

PRAYERS FOR THE NEW  
SOCIAL AWAKENING



INSPIRED BY THE NEW  
SOCIAL CREED

Edited by Christian Iosso  
and Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty

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# INTRODUCTION

*Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty  
and Christian Iosso*

We are living in a time when Christian people are called to be prophets. The prayers in this book are written to help provide “ears to hear” the voice of God that is calling us and “eyes to see” the reign of God that is spread around us. Our time is a fearful time for many, a time of war and well-advertised fear of terrorism, a time of intensifying global warming, a time of growing economic division within and among most nations affected by globalization. Unprecedented levels of international cooperation are needed to address the problems that we are facing and the divisions among us. People of wisdom and faith are particularly called to speak out and act in hope of realizing God’s promises for a new heaven and a *new earth*.

We are also aware that in these times thoughtful Christians are often torn between their concern for crises facing our world and their own thirst for faith-strengthening experiences. Many of us have been working hard and witnessing long for justice and peace, often to see once-clear insights forgotten, good work undone, and needless suffering increased. This book is an effort to provide some of the sustainable spirituality needed for those committed to meeting the social challenges of the twenty-first century. We have gathered almost one hundred prayers written by people of prophetic faith who have been working for social transformation in a variety of ways.

Walter Rauschenbusch's still-innovative *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* (1909) has been our inspiration. Rauschenbusch's prayers similarly spoke to a public concerned with the need to change course and a desire to draw deeply from the Christian tradition for guidance in that turning. Like Rauschenbusch, we include prayers related to particular occupations, life situations, and social issues relevant to our time. Unlike him, however, we have chosen to deviate from the basic conception of *For God and the People* as the work of a single author. By virtue of our contributor range, *Prayers for the New Social Awakening* celebrates a richer diversity of experiences, histories, and calls for justice. The contributors include faithful people, primarily Christians but not exclusively so, from many denominations and a range of theological emphases who are scholars, pastors, and activists, as well as several who are most directly affected by social injustice. Many are well known; several have written prayer books of their own; and all have significant experience and wisdom in relation to the specific themes of their prayers.

This book also lifts up another inspiration for concerted action from that earlier Progressive Era: the Social Creed of the Churches of 1908. The 1908 creed was an effective consensus statement of social ideals that helped build support for the social protections of the New Deal and later legislation. Along with the prayers written by a wide range of prophetic Christians we include a copy of a new Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century, designed to build support in our churches for nothing less than the redemptive redirection of United States society. The "social creeds" are part of the social and ecumenical context of these prayers. They call us to be rooted in past struggles for justice and compassion and linked in solidarity with struggles of today and tomorrow.

## The Social Gospel as a Spiritual Movement

Around the turn of the twentieth century Christians in the United States worked collaboratively to address the needs of working people and immigrants most affected by the burgeoning industrial machine. These Christians, later called social gospelers, formed a movement pushing both American society and the church toward reforms that would challenge the exploitation of laborers and the tremendous economic disparities between workers and the “captains” of industry. Of course, the theological impulse to world engagement and transformation had been central to Christianity from its beginnings as a Jesus movement. Social gospelers returned to an early Christian emphasis on Jesus’ connection with the prophets and teachings about the kingdom. Jesus proclaimed that God’s vision for the world stood in sharp contrast to prevailing social practices.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

—Matt. 5:3–10

These words as they are remembered in Matthew 5 are a key to understanding the social gospelers' ethic—radical and reforming all at once. God's kingdom promised more for those landless then, so it promises more for the homeless or jobless now. Jesus' angle of vision was from below and from a place where righteousness or justice reinforced mercy or charity—but it extended far beyond there. For Walter Rauschenbusch, living into the promise of God's kingdom meant forming new social realities and the eventual “Christianization” of society, despite an equally evident and socially transmitted “kingdom of evil.”

Rauschenbusch, the most widely recognized theologian of the social gospel, articulated the theology that fueled the movement in what has become a classic text, *The Theology of the Social Gospel*. His aim was to provide “an adequate intellectual basis for the movement,” but that was not his only concern. Rauschenbusch, who had also been a pastor, was concerned that activists and reformers find the sustenance and empowerment they needed to work for social change. In one of her letters to him, Vida Dutton Scudder, an English professor at Wellesley College and a leading voice for the social gospel movement in the Episcopal Church, referred to Rauschenbusch as a “mystic.” Scudder and Rauschenbusch agreed that there was a connection between the social and the spiritual. When Rauschenbusch served as a pastor in Hell's Kitchen in New York City, he met with two other pastors and formed what they called a “Society of Jesus.” During their meetings they studied the Scriptures and engaged in a variety of spiritual disciplines. We might compare it with a discipleship or support group today, and in their case it lasted for years despite changes in location.

*For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* was a collection of Rauschenbusch's prayers uttered in various settings between 1907 and 1909 and then published as a book in 1909. Rauschenbusch intended for the

prayer book to serve as a resource that fostered social concern and nurtured the imagination of churches. He focused on the social meaning of prayer in the book's introduction. The Lord's Prayer, he asserted, was the "great charter of all social prayers."<sup>1</sup> The biblical account of Jesus' prayer begins with the word "Our," an expression of Jesus' own "consciousness of human solidarity which was a matter of course in all his thinking."<sup>2</sup> Jesus' words, as Christian communities remembered and continued to pray them, compelled Christians to recognize their oneness with others and to stand together to ask for their common daily bread. But alongside the everydayness of the prayer, Rauschenbusch wanted its revolutionary force understood: the propulsive force of holiness attached to the coming of God's reign on earth. To him, it was a door to the person-making and people-forming power of Jesus, a basic sign of the way personal salvation ushers one into an inherently *social* kingdom of God. In this light, the social gospel movement was a movement of the Spirit, changing the focus of prayer to address massive social evils and seek a yet greater social good.

## Prayer and Its Social Impact

Socially conscious prayer today responds to the desire for wholeness that is part of the Spirit's work in every conscience, shaping love and justice to guide both the believer and the church to serve the common good. Prayer is a way of listening for God's voice and finding one's own. Voicing one's concerns through prayer—before God as individuals and in community—raises our own consciousness; enables

1. Walter Rauschenbusch, *For God and the People: Prayers of the Social Awakening* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1909), 17.

2. *Ibid.*

us to hear the voices of those long silenced, even silenced voices in ourselves; and enlivens our imaginations as we listen for God's hopes and dreams. Church membership becomes a form of social solidarity with a resistance to abandoning anyone and an awareness of the dynamic, interdependent relationship between the world and the church.

Every day we are bombarded by stories of people living hardscrabble lives, the horrible effects of war, refugees who will never again find a place to call home, and the unending human exploitation of our natural world. We can easily become overwhelmed and allow ourselves to be silenced and paralyzed in the face of these problems. Vital prayer, however, has an enlivening effect. By listening to God and by sharing in worship and written prayers, we regain a sense of our own interdependence with all things. Prayer breaks the spell of passivity and gives us back our ability to feel for and to connect with God and others; we become more a part of God's loving and transforming work.

For Rauschenbusch, the saving power of the church did not rest "on its institutional character, on its continuity, its ordination, its ministry, or its doctrine."<sup>3</sup> The power of the church rested on the way it nurtured members to be part of what he called a "new apostolate." He and other social gospelers viewed prayer and other forms of worship as a way of reminding the community of faith of its social mission and as a means of turning the church toward its task. In their way of thinking, prayer and social action belonged together.

Quaker spiritual guide Douglas Steere describes prayer as "intimate cooperation with God."<sup>4</sup> To pray puts us at God's disposal and strengthens the rhythm in us between

3. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917; repr. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 129.

4. Douglas Steere, *Dimensions of Prayer*; with preface by E. Glenn Hinson (1962; repr. Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 66.

faithful action and a deep contemplation. God thus moves us, we believe, from a concern for our own insufficiencies to a concern for sufficiency in the world, from personal integration to the “need for roots” that we all share. More recently, Latin American liberation theologian Leonardo Boff expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote, “It is not a question of keeping prayer and action in separate compartments, nor of prayer outside of a concrete commitment to the liberation of the oppressed, but rather of prayer inserted in the process of liberation, living out an encounter with God ‘in’ the encounter with our brothers and sisters.”<sup>5</sup> Boff argues for “a unity of prayer-liberation based on a living faith in God existing in all things.”<sup>6</sup> Prayer not only finds a place in personal devotion or spaces deemed sacred but also finds voice in and gives rhythm to political action and social practices.

Placing a social emphasis is not meant to instrumentalize prayer or to evade the subtle questions of petitionary prayer and the models of God’s action that lie behind all prayer. Prayer in itself is of intrinsic value, connecting us with God’s presence and purposes. While the prayers in this book focus on many social issues, we do not draw a line between personal and public prayer concerns. Whatever its focus of attention or resulting benefits, to pray is to respond to the living God, who is both transcendent and immanent. Whenever we pray for others, individually or in large groups, we recognize that it is God who awakens our compassion and takes ego out of our desire.

The public impact of prayer is difficult to assess, yet there are examples of the significant impact prayer has

5. Leonardo Boff, “The Need for Political Saints,” *Cross Currents* (Winter 1980–81): 372.

6. Philip Shelldrake, “Christian Spirituality as Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic,” in *Minding the Spirit*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 288.

made on social movements. The example of warfare averted in South Africa's liberation struggle may pose the question of prayer's social effect in a clear way. How did the end of apartheid come about without the bloody race war that was widely predicted? Divestment and other non-violent international economic pressure from the outside have been shown to have helped the struggle within the country. But it was the nature of that internal struggle that was primary, and it was led, to a large degree, by Christians. A significant moment occurred on June 16, 1985, the day chosen (marking the Soweto killings of June 16, 1976) for "A Call to Prayer for the End of Unjust Rule."

In *When Prayer Makes News*, Allan Boesak, Charles Villa-Vicencio, and other contributors make the case that this call and its "theological rationale" put the actions of the state under God's eye, and the state's legitimacy was found wanting. Churches, ministers, priests, and people were divided by the prophetic nature of this usually priestly act of prayer, and some wondered how one could pray both for a government and for its removal. Boesak argued for the freedom and obedience of the church, based in scriptural passages about obeying God and not human beings, and about finding salvation in no other name than Jesus Christ (Acts 4:10, 12). Villa-Vicencio maintained that true piety included resistance: one's self-offering in prayer led to a continuation of the incarnation in acts of public witness and redemptive action. Other contributors discussed the guidance of World War II-era leaders Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer and of Martin Luther King Jr. We may also note that prayers were an integral part of the massive funeral processions and demonstrations that followed the killings of black protesters in apartheid's final years. The impact of prayer remains unquantifiable, but it is hard not to claim that prayer in the churches and in the streets helped end apartheid in a less brutal way than would have otherwise come about.



## Social Prayer and the Social Creeds

*Prayers for the New Social Awakening* emerged from discussions of the Social Creed Resolution Team that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) charged with the task of writing a Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century. The Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century is intended to commemorate the hundredth anniversary of the 1908 “Social Creed” of the Federal Council of Churches, to honor the long history of prophetic witness in which ecumenical churches have been engaged, and to raise awareness among Christians today of the significant attention that needs to be paid to economic, social, and political disparities in the United States and abroad. Creedal statements are often thought of as a way the church defines acceptable individual and communal beliefs. This social creed, however, is not intended to limit conversation; a *social* creed is intended to invite conversation, response, and action.

The Social Creed of 1908 was adopted at the founding meeting of the Federal Council of Churches, a predecessor of what became in 1950 the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Part of the report of the Committee on the Church and Modern Industry, its focus was primarily economic, concerned with working conditions and the abolition of child labor, which is still needed around the world. What is significant is that it advocated social protections not enacted until the New Deal and later, showing a clear prophetic anticipation that was affirmed by the member communions (some of which updated the social creed a number of times). The United Methodist Church must be particularly recognized for its stewardship of the social creed—still part of its *Book of Discipline*—and its current efforts to produce a song version.

In keeping with the ecumenical heritage of the 1908 creed, the Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century also seeks to express a moral consensus among the member

communions of the National Council, thus the Presbyterian working group connected with similar groups in the National Council of Churches and the United Methodist Church. Overall, it is a call to a more communitarian Christian social ethic, far more theologically explicit than its predecessors but still retaining some social gospel elements.

As editors of this collection, we, along with the committee that has helped to give the social creed shape, hope that these prayers will draw the church's attention to the concerns it raises. Clearly, we invite members of congregations to pray individually and communally for a new social awakening as represented in that social creed. At the same time, readers of this book may find the contrasts between the 1908 and 2008 social creeds to be an illuminating analogy to the contrasts between Walter Rauschenbusch's prayers and those of our contributors today.

## The Gathering of These Prayers and the Use of This Book

The classical movements of prayer are present in this book, though they are not our main organizing principle. Praise, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, even argument with God: many of these prayers move among those elements. Some will fit public occasions and can be read antiphonally; others are poems to be reflected on in silence. The organization of the sections of the book reflects the social setting and focus of the prayers and was influenced by Rauschenbusch. *For God and the People* has sections for prayers of "praise and thanksgiving," prayers "for social groups and classes," "prayers of wrath," and prayers for "the progress of humanity." Our "prayers of protest" approximate his "prayers of wrath"; our "prayers for peace and healing" reflect some concerns in his prayers for "the progress of humanity"; our "communities and institutions"

and “various vocations and circumstances” build on his “social groups and classes.” We hope our groupings are helpful, but we do not claim ultimacy for them.

It is appropriate that Rauschenbusch’s prayer book focused partly on vocation, perhaps the doctrine then most under pressure from the processes of industrialization. Industrialization eliminated much of the individual craft and beauty in work for those laboring in factories. We follow Rauschenbusch with prayers from and for particular vocations, not to sanctify any form of expertise but to share in realms of experience and angles of perception that shed light on our “gifts that differ” and what those diverse gifts offer larger communities. Certainly in each vocation, too, there is the challenge to “sell out,” to choose profit over service, to neglect the common good.

Like the early social creed and the social gospel movement itself, scholars have found Rauschenbusch shortsighted with regard to the connections between sexism and racism and society’s institutions, structures, and attitudes. Social context, scholars would agree, determines much, and the social gospel movement had conservative elements. Janet F. Fishburn has looked carefully at the Victorian understanding of family and women’s roles so prevalent in Rauschenbusch’s writing. Others see more support among social gospelers for prohibition of alcohol than more radical positions concerning antilynching protests. Historian Ronald White’s *Liberty and Justice for All* challenges this view and reveals a much fuller picture of the social gospel on race, including African American social gospel leaders. W. E. B. DuBois, for example, might now be understood as pursuing a form of social gospel thinking.

In an effort to avoid the social gospelers’ shortcomings, we have paid significant attention to the distinctive perspectives added by contributors due to age, gender, race, and ethnicity. More than a hundred contributors over the course of eight months were invited to submit a prayer to

this collection. We are pleased to include contributors from the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the Armenian Orthodox Church, Baptist churches (several varieties), the Church of God in Christ, the Christian Church/Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Orthodox Church in America, Metropolitan Community churches, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), the Reformed Church in America, the Roman Catholic Church, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, and the Society of Friends. We have included prayers from a number of immigrants, but a more worldwide gathering awaits another book.

The editors have not chosen to harmonize the voices of the contributors though one may find a remarkable unity of heart and acknowledged responsibility within the very different voices from across the traditions. The idea of the “kingdom” or reign of God, often in echoes of the Lord’s Prayer, still evokes both communal loyalty and world-shaking, in-breaking, transforming power. Yet the idea of God as a “king” is virtually gone among our contributors. God’s glory is celebrated, but there is no celebration of a divine authoritarianism. We also did not generally suggest subjects to contributors unless prompted to do so. Rather, to encourage the authenticity and integrity of each individual’s prayer, we shared some Rauschenbusch examples and the Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century with each contributor and asked them to voice concerns that grew out of their own work and experience. Readers will also find here prayers written by those who are most affected by economic and social disparities today. We seek not just to pray on behalf of or for but *through* this diversity of voices, to open ourselves to the experiences of others. Thus we learn to pray with them, listening for God’s voice in their words as we look toward a new social awakening.

As you read these prayers, please allow them to speak to you. This is not a matter of aesthetic judgment, though we

have sought both beauty and clarity. If prayers for the economy have an economy of style, wonderful, but their power is in how they engage us, and some of this power reflects the dedicated lives of their authors. Rauschenbusch's originals, reflecting his own theology, have a parish-inflected tone, Baptist in directness but also liturgical in awareness. Prayers in extremity may not have an obvious inner balance or steady intimacy with God, especially if an evil or loss has upset the world and destroyed loved ones and the capacity to love. Such prayers of lament and search, like Rachel's weeping, may leave us also wandering and wondering and perhaps mourning in empathy. If so, we have heard the implicit call in each prayer, which is partly a call on our own moral compass, our own ability to embody wholeness, our own discomfort with any compromise with corruption.

## Concluding Thoughts

To mark a centennial is to reflect on particular gifts from the past, in this case the heritage of the social gospel movement that Rauschenbusch embodied. To mark one centennial is also to hope for another. We hope that those who pray these prayers will not only be moved toward deeper contemplation but also be inspired to act. The church itself, and each individual member of it, carries some of the hope of love's realization in history and is a force for both love and justice. We hope that those who pray these prayers will engage in creative resistance to the powers and principalities that are crushing so many bodies and spirits in our world today.

# 1

## SOCIAL CREEDS OF THE CHURCHES: 1908 AND 2008

### The Social Creed of 1908

*Federal Council of Churches*  
(Now, *National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.*)

We deem it the duty of all Christian people to concern themselves directly with certain practical industrial problems. To us it seems that the Churches must stand—

For equal rights and complete justice for all men in all stations of life.

For the right of all men to the opportunity for self-maintenance, a right ever to be wisely and strongly safe-guarded against encroachments of every kind.

For the right of workers to some protection against the hardships often resulting from the swift crisis of industrial change.

For the principle of conciliation and arbitration in industrial dissensions.

For the protection of the worker from dangerous machinery, occupational disease, injuries and mortality.

For the abolition of child labor.  
For such regulation of the conditions of toil for  
    women as shall safeguard the physical and moral  
    health of the community.  
For the suppression of the “sweating system.”  
For the gradual and reasonable reduction of the  
    hours of labor to the lowest practical point, and  
    for that degree of leisure for all which is a condi-  
    tion of the highest human life.  
For a release from employment one day in seven.  
For a living wage as a minimum in every industry,  
    and for the highest wage that each industry can  
    afford.  
For the most equitable division of the products of  
    industry that can ultimately be devised.  
For suitable provision for the old age of the workers  
    and for those incapacitated by injury.  
For the abatement of poverty.

To the toilers of America and to those who by organized effort are seeking to lift the crushing burdens of the poor, and to reduce the hardships and uphold the dignity of labor, this council sends the greeting of human brotherhood and the pledge of sympathy and of help in a cause which belongs to all who follow Christ



## A Social Creed for the Twenty-first Century

We Churches of the United States have a message of hope for a fearful time. Just as the churches responded to the harshness of early Twentieth Century industrialization with a prophetic “Social Creed” in 1908, so in our era of globalization we offer a vision of a society that shares more

and consumes less, seeks compassion over suspicion and equality over domination, and finds security in joined hands rather than massed arms. Inspired by Isaiah's vision of a "peaceable kingdom," we honor the dignity of every person and the intrinsic value of every creature, and pray and work for the day when none "labor in vain or bear children for calamity" (Isa. 65:23). We do so as disciples of the One who came "that all may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10), and stand in solidarity with Christians and with all who strive for justice around the globe.

In faith, responding to our Creator, we celebrate the full humanity of each woman, man, and child, all created in the divine image as individuals of infinite worth, by working for:

Full civil, political, and economic rights for women and men of all races.

Abolition of forced labor, human trafficking, and the exploitation of children.

Employment for all, at a family-sustaining living wage, with equal pay for comparable work.

The rights of workers to organize and to share in workplace decisions and productivity growth.

Protection from dangerous working conditions, with time and benefits to enable full family life.

A system of criminal rehabilitation, based on restorative justice and an end to the death penalty.

In the love incarnate in Jesus, despite the world's sufferings and evils, we honor the deep connections within our human family and seek to awaken a new spirit of community, by working for:

Abatement of hunger and poverty and enactment of policies benefiting the most vulnerable.



High quality public education for all and universal, affordable, and accessible healthcare.  
An effective program of social security during sickness, disability, and old age.  
Tax and budget policies that reduce disparities between rich and poor, strengthen democracy, and provide greater opportunity for everyone within the common good.  
Just immigration policies that protect family unity, safeguard workers' rights, require employer accountability, and foster international cooperation.  
Sustainable communities marked by affordable housing, access to good jobs, and public safety.  
Public service as a high vocation, with real limits on the power of private interests in politics.

In hope sustained by the Holy Spirit, we pledge to be peacemakers in the world and stewards of God's good creation, by working for:

Adoption of simpler lifestyles for those who have enough; grace over greed in economic life.  
Access for all to clean air and water and healthy food, through wise care of land and technology.  
Sustainable use of earth's resources, promoting alternative energy sources and public transportation with binding covenants to reduce global warming and protect populations most affected.  
Equitable global trade and aid that protect local economies, cultures, and livelihoods.  
Peacemaking through multilateral diplomacy rather than unilateral force, the abolition of torture, and a strengthening of the United Nations and the rule of international law.  
Nuclear disarmament and redirection of military spending to more peaceful and productive uses.

Cooperation and dialogue for peace and environmental justice among the world's religions.

We—individual Christians and churches—commit ourselves to a culture of peace and freedom that embraces non-violence, nurtures character, treasures the environment, and builds community, rooted in a spirituality of inner growth with outward action. We make this commitment together—as members of Christ's body, led by the one Spirit—trusting in the God who makes all things new.