

# PORTRAITS OF COURAGE



STORIES OF  
BAPTIST HEROES



Julie Whidden Long

# WALTER RAUSCHENBUSCH BAPTIST PROPHET



**Who:** Walter Rauschenbusch

**Where:** New York City

**When:** 1861-1918

**What he did:** Preached and worked to change the poor conditions of his community

**W**hen young Walter Rauschenbusch's mother asked him what he wanted to be when he grew up, he did not give her a typical answer. He replied that he wanted to be John the Baptist.

Walter did not grow up to be John the Baptist, but he did grow up to become a famous Baptist in his own right. Like John the Baptist, Walter followed Jesus, and he spoke out about the sin he saw in his world. His honesty and challenging message angered some people, but he spoke the gospel truth. He was a Baptist hero.

Walter was born in 1861 in Rochester, New York. His

father was a German pastor who had come to America as a missionary. When he arrived, he became influenced by Baptists. He found in their teachings many of the truths he had discovered in his reading of the Bible. As Walter Rauschenbusch grew up and studied the Bible, he, too, discovered that he wanted to be a Baptist. He later said, "I began by being a Baptist because my father was, but today I am a Baptist because, with my convictions, I could not well be anything else. I now stand on my own feet and am ready to give account of the faith I hold."

When the time came for Walter to decide what he really did want to do with his life, he prayed for God's help. As he prayed, seventeen-year-old Walter felt God tugging very deep within his heart. When he experienced God in that way, he believed that God had a special mission for his life. He attended college at the University of Rochester and studied to be a minister at Rochester Theological Seminary.

At first, Walter wanted to go to India as a missionary. When a Baptist missionary society turned down his application, he explored other options. He began to believe very strongly that God called him to be a pastor. He told a fellow student in seminary, "I want to do hard work for God—I want to be a pastor, powerful with men, preaching to them Christ. . . . And if I do become anything but a pastor, you may believe that I have sunk to a lower ideal or that there was a very unmistakable call to duty in that direction." When Walter graduated from seminary, he did



become a pastor, but his first pastorate was not exactly the experience that he expected.

In 1886, Walter became the pastor of the Second German Baptist

Church in New York City. The church was located in an area nicknamed “Hell’s Kitchen” because it was one of the city’s worst slum neighborhoods. In “Hell’s Kitchen,” God changed Walter’s life.

Many changes were taking place in society. The Industrial Revolution was bringing about a different type of work environment in the cities. New machines helped factories to produce goods more quickly. Many people moved from the country to the city to work in these factories. Immigrants moved from other countries to get jobs in the factories for very low wages. Many business owners focused more on making money than on being fair to their employees. Inner-city neighborhoods were turning into slums, filled with poor people who did not have ways to meet their needs. Sadly, churches in the cities were not meeting those needs either.

When Walter moved to “Hell’s Kitchen,” he began to see first-hand how rough the conditions were, and he became concerned. What he saw touched him deeply and he wrote:



When I saw how men toiled all their life long, hard toilsome lives, and at the end had almost nothing to show for it; how strong men begged for work and could not get it in the hard times; how little children died—oh, the children's funerals! They gripped my heart—that was one of the things I always went away thinking about—why did the children have to die?

As a pastor, he preached about Christ and taught about the Bible, but Walter began to serve his people by helping them with the practical problems they faced. He worked with the poor to find jobs, receive medical care, fight against crime, and fill their stomachs.

As Walter saw the troubles of the people in his community, he also saw many “good” Christians who were unconcerned about what was going on. For them, being a Christian meant having only a personal relationship with God. They did not understand that they should also be concerned with the social problems of others.

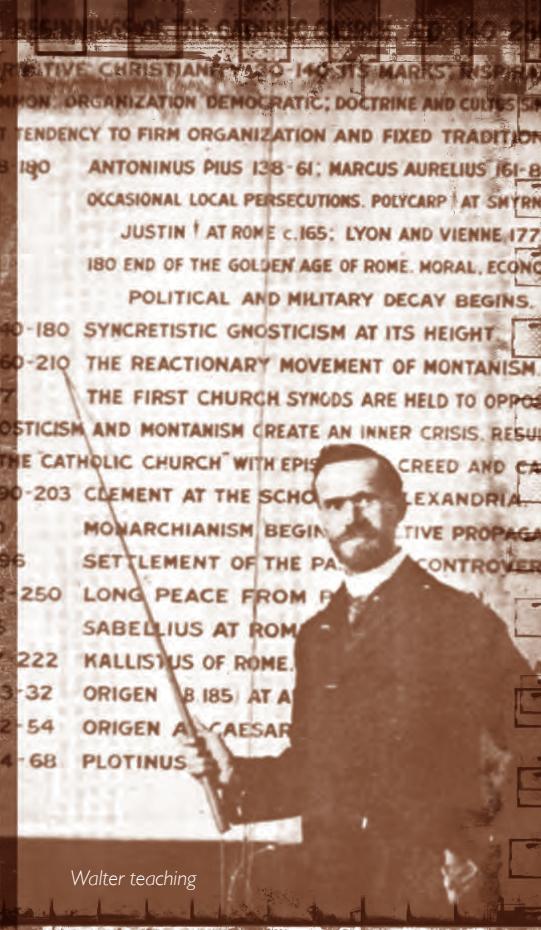
Ministering among the poor and watching them suffer inspired Walter to find ways to help improve the social conditions. He studied the Bible and discovered that Jesus spoke not only about changing individual lives, but changing the community as well. From Jesus, Walter picked up clues about how his faith should influence the way he lived in his community. This new reading of the Bible gave Walter a fresh experience of God's calling. To live out the message of the gospel, Christians must help meet the social needs of their communities and world.

Walter began to write about what he had discovered

while living in “Hell’s Kitchen.” He wanted other Christians to think about how their faith influenced the way they treated others. After suffering an illness that left him deaf in 1888, Walter turned his attention toward writing even more. He wrote eleven books and many articles about what he called the “social gospel,” and he became a popular speaker. Walter eventually left the pastorate to teach at Rochester Theological Seminary. In 1892, he also formed a group called “Brotherhood of the Kingdom,” which worked for better working conditions for the poor of the cities.

What did Walter write and speak about that was so important? He believed that the goal of the “**Social Gospel Movement**” was to apply the teachings of the gospel to society, and he wrote about a new understanding of the “Kingdom of God.” For Walter, the Kingdom of God was not a goal to be reached in the future, like heaven. As he read the prayer our Lord taught us to pray in the Bible, Walter took seriously Jesus’ words: “Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). Walter truly believed that people could work to establish life as God wanted it to be on

Rauschenbusch was a leader of the “**Social Gospel Movement**.” This movement tried to encourage people to understand that the Christian faith required that followers of Jesus use their resources to help the poor and change the injustices of society. The gospel should impact the society not just spiritually, but physically.



Walter teaching

earth. That meant no suffering, hatred, or violence. All God's people would have all that they needed and would live peacefully together.

Walter believed that the church existed to help make this goal possible. The purpose of the church, he said, was not only to communicate the importance of a personal Christian faith. The church also must work to transform society so that God's

Kingdom could exist on earth. He also believed strongly in the need

for a personal experience with God. In fact, he considered the Baptist emphasis on individual faith one of the primary reasons he was a Baptist, but he knew that faith was not meant to be a purely individual matter. While their personal relationship with Jesus was certainly significant, Christians were called to devote their lives to changing the world.

Walter did much good in helping to improve society in



his lifetime. When he died from cancer in 1918, much work was left to be done. Before he died, he said, "I am not sorry to be leaving a world where there is so much hate and to be going to a country where there will be so much love." He believed that God's Kingdom could be real on earth, but it had not happened yet.

Why is Walter Rauschenbusch a Baptist hero? He was a Baptist prophet. Often, people think of prophets as those who predict the future or think about future events. In the Bible, however, prophets were those people who took a good look at the world around them and demanded change. They believed that faith was not something that was only in a person's heart or head. Faith calls people to act, to do something practical about present-day situations. They did not predict the future, but they looked forward to a future when the gospel was lived out.

Walter was this kind of prophet. He saw problems in the world around him, called people to take action to change them, and hoped for the day that the world would be a better place because of the church.

As a prophet, Walter also challenged the church. He reminded Christians of the meaning of the gospel when it would have been much easier for them to sit comfortably in their pews. Some people told him that the church's job was to "save souls" by preaching the gospel, not dealing with people's physical problems. Walter agreed that the church was responsible for preaching the gospel, but he turned to the Bible and reminded them that Jesus was also



concerned with helping the poor, sick, and needy with their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs.

Walter was a hero because he found a way to live out the gospel in his own community. His passion for service and his ideas about the “social gospel” came out of his experience with the people in “Hell’s Kitchen.” He could not just keep the message of Jesus within the walls of the church he pastored. He took that message to the streets and told the people who had no jobs, food, or housing that they could know a better way.

Walter Rauschenbusch is still a hero for Baptists today. His teaching and work have influenced many people, Baptists and non-Baptists, to take seriously Jesus’ commandments to love God and love their neighbors. One important person he influenced was another Baptist hero—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Baptists can continue to learn from Walter Rauschenbusch. We should read the Bible and take seriously Jesus’ instructions about caring for those treated unfairly. We should look around us and speak out about the wrong things that are happening in our world. We should take action to make our communities better places. We should do our part to make the world like God’s Kingdom, a place with no suffering, hatred, or need. Like Walter Rauschenbusch, we may never see that goal met, but we can know that we are trying to do what Jesus asked of his followers.

# PORTRAITS OF COURAGE

STORIES OF BAPTIST HEROES

Written by Julie Whidden Long, this 128-page book, designed especially for younger youth and older children, presents the stories of Baptist heroes. These heroes lived in various countries and centuries and represent many phases of Baptist life. By highlighting the biographical dimension of the Baptist past, these inspiring stories help readers appreciate the personal contributions of heroic Baptist men and women.



Rev. Julie Whidden Long is the pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ in Macon, Georgia. She previously served as minister of children and families (2005–2013) and associate pastor (2013–2018) at FBCX Macon. Additionally, Rev. Long was the associate director of Baptist Women in Ministry (2018–2019) and launched a coaching and consulting practice in 2020. A native of Fitzgerald, Georgia, she is a two-time graduate of Mercer University, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts in Christianity and History from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in 2002 and a Master of Divinity from McAfee School of Theology in 2005. She is married to Jody Long, executive coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Georgia, and they have two children.