They are pacifists themselves when it comes to the class war. They even pretend it is not there.”¹

Rauschenbush called for persons to look to the spirit from which the Hebrew law protected the laborer and proposed revolutionary ideas about the forgiveness of debt in the Jubilee Year. Like Day, Rauschenbush also called for Christians to look to Jesus for the example of holy living that would bring about the redemption of oppressive social systems and practices. “Complete salvation, therefore, would consist in an attitude of love in which [one] would freely co-ordinate [one’s] life with the lives of [one’s] fellows in obedience to the loving impulses of the spirit of God, thus taking part in a divine organism of mutual service.”²

Like so many American churches, the small American Baptist church of which I am a member pays lip service to the “woes” of the nation and the world. The pastor occasionally remembers the soldiers in the morning prayers and asks God to bring them home safely and quickly, but rarely does he confront the sin of violence head-on. Instead, the church and its members are content to serve at the local soup kitchen once a month, and to “mix-it-up” with future Habitat for Humanity homeowners on a worksite. In this way, the church takes a lukewarm position on all the sins that abound in society. As if Day and Rauschenbush’s words had never been spoken, the church is content to let the hungry remain hungry and the soldiers remain at war.

Church leaders might defend themselves by saying that war and hunger are inevitable evils of a faulted world. Where sinful persons are active, persons are predictably going to fight and take advantage of each other. Still, Jesus was not daunted by the perils of the Roman Empire, and those who accept the violence of poverty and war as inevitable or even necessary ought to pay more attention to Jesus’ ministry of reconciliation, feeding and healing.

Jesus was always “on-call” in his ministry to the brokenness of this world. Had Jesus’ activity been a once-a-month mission of philanthropy, we might have called him a charitable person, even a humanitarian, but no one would call him savior. The call of Dorothy Day, Walter Rauschenbush and even Jesus is to take up a life that boldly pronounces the evils of violent wars and oppressive social systems. We are invited into a divine partnership that is ongoing in the work of peace and liberation. Being part-time philanthropists will not meet the needs of God’s suffering children.

¹ J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong ed., *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) 249.

² *Ibid.*, 243-244.