Walter Rauschenbusch was born to the son of a German immigrant and Baptist minister at the start of the Civil War. After graduating from Rochester Seminary in 1886, he launched his own career as a minister in New York. His early work was with working-class immigrants, and he quickly became involved in reform politics aimed at improving the condition of those communities. In 1892, he joined the new Brotherhood of the Kingdom, a core organization in the Social Gospel movement at the turn of the century, and a few years later returned to the Rochester Seminary as a member of the faculty. His most important work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, helped define the Social Gospel movement with its argument that a commitment to the New Testament required a commitment to social reform. The Social Gospel advocates had a significant influence on the Progressive political movement of the early twentieth century, and Rauschenbusch remained an active writer and lecturer until his death in 1918.

Approximate equality is the only enduring foundation of political democracy. The sense of equality is the only basis for Christian morality. Healthful human relations seem to run only on horizontal lines. Consequently true love always seeks to create a level. If a rich man loves a poor girl, he lifts her to financial and social equality with himself. If his love has not that equalizing power, it is flawed and becomes prostitution. Wherever husbands by social custom regard their wives as inferior, there is a deep-seated defect in married life. . . . Even our instinct of pity, which is love going out to the weak, works with spontaneous strength only toward those of our own class and circle who have dropped into misfortune. Business men feel very differently toward the widow of a business man left in poverty than they do toward a widow of the poorer classes. People of a lower class who demand our help are “cases”; people of our own class are folks.

The demand for equality is often ridiculed as if it implied that all men were to be of identical wealth, wisdom, and authority. But social equality can coexist with the greatest natural differences. There is no more fundamental difference than that of sex, nor a greater intellectual chasm than that between an educated man and a little child, yet in the family all are equal. In a college community there are various gradations of rank and authority within the faculty, and there is a clearly marked distinction between the students and the faculty, but there is social equality. On the other hand, the janitor and the peanut vender are outside of the circle, however important they may be to it.

The social equality existing in our country in the past has been one of the chief charms of life here and of far more practical importance to our democracy than the universal ballot. After a long period of study abroad in my youth I realized on my return to America that life here was far poorer in music, art, and many forms of enjoyment than life on the continent of Europe; but that life tasted better here, nevertheless, because men met one another more simply, frankly, and wholesomely. In Europe a man is always considering just how much deference he must show to those in ranks above him, and in

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turn noting jealously if those below him are strewing the right quantity of incense due to his own social position.

The fundamental democracy of social intercourse, which is one of the richest endowments of our American life, is slipping from us. Actual inequality endangers the sense of equality. The rich man and the poor man can meet on a level if they are old friends, or if they are men of exceptional moral qualities, or if they meet under unusual circumstances that reduce all things to their primitive human elements. But as a general thing they all live different lives, and the sense of unlikeness will affect all their dealings. With women the spirit of social caste seems to be even more fatally easy than with men. It may be denied that the poor in our country are getting poorer, but it cannot well be denied that the rich are getting richer. The extremes of wealth and poverty are much farther apart than formerly, and thus the poor are at least relatively poorer. There is a rich class and a poor class, whose manner of life is wedged farther and farther apart, and whose boundary lines are becoming ever more distinct. The difference in housing, eating, dressing, and speaking would be a sufficient barrier. The dominant position of the one class in industry and dependence of the other is even more decisive. . . . As capitalism grows, it must create a proletariat to correspond. Just as militarism is based on military obedience, so capitalism is based on economic dependence.

We hear passionate protests against the use of the hateful word “class” in America. There are no classes in our country, we are told. But the hateful part is not the word, but the thing. If class distinctions are growing up here, he serves his country ill who would hush up the fact or blind the people to it by fine phrases. A class is a body of men who are so similar in their work, their duties and privileges, their manner of life and enjoyment, that a common interest, common conception of life, and common moral ideals are developed and cement the individuals. The business men constitute such a class. In old countries the upper class gradually adorned itself with titles, won special privileges in court and army and law, and created an atmosphere of awe and apartness. But the solid basis on which this was done was the feudal control of the land, which was then the great source of wealth. The rest was merely the decorative moss that grows up on the rocks of permanent wealth. With the industrial revolution a new source of wealth opened up; a new set of men gained control of it and ousted the old feudal nobility more or less thoroughly. The new aristocracy, which is based on mobile capital, has not yet had time to festoon itself with decorations, but likes to hasten the process by intermarriage with the remnants of the old feudal nobility. Whether it will ever duplicate the old forms in this country is immaterial, as long as it has the fact of power. In some way the social inequality will find increasing outward expression and will tend to make itself permanent. Where there are actual class differences, there will be a dawning class consciousness, a clear class interest, and there may be a class struggle.

In the past the sympathy between the richer and the poorer members of American society has still run strong. Many rich men and women were once poor and have not forgotten their early struggles and the simple homes of their childhood. As wealth becomes hereditary, there will be more who have never known any life except that of luxury, and have never had any associates except the children of the rich or their servants. . . . [T]hey live a world apart, and the mass of the people have distorted ideas about them and little human sympathy for them. . . .

Individual sympathy and understanding has been our chief reliance in the past for overcoming the differences between the social classes. The feelings and principles implanted by Christianity have been a powerful aid in that direction. But if this sympathy diminishes by the widening of the social chasm, what hope have we? . . .

. . . If we allow deep and permanent inequality to grow up in our country, it is as sure as gravitation that not only the old democracy and frankness of manners will go, but even the theory of human equality, which has been part of our spiritual atmosphere through Christianity, will be denied. It is already widely challenged.
Any shifting of the economic equilibrium from one class to another is sure to be followed by a shifting of the political equilibrium. If a class arrives at economic wealth, it will gain political influence and some form of representation. . . . a class which is economically strong will have the necessary influence to secure and enforce laws which protect its economic interests. In turn, a class which controls legislation will shape it for its own enrichment. Politics is embroidered with patriotic sentiment and phrases, but at bottom, consciously or unconsciously, the economic interests dominate it always. If therefore we have a class which owns a large part of the national wealth and controls nearly all the mobile part of it, it is idle to suppose that this class will not see to it that the vast power exerted by the machinery of government serves its interests. And if we have another class which is economically independent and helpless, it is idle to suppose that it will be allowed an equal voice in swaying political power. In short, we cannot join economic inequality and political equality. As Oliver Cromwell wrote to Parliament, “If there be any one that makes many poor to make a few rich, that suits not a Commonwealth.” The words of Lincoln find a new application here, that the republic cannot be half slave and half free.

The power of capitalism over the machinery of our government, and its corroding influence on the morality of our public servants, has been revealed within recent years to such an extent that it is almost superfluous to speak of it. If any one had foretold ten years ago the facts which are now understood by all, he would have been denounced as an incurable pessimist. Our cities have surrendered nearly all the functions that bring an income, keeping only those that demand expenditure, and they are now so dominated by the public service corporations that it takes a furious spasm of public anger . . . to drive the robbers from their entrenchments in the very citadel of government; and after the victory is won there is absolutely no guarantee that it will be permanent. There is not one of our states which is not more or less controlled by its chief railways. How far our national government is constantly warped in its action, the man at a distance can hardly tell, but the public confidence in Congress is deeply undermined. . . .

The courts are the instrument by which the organized community exercises its supremacy over the affairs of the individual, and the control of the courts is therefore of vital concern to the privileged classes of any nation. Exemption from the jurisdiction of certain courts which would be troublesome, was a desirable privilege, and both the feudal aristocracy and the clergy had that privilege. . . . In our own country all are equal before the law—in theory. In practice there is the most serious inequality. The right of appeal as handled in our country gives tremendous odds to those who have financial staying power. The police court, which is the poor man’s courts, deals with him very summarily. If a rich man and a poor man were alike fined $10 for being drunk and disorderly, the equal punishment would be exceedingly unequal. If the poor man is unable to pay the fine, he gets ten days; nothing likely to be inflicted on the rich man for a similar offense would hit him equally hard.

To what extent the judges are actually corrupt it is probably impossible to say. We have been trying to keep up our courage amid the general official corruption by asserting that the integrity of the judiciary is at least above reproach. But the only thing that would make them immune to the general disease is the spirit and professional honor are a rather fragile barrier against the terrible temptations which can be offered by the great interests, and when that barrier is once undermined by evil example, it will wash away with increasing speed. Recent revelations have not been calculated to cheer us. The judge is frequently a successful politician before he sits on the bench. Is the sanctifying power of official responsibility so great that it will purge out of the habits of mind acquired by a successful political career, as politics now goes? At any rate, it is safe to say that the study and practice of the law create an ingrained respect for things as they have been, and that the social sympathies of judges are altogether likely to be with the educated and possessing classes. . . .
The only power on which we stake our hope in our present political decay is the power of public opinion. Whenever some temporary victory has been scored by the people, the newspapers triumphantly announce that the people that the people are really still sovereign, and that nothing can resist public opinion when once aroused. In reality this sheet anchor of our hope is as dependable as the wind that blows. It takes strenuous efforts to arouse the public. Only spectacular evils are likely to impress it. When it is aroused, it is easily turned against some side issue or some harmless scapegoat. And, like all passions, it is short-lived and sinks back to slumber quickly. Despotic governments have always trusted in dilatory tactics, knowing well the somnolence of public opinion. The same policy is adroitly used by those who exploit the people in our country. To this must be added the fact that the predatory interests are tampering with the organs which create public opinion. If public opinion is indeed so great a power, it is not likely that it will be overlooked by those who are so alert against all other sources of danger. It will not be denied that some newspapers are directly in the pay of certain interests and are their active champions. It will not be denied that the counting-room standpoint is profoundly influential in the editorial policy of all newspapers, and that large advertisers can muzzle most papers if they are determined on a policy. Not only the editorials are affected, but the news matter. . . . Now the justice and efficiency of democratic government depend on the intelligence and information of the citizens. If they are purposely misled by distorted information or by the suppression of important information, the larger jury before which all public causes have to be pleaded is tampered with, and the innermost life of our republic is in danger.

. . . We have, in fact, one kind of constitution on paper, and another system of government in fact. That is usually the way when a slow revolution is taking place in the distribution of political and economic power. The old structure apparently remains intact, but actually the seat of power has changed. . . . The president of a great university has predicted that we shall have an emperor within twenty years. We shall probably never have an emperor, but we may have a chairman of some committee or other, some person not even mentioned in any constitution or law, who will be the de facto emperor of our republic. Names are trifles. An emperor by any other name will smell as sweet. . . . The boss in American political life is the extra-constitutional ruler simply because he stands for the really dominant powers.

The political life of a nation represents the manner in which that nation manages its common affairs. It is not a thing apart from the rest of the national life. It is the direct outgrowth of present forces and realities, somewhat modified by past traditions, and in turn it intensifies the conditions which shape it. The ideal of our government was to distribute political rights and powers equally among the citizens. But a state of such actual inequality has grown up among the citizens that this ideal becomes unworkable. According to the careful calculations of Mr. Charles B. Spahr, one per cent of the families in our country held more than half of the aggregate wealth of the country, more than all the rest of the nation put together. And that was in 1890. Is it likely that this small minority, which is so powerful in possessions, will be content with one percent of the political power wherewith to protect these possessions? Seven-eighths of the families held only one-eighth of the national wealth. Has it ever happened in history that such a seven-eighths would permanently be permitted to wield seven-eighths of all political power? If we want approximate political equality, we must have approximate economic equality. If we attempt it otherwise, we shall be bucking against the law of gravitation. . . .

Our moral character is wrought out by choosing the right when we are offered the wrong. It is neither possible nor desirable to create a condition in which the human soul will not have to struggle with temptation. But there are conditions in which evil is so dominant and its attraction so deadly and irresistible, that no wise man will want to expose himself or his children to such odds. . . .

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this purpose? Competitive commerce exalts selfishness to the dignity of a moral principle. It pits men
against one another in a gladiatorial game in which there is no mercy and in which ninety percent of the
combatants finally strew the arena. . . . Our business life borders so closely on dishonesty that men are
hardly aware when they cross the line. It is a penal offense for a government officer to profit by a
contract which he awards or mediates; in business life that is an everyday occurrence. No wonder that
our officials are corrupt when their corruption is the respectability of business life.

. . .
Industry and commerce are good. They serve the needs of men. The men eminent in industry
and commerce are good men, with the fine qualities of human nature. But the organization of industry
and commerce is such that along with its useful service if carries death, physical and moral. . . . Every
joint-stock company, trust, or labor union organized, every extension of government interference or
government ownership, is a surrender of the competitive principle and a halting step toward
cooperation. Practical men take these steps because competition has proved itself suicidal to economic
welfare. Christian men have a stouter reason for turning against it, because it slays human character and
denies human brotherhood. If money dominates, the ideal cannot dominate. If we serve mammon, we
cannot serve the Christ.

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Nations do not die by wealth, but by injustice. The forward impetus comes through some great
historical opportunity which stimulates the production of wealth, breaks up the caked and rigid order of
the past, sets free the energies of new classes, calls creative leaders to the front, quickens the
intellectual life, intensifies the sense of duty and the ideal devotion to the common weal, and awakens
in the strong individuals the large ambition of patriotic service. Progress slackens when a single class
appropriates the social results of the common labor, fortifies its evil rights by unfair laws, throttles the
masses by political centralization and suppression, and consumes in luxury what it has taken in
covetousness. Then there is a gradual loss of productive energy, an increasing bitterness and distrust, a
waning sense of duty and devotion to country, a paralysis of the moral springs of noble action. Men no
longer love the Commonwealth, because it does not stand for the common wealth. Force has to supply
the cohesive power which love fails to furnish. Exploitation creates poverty, and poverty is followed by
physical degeneration. Education, art, wealth, and culture may continue to advance and may even ripen
to their mellowest perfection when the worm of death is already at the heart of the nation. Internal
convulsions or external catastrophes will finally reveal the state of decay.

. . .
In the last resort the only hope is in the moral forces which can be summoned to the rescue. If
there are statesmen, prophets, and apostles who set truth and justice above selfish advancement; if
their call finds a response in the great body of the people; if a new tide of religious faith and moral
enthusiasm creates new standards of duty and a new capacity for self-sacrifice; if the strong learn to
direct their love of power to the uplifting of the people and see the highest self-assertion in self-
sacrifice—then the entrenchments of vested wrong will melt away; the stifled energy of the people will
leap forward; the atrophied members of the social body will be filled with a fresh flow of blood; and a
regenerate nation will look with the eyes of youth across the fields of fortune.

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