

REINHOLD NIEBUHR: THE REDISCOVERY OF SIN

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INTRODUCTION

Mention the name Reinhold Niebuhr in a contemporary conversation and most people would likely respond with a blank stare. Certainly among more scholarly circles the name would be recognized, but in recent decades the person of Reinhold Niebuhr has faded into relative obscurity. Nonetheless, some interest in Niebuhr was prompted by a 2007 *New York Times* article by David Brooks regarding his interview with then Senator Barack Obama.¹ In the article, Brooks states he asked Obama, “Have you ever read Reinhold Niebuhr?” Obama responded, “I love him. He’s one of my favorite philosophers.” Spurred on by such a response, in 2009 leading journalists gathered at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life Faith Angle Conference in Key West, Florida to participate in a symposium entitled, “Obama’s Favorite Theologian? A Short Course on Reinhold Niebuhr.”

Given this recent interest, a study of the influence Niebuhr’s ideas had on American culture is a worthy endeavor, especially his restatement of the idea of sin. Edwin Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt suggest his influence “shaped the thinking of political scientists, statesmen, journalists, diplomats, and a host of others.”² In fact, Robert Pyne offers that Niebuhr’s particular emphasis on individual and collective sin has provided a starting point for Christian social ethics for over six decades.³ To wit, Niebuhr argued that humanity’s sinfulness must be understood

¹ David Brooks, "Obama, Gospel, and Verse," *New York Times*, April 26, 2007.

² Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 319.

³ Robert A. Pyne, "The New Man and Immoral Society," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154, no. 614 (1997): 259-260.

from not only an individual perspective, but also from a corporate perspective. He termed this corporate perspective “collective pride,” denoting it as “man’s last, and in some respects, most pathetic effort to deny the determinate and contingent character of his existence. The very essence of human sin is in it.”⁴ Developed more fully, man’s problem in the end is his inhumanity to his fellow man.

The effects of this reasoning on the thinking of so many during the first half of the twentieth century were never more evident than in Niebuhr’s voice in support of the “just war.” G. E. Edwards, a Presbyterian pacifist, wrote somewhat critically of Niebuhr: “What Augustine was to the Roman emperorship, in providing a theology of just war to cope with the political exigencies of the fourth and fifth centuries, Reinhold Niebuhr was to President Roosevelt in the undergirding of WWII with churchly sanctions in 1941.”⁵ Building on Niebuhr, other theologians have also attempted to address collective forms of evil such as racism, sexism, and even nationalism. Bruce Milne concludes, “Niebuhr takes his stance on the borderland between the gospel and the world and seeks to construct a doctrine of sin in closest relationship to immediate human realities, particularly social ones.”⁶

In the pages that follow, the development of Niebuhr’s doctrine of sin will be examined. It will be demonstrated that while the social gospel movement of the early twentieth century proclaimed the wages of individual sin could be overcome by intelligent social reform, Niebuhr argued individuals intrinsically have little goodness within themselves and that socialization actually makes people more sinful. In support of this contention, Niebuhr’s ideas regarding the

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Human Nature,” in *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 213.

⁵ G. R. Edwards, *Jesus and the Politics of Violence* (New York: Harper, 1972), 179.

⁶ Bruce A. Milne, “The Idea of Sin in Twentieth-Century Theology,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 26, no. 1 (1974): 32.

anthropology of man will be examined in terms of man's dualistic nature.⁷ Additionally, his restatement of sin in the context of man-in-community, man in immediate social and cultural relationships, will be expounded. Further, his ideas regarding the pursuit of a holy society via the law of love will be surveyed. Finally, his contribution and detractions to contemporary theology surrounding his ideas of sin will be addressed and critiqued. First, a brief overview of his life and background and the impact his experiences had on the shaping of his theology is in order.

THE SHAPING OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

To some degree, all people are shaped by their spiritual journey. Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr is no exception. He was born in Wright City, Missouri, on June 21, 1892, to Gustav and Lydia Niebuhr, a young German-American couple who had come to America in 1881.⁸ Gustav was to graduate from Eden Seminary near St. Louis, the primary training ground for the German Evangelical Synod, and became a de facto circuit-riding preacher.⁹ In 1895 he settled in St. Charles, Missouri, serving as pastor of Saint John's church. He resigned from the parish and accepted the call as pastor of Saint John's church in Lincoln, Illinois in 1902.¹⁰ It would be there in Logan County that Reinhold would spend his formative years.

⁷ The titles of several of Niebuhr's books make it clear he had no problem using the generic term "man" to describe "mankind," which clearly includes women. Therefore, a disclaimer is provided that will also be the usage throughout this study. Let the context be the determinant as to whether a generic or masculine understanding is in view.

⁸ Richard Wightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr : A Biography*, 1st ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 3-5.

⁹ Ibid., 4.

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

The Seeds are Planted

Richard Fox describes Gustav as somewhat of a paradox, “both liberal and Evangelical in his faith.”¹¹ He was liberal in his regard for a social and individual gospel. He was not fixated on doctrinal precision but held to the deity of Christ and the divine inspiration of Scriptures – though he did not believe every word or episode contained in the Bible was true. He was quick to speak out on social issues, but was not a radical. Fox describes Gustav’s liberalism as that of Teddy Roosevelt: “efficiency, social order, and a bigger role for the federal government in bringing that order about.”¹² Contemporary students would be aghast at Gustav’s position on women’s rights – their station was to be “in the gentle realm of the home, nurture, and charitable service.”¹³

Given the domain in which Reinhold was raised, one will quickly realize the apple did not fall far from the tree. Of his father Niebuhr would later write, “The first formative religious influence on my life was my father, who combined a vital personal piety with a complete freedom in his theological studies. He introduced his sons and daughter to the thoughts of Harnack without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that theologian.”¹⁴ Larry Rasmussen concludes that Reinhold’s “basic character” as a liberal evangelical “is formed by about the age

¹¹ Ibid., 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Intellectual Autobiography,” in *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 3. For comparison, Ron Bigalke explains that in the late nineteenth century Adolf von Harnack was on “a theological crusade to remove from Scripture anything offensive to the human mind. Harnack sought to create a Jesus that would coincide with his own nineteenth-century liberal worldview.” Ron Bigalke Jr., “Historical Considerations and Openness Theology,” *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 11, no. 2 (2005): 72.

of twenty-five, and that changes after that are usually best explained by altered circumstances and responsibilities.”¹⁵

Educational Influences

Reinhold, hereafter to be called simply Niebuhr, graduated from Elmhurst College, an unaccredited junior college outside of Chicago, and then attended Eden Seminary like his father and graduated in 1913, the very year of his father’s death. He filled his father’s pulpit for a brief time, but while living, his father had urged him to seek an additional post-graduate education from an accredited East Coast school. Niebuhr had initially sought to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York, but this school required a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college, which he did not have, and his degree from Eden was not considered a comprehensive ministerial program. Thus, Niebuhr was not qualified to attend the school. Yale Divinity School, however, was accepting graduates from unaccredited institutions, and in 1913 he was enrolled as a third-year undergraduate. Two years later he would graduate with a master’s degree in hand.¹⁶

Though formerly a bastion of Congregationalism, Yale had by the end of the nineteenth century become a distinctively liberal institution. Whether the faculty was stressing individual betterment, a progressive social gospel, or a combination thereof, Fox suggests “they tended to minimize the previously central issues of divine judgment, human frailty, and individual culpability. The old Calvinist refrain ‘there is no good in us’ had been shelved in favor of the

¹⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr and Larry L. Rasmussen, *Reinhold Niebuhr : Theologian of Public Life*, 1st Fortress Press ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 6.

¹⁶ Of interest, he did not pursue post-graduate studies commenting that “epistemology bored me . . . and frankly the other side of me came out. I desired relevance rather than scholarship.” Charles W. Kegley, *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, 2nd ed. (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984), 4.

upbeat theme of positive thinking: both individual and society could be remade through reason, sympathy, and goodwill.”¹⁷ Niebuhr, to his credit, did not embrace these modernistic ideas.

The Disillusionment of Detroit

In 1915 Niebuhr accepted a call to pastor Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit – a small evangelical and reformed congregation. His widowed mother followed soon after, freeing him from some of the burdens of ministry. With this freedom came prolific writing, and his interaction with social tensions brought about by the explosion of industry in the city. During his thirteen years in Detroit, he experienced the dark realities of industrialization, World War I, and the onset of a depression. Rasmussen summarizes Niebuhr’s experiences:

Detroit was Niebuhr’s entry way into the world of his day. He found himself opposing both Henry Ford and the Ku Klux Klan, championing the labor movement, chairing the Mayor’s Inter-racial Committee, serving on the Detroit Council of Churches Industrial Relations Commission, joining the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, pastoring a congregation that had grown from sixty-five members to some six hundred and had become a community force to be reckoned with, traveling widely on denominational and ecumenical tasks, and writing for local consumption as well as for the national church and secular press (*The Christian Century*, *World Tomorrow*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *The Nation*).¹⁸

In this environment, Niebuhr tested religious and secular liberalism and even developed an appreciation for Karl Marx. Milne notes Niebuhr’s two earliest books¹⁹ even betray some sympathies for Marx’s “socio-economic critique of religion.”²⁰

¹⁷ Fox, 25.

¹⁸ Niebuhr and Rasmussen, 7-8.

¹⁹ *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study in the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (1927) and *Moral Man and Immoral Society; a Study in Ethics and Politics* (1932).

²⁰ Milne, "The Idea of Sin in Twentieth-Century Theology," 16. "Religion," said Marx, "is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, 40 vols., vol. 3 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 175, quoted in David A. Noebel, *Understanding the Times*, 2nd abridged and rev. ed. (Manitou Springs, CO:

Niebuhr's years in Detroit comprehensively shaped his theological convictions. He later recalls,

. . . [S]uch theological convictions which I hold today began to dawn upon me during the end of a pastorate in a great industrial city. They dawned upon me because the simple little moral homilies which were preached in that as in other cities, by myself and others, seemed completely irrelevant to the brutal facts of life in a great industrial center. Whether irrelevant or not, they were certainly futile. They did not change human actions or attitudes in any problem of collective behavior by a hair's breadth, though they may well have helped to preserve private amenities and to assuage individual frustrations.²¹

He goes on to say the "convictions which dawned in my pastorate" were elaborated "in a teaching position in a theological seminary"²² – the grandest chapter of his life.

On to New York

In 1928 Niebuhr joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary to teach Christian ethics. He continued writing and in 1932 published the book that would launch his academic career as a challenging thinker and public intellectual.²³ This work, *Moral Man and Moral Society*, was not necessarily a theological treatise so much as it was laying a foundation for his future theological developments. Rasmussen notes Niebuhr was at this time embracing Marxism as "demonstrably more adequate as Christian orthodoxy or secular liberalism in giving a coherent meaning to an entire age of storm and struggle, such as the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s."²⁴ Notwithstanding, for Niebuhr the solution to these struggles lay less in how society was structured (a Marxist tenet) than in the nature of the individuals riding out the storms. In the early

Summit Press, 2006), 67.

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," *The Christian Century* 56, no. 17 (1939): 545.

²² Ibid.

²³ Niebuhr and Rasmussen, 10.

²⁴ Ibid.

1940s he would abandon his quest to synthesize Marxism and Christianity and instead adopted Augustinian and Reformation wisdom informed by his reflections on the storm and struggle of the age. These new ideas were illuminated in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941, 1943) and in a sense provided a rediscovery of the possibilities of man and sin.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s Niebuhr was an avid supporter of far-left causes and ideologies of the socialist wing of the Democratic Party. He would find a home and comfort in political activism aided by his incessant writing.²⁵ He was not writing about systematic theology; rather, his topic of choice was social ethics, reacting to events as they occurred. So widely was Niebuhr accepted that he could be found on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1948, and *Life* magazine in 1946 and 1948. He is said to have influenced religious leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and political leaders such as Jimmy Carter and, as previously noted, Barack Obama.²⁶ Sadly, he suffered several minor neurological attacks in 1952 that left him partially paralyzed. These events required him to bow out of the public limelight but he still continued writing up until his death in 1971.

NIEBUHR'S THEOLOGICAL ROADMAP ON SIN

Niebuhr would shrink from the very idea of the label “professional theologian” and spent little time elucidating his theological methods or developing succinct categories. As a result, identifying his theological positions is rather like peeling back layers of two onions – “political” and “sin” onions. Though the two theologies are interrelated in Niebuhrian thought, the focus of

²⁵ Rasmussen states that between 1942 and 1952 Niebuhr published some 767 articles, wrote chapters for many edited books, wrote four books on his own, and served as founder and editor of the bi-weekly publication, *Christianity and Crisis*. Ibid., 13.

²⁶ Gaustad and Schmidt, 405.

this analysis will be his theology of sin, which Rasmussen defines as “one way to name the plagued efforts of human agency.”²⁷ Niebuhr offers the following polemic against nineteenth-century idealism as a launching point:

. . . [N]othing gives the diverse and discordant notes of modern culture so much harmony as the unanimous opposition of modern man to Christian conceptions of the sinfulness of man. The idea that man is sinful at the very centre of his personality, that is in his will, is universally rejected. It is this rejection which has seemed to make the Christian gospel simply irrelevant to modern man, a fact which is of much more importance than any conviction about its incredibility. If modern culture conceives man primarily in terms of the uniqueness of his rational faculties, it finds the root of his evil in his involvement in natural impulses and natural necessities from which it hopes to free him by the increase of his rational faculties.²⁸

Niebuhr’s intellectual response to this prevailing idealism was to begin a reexamination of the very nature of man.

The Dualistic Nature of Man as the Occasion of Sin

Niebuhr’s assessment of man begins with an expression of man’s dualistic nature; that is, man is involved in “the unities and harmonies of nature,” but also “transcends them in his freedom.” Simply put, man is a rational, tool-making animal with the capacity for reason, and this rational capacity provides man a “self-transcendence, the ability to make himself his own object.”²⁹ Man, then, is said to be a dualistic being, part of and engaged in the natural order, but also a spiritual personality that seeks to dominate the natural order. To Niebuhr, man resides in a state of contradiction, between finiteness and freedom. However, this state of contradiction is not the cause of sin, but is the occasion of sin. Niebuhr writes, “Sin lies at the juncture of spirit and

²⁷ Niebuhr and Rasmussen, 18.

²⁸ Niebuhr, “Human Nature,” 23.

²⁹ Ibid., 4.

nature in the sense that the peculiar and unique characteristic of human spirituality in both its good and evil tendencies can be understood only by analyzing the paradoxical relation of human freedom and necessity, of finiteness and the yearning for the eternal in man.”³⁰ Man’s response to this state of contradiction is to assume he can gradually transcend his creaturely limitations “until his mind becomes identical with universal mind.”³¹ Niebuhr writes, “Man is mortal, that is his fate; man pretends not to be mortal, that is his sin.”³²

Niebuhr suggests the Bible characterizes sin in both religious and moral terms: the religious dimension is man’s rebellion against God, the moral and social dimension is injustice – the manifestation of human self-centeredness by subordinating other life to its will. Man’s sin is caused by temptation brought about by “pride and self-love,” or by sensuality – “an effort to escape from the freedom and the infinite possibilities of spirit by becoming lost in the detailed processes, activities and interest of existence, an effort which results inevitably in unlimited devotion to limited values.”³³ Man’s sin is also a reflection of his anxiety in his contradictory state. Like animals, man seeks security and protection against nature’s contingencies, with the result that throughout human history “all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life.”³⁴ By implication, then, there exists both individual and corporate aspects of sin.

³⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York, London,: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 87. Quoted in Milne, "The Idea of Sin in Twentieth-Century Theology," 19.

³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Grace and Sin," in *Reinhold Niebuhr : Theologian of Public Life*(Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 136-137.

³² Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy; Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History*, Essay Index Reprint Series (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971), 128.

³³ Niebuhr, "Human Nature," 185.

³⁴ Niebuhr, "Grace and Sin," 138.

Individual and Group Pride as Sin

Niebuhr distinguishes the sin of pride in four ways: pride of power, pride of knowledge, pride of virtue, and moral or spiritual pride. Though interrelated, pride of power is the sin about which he spills the most ink.³⁵ Pride of power arises in two forms. In the first form, the human ego fails to recognize its creaturely limitation and believes itself to be “the author of its own existence, the judge of its own values and the master of its own destiny.”³⁶ When the ego does not see itself as significant or respected or feared, it seeks to enhance its position in nature and society. Niebuhr contends all people exemplify this form of pride, but it is most prevalent in individuals and classes of people who possess an extraordinary degree of social power, “whose position in society is, or seems to be, secure.”³⁷

The second form of the pride of power embodies the anxiety and insecurities of man’s contradictory state and his desire for self-glorification. Niebuhr explains,

It is the sin of those, who knowing themselves to be insecure, seek sufficient power to guarantee their security, inevitably of course at the expense of other life. . . Among those who are less obviously secure, either in terms of social recognition, or economic stability or even physical health, the temptation arises to overcome or to obscure insecurity by arrogating a greater degree of power to the self. Sometimes this lust for power expresses itself in terms of man’s conquest of nature, in which the legitimate freedom and mastery of man in the world of nature is corrupted into a mere exploitation of nature.”³⁸

³⁵ Quite understandably given his Detroit experiences.

³⁶ Niebuhr, “Grace and Sin,” 141. Niebuhr suggests this represents quite an Augustinian understanding of pride, the “Pauline exposition of man’s self-glorification” found in Romans 1:23: “[They] exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man.”

³⁷ Niebuhr, “Human Nature,” 189.

³⁸ Niebuhr, “Grace and Sin,” 142; Niebuhr, “Human Nature,” 190.

To Niebuhr, man's exploitation of nature is really nothing more than greed – a form of the “will-to-power” which he sees as the “besetting sin of a bourgeois culture” that constantly strives after greater degrees of physical comfort and security at the expense of others.³⁹

These descriptions focus on individual attitudes surrounding pride and arrogance, but he also compares individual pride with that of group pride – a pride sourced in individual attitudes, but as a collective this pride gains authority over individuals, resulting in absolute group demands upon individuals. He notes the group “is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.”⁴⁰ Group pride exists within social groups, nations, or groups of nations where the individual's unconditional loyalty is requested, and compliance with the ultimate law of the group is required for survival. His thesis is that while individuals are necessarily sinful, group pride results in people attaining to a higher degree of sinfulness as a consequence of group loyalty. Niebuhr uses Nazi Germany and the corresponding historically fascist nations as examples of the pride of nations being imposed upon their individual citizens.⁴¹ Notwithstanding this somewhat pessimistic view of the individual and collective man, Niebuhr did provide a means of escape through, as will be shown, a unique gospel centered in Christ as the final expression of God's love, grace, and mercy toward man.

The Gospel of God's Love

Niebuhr's ultimate moral norm was God's sacrificial love (*agape*) exemplified in Christ. Christ is in the end both the revelation of God's character and of the true character of man.

³⁹ Niebuhr, "Human Nature," 191. Note the influence of Marx in these expressions.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 298.

⁴¹ Ibid., 219.

Niebuhr adds, “Christian faith sees in the cross of Christ the assurance that judgment is not the final word of God to man. The good news of the gospel is that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life.”⁴² Christ represents God’s love, “the ultimate reality upon which the created world depends and by which it is judged.”⁴³ Unfortunately, Niebuhr’s Christ is not the Christ of Scripture as he rejects the orthodox view of the dual nature of Christ, writing:

All definitions of Christ which affirm both His divinity and His humanity (in the sense that they ascribe both finite and historically conditioned and eternal and unconditioned qualities to His nature) must verge, on logical nonsense. It is possible for a character, even or fact of history to point symbolically beyond history and become a source of disclosure of an eternal meaning, purpose and power which bears on history. But it is not possible for any person to be historical and unconditioned at the same time . . . since the essence of the divine consists in its unconditional character, and since the essence of the human lies in its conditioned and contingent nature, it is not logically possible to assert both qualities of the same person.⁴⁴

Niebuhr’s Christ is not the God-man, but just a man – the “essential” man, “the perfect norm of human character” – through whom God acted to reveal himself in a unique way in history, and will also uniquely do so in the future.⁴⁵ It is through Christ that God reveals himself as the God of all grace and love. In his freedom, God involves himself in the suffering and guilt of mankind through Christ’s death on the cross. This involvement represents God taking upon himself man’s sin, and therefore, he is justified in granting forgiveness to sinners coming to him in faith. This, then, is Niebuhr’s gospel of love. It is a gospel that is able to transform the

⁴² Ibid., 140.

⁴³ Ibid., 146.

⁴⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Human Destiny," in *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 61.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 76.

individual and the collective man. Christ becomes the ideal that shapes individual human reality, with the goal of shaping the untransformed collective man into the Christ-like ideal.⁴⁶

CONTRIBUTIONS AND DETRACTIONS TO CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY

Without question, there exist some positive attributes to Niebuhr's restatement of the idea of sin and the human dilemma, especially in view of the idealism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His personal experiences and observations from Detroit and the storms of World War I and II, racism, and overall social disparity stood in stark contrast to the utopian idealism of modernity. These reminders of man's self-centeredness and the exasperation provided by collected man are imbibed in Niebuhr's staunch pessimism. Given the social influences of the contemporary age (e.g., pornography, substance abuse, abortion, secular humanism), were he alive today, he might retort regarding the social dimension of sin, "See, I told you so." Perhaps some lingering influences on contemporary theology were seen in the "cultural conversion" ideas raised in the 1978 Lausanne Committee "Gospel and Culture" consultation.⁴⁷ In any event, his view of sin was clearly a wake-up call, to say the least.

Milne observes that notwithstanding the advances on earlier "facile optimisms," the "heaviness and burden to so much of [Niebuhr's] writing . . . is out of harmony with the full Biblical perspective."⁴⁸ He continues observing,

Niebuhr exposes sin and confronts us with man the sinner, but he has little to offer by way of solution and we listen almost in vain to hear a reflection of the New Testament's note of hope and victory in face of sin and evil. Theologically this pessimism appears

⁴⁶ A somewhat romanticized view of man given his pessimism regarding man's inherent proclivity to self-glorification.

⁴⁷ "The Willowbank Report," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement: A Reader*, ed. Ralph D. Winter et al. (Pasadena, Calif.: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization; William Carey Library, 2009), 506-528.

⁴⁸ Milne, "The Idea of Sin in Twentieth-Century Theology," 22.

traceable to the very close relation between sin and finitude in his thought so that sin attains a certain inevitability. Niebuhr defends this sense of sin's inevitability on grounds of its being orthodox Paulinism, but there is no balancing reflection in Niebuhr of Paul's exultant hope and throbbing sense of triumph over sin in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁴⁹

In deference to Milne, one must recall that Niebuhr's theology was primarily shaped by his experiences in Detroit. As a result, the apparent inevitability of sin, especially the corporate dimension, must be weighed in view of his early experiences.

Nevertheless, there is much to criticize about this corporate dimension as Niebuhr characterizes obedience to God as perfected relationships under the law of love. Niebuhr writes, "There are no limits to be set in history for the achievement of more universal brotherhood, for the development of more perfect and more inclusive mutual relation. . . [T]he *agape* of the Kingdom of God [is] a resource for infinite developments towards a more perfect brotherhood in history."⁵⁰ In other words, obedience to God is measured from the collective sense versus in individual attitudes and actions. It is a standard that strains the possibilities of overcoming sin when compared with an individualized view of man's goal.⁵¹

As a final measure of criticism, Niebuhr's Christology is at the very least scandalous. Niebuhr was prone to speak of the supernatural claims of the Bible as myths, or as merely symbols, and his rejection of the incarnation and deity of Christ runs counter to biblical truth and traditional orthodoxy. Further, transferring Christ's suffering directly onto God and suggesting God suffers at the hands of sinful man is to impugn divine impassability and even suggests an early openness idea of God. Niebuhr was clearly a liberal theologian, and his views on the

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, "Human Destiny," 85.

⁵¹ Milne, "The Idea of Sin in Twentieth-Century Theology," 23.

authority and inerrancy of Scripture are part and parcel to his neo-orthodox doctrines. According to one critic,

[Niebuhr] claims to base his faith on the Bible, and calls it Biblical faith. But a careful examination shows that he corrects the Bible according to his own convictions. According to Niebuhr many of the truths of the Bible are presented in the form of myths. But myths are defective, he admits, and even Jesus and Paul were deceived by them.... Niebuhr corrects the errors of the Biblical authorities from Jesus down.⁵²

CONCLUSION

Reinhold Niebuhr never fancied himself a theologian – he was most comfortable in the pulpit. Yet his early pulpit experiences were interlaced with social pressures and a developing aversion to idealism. His response was to write voraciously on the possibilities of overcoming individual and corporate sin expressed as pride. He argued individuals intrinsically have little goodness within themselves and that socialization actually makes people more sinful. He preferred to speak of “human depravity, not nobility; of society’s folly, not its promise of progress.”⁵³ He was indeed an optimistic pessimist, who commanded the attention of religious leaders, scholars, and politicians, though primarily of liberal persuasions. Yet while Niebuhr’s restatement of the idea of sin overcame the idealism of the nineteenth century, it failed to recognize that the final seriousness of sin is not before mankind, but that sin is committed before a Holy God and encounters his Holy wrath. Niebuhr exposes sin and confronts us with man “the sinner,” but he offers little by way of solution to the problem of sin. Mankind does not need a social makeover; mankind needs to be reconciled to God through his son Jesus Christ.

⁵² Henry Nelson Wieman, "A Religious Naturalist Looks at Reinhold Niebuhr," in *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York: McMillan, 1956), 339-340, quoted in Ron Bigalke Jr., "Historical Survey of Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 14, no. 42 (2010): 48-49.

⁵³ Gaustad and Schmidt, 318.

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