

**THE MOULDING OF JUSTICE: A THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE  
CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR  
AND ITS RELEVANCE FOR SOCIAL ETHICS**

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the Christian anthropology of Reinhold Niebuhr as presented in the two volume work, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and explores its relevance for social ethics, from an evangelical theological perspective. The contention is that despite some weaknesses in Niebuhr's approach, his anthropology provides a useful foundation and corrective for evangelical social ethics, which seek to wrestle with issues of contemporary significance.

In order to provide a framework for analysis, Niebuhr is placed first in his proper personal, historical, and theological context. His anthropology is then elaborated and explored as it appears in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Elements of his doctrine of humanity are subsequently brought into synthesis for application to social ethics. Recommendations for further study are made, and an example is presented of how Niebuhr's anthropological paradigm works out in application to a specific, contemporary social issue, namely, the proliferation of information technology.

All of this serves to demonstrate the enduring relevance of a theologian whose work has been widely lauded and criticised in the years since he first elaborated his anthropological approach to theology. Rediscovering Niebuhr on his own terms allows freedom to reapply his insights for the ethical and theological challenges of a new millennium.

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## INTRODUCTION

The thought of Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971) has enjoyed wide appeal, across political and academic disciplines. Regarded as the most significant American theologian of the twentieth century, Niebuhr has always drawn the attention of those who seek to criticise, affirm, understand, or reapply his ideas. While his political ideas remained popular through the Cold War of the 1980's, the study of his theology grew in popularity toward the end of that decade and into the 1990's. Perhaps this was due, in part, to the centenary of his birth, which was celebrated in 1992, and saw several new studies published in the years leading up to that important date. More likely, the revival of interest grew out of a battle between liberals and conservatives over who held title to his thought, as they both criticised and hailed him as a native son.<sup>1</sup> With such debate underway, students and scholars turned to read Niebuhr for themselves, in a rediscovery

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<sup>1</sup>In the preface to his later book, Ronald Stone indicates the likely connection between the liberal and conservative interpretations of Niebuhr's thought and the revival of interest which took place in the late 1980s and early 1990s. See Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr: A Mentor to the Twentieth Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992). Hans Hofmann describes Niebuhr as "resolved to be more orthodox than the orthodox fundamentalist," (*The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith [New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956], 114); while fundamentalist Gordon Lewis has described him as a "total relativist." (Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds., *Challenges to Inerrancy* [Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984], 173). Conservative economist Michael Novak is a self-described Niebuhrian, as are several liberation theologians. Cf. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1982). Reinhold Niebuhr has been equally acclaimed and criticized from both ends of the theological spectrum, and every point in between.

of the mind of the man who contributed so significantly to the American political, social, and theological scene. In so doing, they rediscovered the engaging style of a theologian whose writings have just as much relevance to the present human situation as they did when he first offered them to the world. Of course, renewed interest in Niebuhr is due in no small part to the revival of interest in ethics generally, and social ethics particularly, as the world has witnessed the end of the Cold War and the shift to a "new world order," where the issues of industrialisation have been traded for the complexities of technological development of society, and the marginalisation of the poor is a continuing reality. Reinhold Niebuhr has much to say to the present human situation.

A similar motivation drives this present study. Reading liberation theologians and thoroughgoing capitalists who equally claim Niebuhr as their own, provides a challenge to discover him on his own terms. This need is particularly relevant for a society embarking on the challenges of a new millennium, where the gap between rich and poor grows increasingly wide in the midst of social individualism, and the drive to accumulate wealth and information. While evangelicals were once at the forefront of social thought and ethics in North America,<sup>2</sup> the pull of individualism has drawn them away from this orientation, and the social element has been buried beneath an ethic that is more concerned with rights than responsibilities, and offers more judgement than mercy. Although there are segments within evangelicalism that seek to address these issues, it seems there is insufficient theological reflection contained therein, which would offer a foundation upon which to build a fresh vision for addressing social needs and concerns into a new millennium.<sup>3</sup> If a Christian social ethic is to withstand the challenges of relativism and

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<sup>2</sup>This is particularly true of evangelicals in the mid-late nineteenth century. See David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1989).

<sup>3</sup>British evangelicals seem to have a stronger record than North Americans in this regard, particularly in relation to work done in social ethics in response to the Lausanne

marginalism, even from within the circle of faith, it must be grounded on a solid theological foundation, rooted in scripture, within the perspective of historic orthodoxy, and sufficiently progressive in its expression to meet modern needs and concerns. Moreover, it must seek to convict Christians of their active participation in systems which are opposed to the ethics of the Kingdom of God in general, and the ethic of *agape* in particular, convincing them of the hypnotic trance with which ethical materialism has bewitched modern society. Reinhold Niebuhr has much to say about these issues, and though evangelicals may disagree with his method, many of his conclusions may be effectively appropriated into an acceptable framework for their understanding and interpretation.

The most helpful approach to Reinhold Niebuhr's ethic is to access it through his Christian anthropology. Since all of his statements and assumptions about ethics grow out of his observations of the human condition, it becomes a crucial cornerstone for understanding and analysing his thought. In fact, Niebuhr's entire theological system is built upon his anthropological studies, finding its most mature and systematic expression in his two-volume *magnum opus*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*,<sup>4</sup> originally presented as the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1939.<sup>5</sup> As this theological treatise demonstrates,

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Movement. Cf. Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964); Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982). These works represent the quickly-aging but more competent side of North American evangelical reflection on social ethics, which themselves are in need of critique.

<sup>4</sup>Although this author will seek to use gender-inclusive language, quotations taken directly from other works will generally remain unaltered.

<sup>5</sup>William John Wolf writes, "Unlike systematicians like Aquinas or Barth who cover the whole corpus of Christian truth by the method of a *Summa*, Niebuhr makes one doctrine, brilliantly plumbed to its depths, the basis of his whole thought. Articulated in terms of man's relations with his fellow men, the doctrine of man is determinative for his social ethics and for his interpretation of the meaningfulness of history." See William John Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and*

"what Niebuhr had to say about God was stated, almost incidentally, in relation to his theological anthropology. For Niebuhr, knowledge of God's will for social policy was not possible without first understanding human nature and agency."<sup>6</sup>

Through an examination of Niebuhr's anthropology as it appears in the above volumes, certain conclusions about human nature and its ethical relevance will be appropriated into an evangelical understanding of such issues. Chapter I will place Niebuhr in his historical and theological context, crucial for a proper understanding of his thought. This will include a brief personal biography of Niebuhr; his flirtation with and final rejection of liberalism and the social gospel; his place within the development of neoorthodoxy and contribution to American realism; the influence his Reformed tradition had on his formation; and a portrayal of his understanding of scripture as myth and symbol. Understanding the context of Niebuhr's thought provides a helpful vantage point for embarking on an analysis of his anthropology. Subsequently, chapter II will focus on the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, with its elaboration of humanity as Niebuhr's starting point for theology. The time-eternity dialectic, so central to his thought will be explored, and then an examination of the human dialectical tension between the image of God and the problem of sin will be offered. Chapter III will concentrate on volume II of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and examine the relevance of Christology to the meaning of history and the human condition. The chapter also will offer an exploration into Niebuhr's eschatology, including the role of love and justice in human social ethics. Chapter IV will bring into synthesis the elements explored in previous chapters. It will offer conclusions regarding the usefulness of various elements of

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*Political Thought*, eds. Charles W. Kegley and Robert W. Bretall (New York, NY: MacMillan, 1956), 230.

<sup>6</sup>Harlan Beckley, *Passion for Justice: Retrieving the Legacies of Walter Rauschenbusch, John A. Ryan, and Reinhold Niebuhr* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 264.

Niebuhr's anthropology for evangelical social ethics, and will critique several weaknesses, including his method, neglected ecclesiology, and truncated pneumatology. Recommendations for further study of these issues will be made. Overall, it will be argued that in spite of weaknesses, many elements of Niebuhr's anthropology are useful tools in assembling an evangelical approach to social ethics.

Though anthropology informed Niebuhr's thought on a number of levels, its fullest expression is found in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.<sup>7</sup> For that reason, the analysis of this paper will focus particularly on those volumes, *Human Nature* and *Human Destiny*. *Human Nature* was published in 1941, with *Human Destiny* following in 1943. Though examination will draw on insights gained from his earlier work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), and his later *Introduction to Christian Ethics* (1956), it will concentrate mainly on his formal anthropological expression in his *magnum opus*. Nevertheless, Niebuhr's other writings have provided helpful insights, including a collection of sermons entitled, *Beyond Tragedy* (1937) which is a beneficial introduction to his interpretation of Christian history.

The literature produced on Niebuhr's thought could fill its own library. Even so, there have been no watershed works published which deal solely with Niebuhr's anthropology, perhaps because it permeates every aspect of his thought. Biographies including June Bingham's *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1972), and the more recent volume by Richard Fox entitled, *Reinhold*

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<sup>7</sup>Niebuhr's theology was constantly fed by his understanding of the human situation. His work, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* represents his earlier and somewhat more optimistic thinking on the subject, while *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness* represents later application of anthropology to a study of democracy. *The Self and the Dramas of History* also represents a later and a more psycho-social analysis than solely theological one. Since examination of any one of these volumes could form a study in itself, this paper will limit the study of Niebuhr's work to *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, as it represents his theological development and understanding most clearly.

*Niebuhr: A Biography* (1985), combine with insights of other writers such as Charles Brown's *Niebuhr and His Age* (1992), to provide an informative overview of Niebuhr's life and the influences which shaped it. General guides to Niebuhr's thought have also helped in gaining a proper perspective, including Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1960), and Hans Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1956). The collection of essays by various theologians responding to Niebuhr's work in Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall, eds., *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social and Political Thought* (1956) provided particularly helpful insights, especially the chapter by William John Wolf entitled, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," as did those in Richard Harries, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time* (1986). The reaction of some of Niebuhr's closest colleagues is recorded in Harold Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (1962), which proved insightful as well as entertaining. Particularly useful was the analysis of Niebuhr's realism provided in a recent work by Robin Lovin entitled, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (1995).

In addition, several articles and doctoral dissertations have offered assistance in accessing Niebuhr's anthropology and epistemology. Periodical submissions by Gustaf Aulen, Ronald Feenstra, Joseph Bettis, and Jan Milic Lochman and dissertations by J. K. Keeling, Thomas Nordberg, and George Lewis Lane gave valuable assistance. Articles in David Wells, ed., *Reformed Theology in America* (1985) offered a perspective of Niebuhr from within the Reformed camp, and the articles by Dennis Voskuil and Gabriel Fackre were helpful in gaining an understanding of the influence of Reformed theology on Niebuhr's thought. In a similar vein, Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (1983) provided an excellent account of the development of social concern as a significant element of Reformed theology. Harlan Beckley offered an insightful description of Niebuhr's anthropology as part of his work, *Passion for Justice* (1992)

which examined Niebuhr in contrast with social thinkers Walter Rauschenbusch and John Ryan.

Of utmost assistance in providing this paper with a framework for analysis was the excellent study of Niebuhr's theology provided by Edward John Carnell in *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (1951). Carnell's ability to grasp, explain, and critique Niebuhr's thought remains unsurpassed. Although the conclusions of the present study remain independent of Carnell's observations, his work provided an invaluable tool for study. Worthy of equal note are several articles by Carnell which are compiled in *The Case for Biblical Christianity* (1969) edited posthumously by Ronald Nash. The available studies of Niebuhr's thought are extensive and too numerous to include in a study of such minimal proportions. For the purposes of this paper, literature has been limited to those works which have proven to be most relevant, most significant and most accessible, which is a subjective selection to some extent, but nevertheless a necessary one.

Because so much work has focused on Niebuhr's thought for several decades, there are many ways in which any "new" study of his theology will prove redundant. However, one must climb the stairs one at a time before reaching the top. In order to reject or appropriate elements of Niebuhr's social ethics, an understanding of the anthropology upon which they are built must first be acquired and evaluated from within a particular framework. This study will approach Niebuhr's anthropology from the perspective of evangelicalism in general, and Baptist belief in particular, with Niebuhrian openness to allow such systems to be challenged, if the course of the study proves such to be necessary.<sup>8</sup> Even so, certain assumptions about the authoritative nature of scripture as

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<sup>8</sup>The term 'evangelical' will refer to the spiritual-theological movement that has evolved since the eighteenth century and cuts across denominational lines. The special marks of evangelical religion have been described by Bebbington as conversionism, activism, biblicism, and crucicentrism. Cf. Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage*, Waco, TX: Word, 1973). The term "Baptist" refers to historically non-conformist doctrine, which

revelation, and the witness of historic Christian faith will be consistently guarded so that theological integrity is maintained.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the paper will provide an introduction for further theological endeavours which seek to develop more solid and relevant models for evangelical social ethics in a world where two-thirds of global society are without basic needs, and without a voice.

The underlying conviction that Christians in North America and Western Europe ought to confess their sins of ignorance and indifference toward their sisters and brothers in need, and acknowledge their participation in systems which perpetuate problems of injustice, before the complexities of such issues may be properly addressed, is a key motivation for this study. If an examination of Niebuhr's anthropology provides even a few small steps in that direction, then its purpose will have been achieved. These pages are offered in hope that new challenges will contribute to a progressively orthodox social ethic which seeks justice for all of society, and not only a privileged few.

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maintains as distinctives: the authority of Scripture; the priesthood of believers; soul liberty; separation of church and state; local church autonomy; congregational church government; regenerate church membership; believer's baptism by immersion.

<sup>9</sup>See Alan P. F. Sell, *Aspects of Christian Integrity* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1990), 14. Sell outlines parameters of theological integrity including: the Bible; the Christian community of interpretation; the context of theology conceived; and the Gospel of the grace of God.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **The Formation of Justice: Setting the Context for a Study of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Anthropology**

The significant contribution of the political and religious thought of Reinhold Niebuhr has been so deeply entrenched in American culture that it is difficult to determine where influences upon his life left off and his own influence began. In the years since his passing, many have offered interpretations of his work and thought, and in an attempt to sanction his support for their own approaches, have forced him into various Procrustean beds. It is of utmost importance, therefore, to attempt to grasp the significance of his work within its theological and philosophical context. Understanding the influences which formed his own thinking and those to which he responded so vehemently is crucial to any examination of his work, particularly to grasp the intricacies of his Christian anthropology, which formed the centrepiece of his theology. In an attempt to reach such an understanding, this introductory chapter will place Reinhold Niebuhr in his appropriate personal, historical, and theological framework, which will inform the more detailed examination of his work in subsequent chapters.

#### **Biography**

Reinhold Niebuhr's life was a constant example of faith-in-action and theological reflection-in-action as he responded to, and sought to influence, the political and social events of his time. The frenzied pace of his life and natural humility arising from a self-

imposed inferiority complex,<sup>1</sup> meant that autobiographical notes are sprinkled only haphazardly into his work, as he shied away from offering any substantial self-portrayal of his life and career.<sup>2</sup> Overcoming this obstacle has resulted in several published biographies, which together with Niebuhr's own personal anecdotes offer a fairly complete overview of his family life, pastoral concerns, educational influences, and political and social interests.<sup>3</sup> June Bingham asserts that one reason why Niebuhr leaves much of his personal life and identification of influences out of his work "may simply be the momentum of his thought." His unique ability to reflect upon and respond to several issues at once is graphically illustrated: "Like a juggler with five balls in the air he cannot stop to explain which event led to what idea: all he can do is to get a quick response before its related ideas bear down upon him."<sup>4</sup> His characteristic reluctance to draw attention to himself on a personal level was revealed when asked directly if he would mind someone else producing an introduction to his life and thought. On such an occasion, he

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<sup>1</sup>Responding to essays written in tribute to him by Paul Tillich, John C. Bennett and Hans Morgenthau, Niebuhr wrote: "It is somewhat embarrassing to make a response to the analyses of my thought by three good friends, chiefly because they are so extravagant in their estimate of the significance of my labors. One suspects that either friendship has dulled their faculties or that they have concluded that a colloquium about the thought of an aged colleague is so much like a funeral that the axiom applies: 'About the dead speak nothing but good.' Niebuhr indicated in the next paragraph that he wished he had spent more time in study and less time in committee meetings, thinking perhaps it might have saved him "from an inferiority complex, as I lived for years among devoted scholars without the competence of a scholar." See Niebuhr's response in Harold R. Landon, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Prophetic Voice in Our Time* (Greenwich, CT: Seabury Press, 1962).

<sup>2</sup>"Dishonest," was how Niebuhr described biographies. "They begin with a dishonesty because they are usually consciously humble, but this conscious humility cannot hide the fact that you find it worthwhile to record your own little story." Cited in June Bingham, *Courage to Change: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 18.

<sup>3</sup>See Bingham; and Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985).

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

merely shrugged reluctant approval and added that, "the life part could be reduced to one page."<sup>5</sup> Despite such personal elusiveness, there were several influences upon Niebuhr's life which led him in particular personal and theological directions. From his childhood years in the parsonage and university education at Yale, to his pastorate in Detroit and faculty appointment at Union Seminary, Niebuhr was constantly absorbing, challenging, and influencing elements of human society.

Reinhold Niebuhr was born in Wright City, Missouri, in 1893, the son of Gustav Niebuhr, a pastor of the German Evangelical Synod. Reinhold's mother, Lydia, was the daughter of pioneer missionaries who served effectively as parish assistant, first to her father, then to her husband, and finally to her son.<sup>6</sup> Niebuhr would later comment that his mother was "a remarkable person. . . . [I]n my parish in Detroit, she was, in effect, a parish deaconess. She had great organizational skill. She made life rather sufferable for me as a young parson. . . ." <sup>7</sup> Niebuhr figuratively described her as his assistant pastor, and it is clear that ministry tasks occupied much of her time while her four children were growing up.

It was Niebuhr's father who had a more obvious impact on his intellectual formation, even though he spent much time away from home with denominational responsibilities while his children were young. Reinhold spent the rest of his childhood years in Lincoln, Nebraska, where his father took a parish in order to spend more time with his family. Niebuhr was "thrilled" by his father's sermons and "regarded him as the most interesting man in town."<sup>8</sup> Apart from his preaching, his theology and values also made a lasting impression on the young Reinhold. His father "had a great passion for

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 18.

<sup>6</sup>Fox, 8.

<sup>7</sup>Bingham, 102.

<sup>8</sup>Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 9.

American egalitarianism and American freedom, which for him particularly meant freedom in the family."<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the very personality and Christian demeanour of his father attracted him to Christianity and to the ministry. Niebuhr writes, "If my father had not had grace, I would not have been a Christian - or if he had been secular and without grace, I might have rebelled and become a Christian. But who knows? That's human freedom."<sup>10</sup>

Upon Niebuhr's announcement at the age of ten, that he would pursue ministry as a career, his father began to tutor him in Greek and theology. Though he did not have the time to become a scholar himself, Gustav Niebuhr "was a widely read man, with deep respect for the traditions of German learning."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, he was a thoroughgoing pietist, "and hence a determined foe of rationalism and relativism" but intellectually curious. He introduced all of his children to theology, sharing with them the insights of Luther and Harnack, "without fully sharing the liberal convictions of that [latter] theologian."<sup>12</sup> Reinhold's formal education was well-planned by his father, as it was for the other Niebuhr children, save for Hulda, the only daughter, who pursued her desired course of study only after her father's death.

Niebuhr attended the denominational preparatory school and then Eden seminary where he encountered Samuel D. Press. He appreciated Press for his combination of "childlike innocence with a rigorous scholarship in Biblical and systematic subjects."<sup>13</sup> Press also introduced Niebuhr to some challenging biblical figures. He taught that, "all theology really begins with Amos," and Niebuhr admitted that Press "first made both the prophet Amos and the apostle Paul a real influence in my religious life."<sup>14</sup> Niebuhr

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<sup>9</sup>Bingham, 38.

<sup>10</sup>Cited in Ibid., 55.

<sup>11</sup>Fox, 14.

<sup>12</sup>Brown, 11.

<sup>13</sup>Bingham, 63.

<sup>14</sup>Brown, 15.

completed studies at both institutions as class valedictorian, though the parochial nature of the schools precluded the attainment of a recognised degree.

From seminary, Niebuhr went to Yale, where he was challenged socially and theologically. The death of his father meant he would face financial struggles, and the lack of a previous university degree stirred feelings of inferiority as he encountered many students from privileged backgrounds. In writing to Press after his arrival at Yale, Niebuhr wrote: "I have bluffed my way through pretty well by industrious reading but I feel all the time like a mongrel among thoroughbreds, and that's what I am."<sup>15</sup> He would later petition his denomination to provide adequate funds for the education of its ministers. Despite his struggles, Niebuhr was awarded the M.A. degree from Yale in 1915, having been exposed to the influences of the Old Testament prophets, Pauline theology, the thought of Augustine, William James, Luther, Calvin and Kierkegaard, and his own teachers including D. C. Macintosh. Niebuhr would write often of the significance of both Augustine and James to his thinking.<sup>16</sup> Also at Yale, he became fully immersed in the Ritschlian liberalism of his professors, a fact which concerned him regarding his future within the denomination.<sup>17</sup> He need not have worried, since he would later serve as the American champion of neoorthodoxy, attacking the modernist theologies with which he had become so well acquainted. Yale gave Niebuhr the last of his formal education, which led him to claim that he was neither a scholar nor a theologian. Yet, "few recent thinkers

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<sup>15</sup>Bingham, 84.

<sup>16</sup>Niebuhr admitted, "I stand in the William James tradition. He was both an empiricist and a religious man, and his faith was both the consequence and the presupposition of his pragmatism." Cited in Bingham, 224.

<sup>17</sup>Niebuhr wrote to Press, "I am a good deal worried about my future. In the first place, as you may know, I have not gone for two years to Yale without absorbing a good deal of its liberalism. I have enough confidence in myself to believe that I did not simply fall prey to my environment . . . Now I am a good deal worried that my liberalism will not at all be liked in our church and will jeopardise any influence which I might in time have won in our church . . . ." Cited in Bingham, 87.

have given scholarly theologians more to write about. He did not have a Ph.D., but few persons in the field of religion have had as many Ph.D. theses written about them."<sup>18</sup>

Niebuhr accepted a posting to Bethel Evangelical Church, "the newest and smallest of the synod's congregations in Detroit."<sup>19</sup> During the length of his pastorate, the city would grow three times in size and become an industrial metropolis. The growing industrialisation of the city, the Great War, racial tensions, and the resulting social struggles would all have their influence upon Niebuhr. It did not take long before he realised, "I was up against an industrial city, and I saw that human nature was quite different than I had learned at Yale Divinity School."<sup>20</sup> This epiphany would eventually lead him to significant theological conclusions about the nature and destiny of humanity.

During the Great War, Niebuhr was given responsibility to head a commission established by the synod to maintain contact with its troops, and he would later spend time experimenting with pacifist groups. But while the war made its mark on Continental theology, the American scene would not be similarly influenced until the Second World War. By far, the more influential events of Niebuhr's pastorate related to the social issues emerging from industrialisation in general, and the Ford automobile assembly line in particular. As a result, "the social conscience Niebuhr had acquired from his pietist heritage became transformed to include not only charitable endeavours but promotion of legislation protecting industrial workers and their families." As Niebuhr would later admit, "I cut my eye-teeth fighting Ford."<sup>21</sup>

Niebuhr came into contact with Charles D. Williams, who introduced him to the social gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch, and taught him that "charity should not be a

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<sup>18</sup>John C. Bennett, "On Looking Into Fox's Niebuhr," *Christianity and Crisis* 1:46 (February 3, 1986): 6.

<sup>19</sup>Fox, 41.

<sup>20</sup>Brown, 20.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 24, 28.

substitute for justice."<sup>22</sup> This axiom became more apparent to Niebuhr as Ford's control over a large labour force became more entrenched. In 1927, he reacted to this situation in his journal:

What a civilization this is! Naive gentlemen with a genius for mechanics suddenly become the arbiters over the lives and fortunes of hundreds of thousands. Their moral pretensions are credulously accepted at full value. No one bothers to ask whether an industry which can maintain a cash reserve of a quarter of a billion ought not make some provision for its unemployed.<sup>23</sup>

Niebuhr's reaction was saved not only for his journal. He was prompted to become involved in labour and socialist groups, an affiliation which would endure. As his position grew more moderate, however, Niebuhr realised that, "Mr. Ford typified for my rather immature social imagination all that was wrong with American 'capitalism'. I became a socialist in this reaction. . . . I became a socialist long before I enrolled in the Socialist Party and before I had read anything by Karl Marx."<sup>24</sup> Friendships and contacts were solidified as Niebuhr contributed to the socialist movement, and he was in turn influenced by the people and activities he encountered. During his time in Detroit he also became involved in a committee on race relations, a situation which brought about his direct involvement in politics. The end result was that Niebuhr rejected liberal socio-political interpretations of the gospel because of their persistent utopianism. He was still interested in exploring the social dimensions of Christianity, but set apart from pacifist and Marxist movements. Niebuhr would later conclude that his time in the pastorate was a period of formation and growth. He wrote: "Even while imagining myself to preach the Gospel, I had really experimented with many modern alternatives to Christian faith, until

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>23</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1929), 154-155.

<sup>24</sup>Cited in Bingham, 134.

one by one they proved unavailing."<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, it was during his time in Detroit that "insights came to him as he developed. . . a deeper sense of sin as a social and personal reality."<sup>26</sup>

Proving earlier fears to be unfounded, Niebuhr gained a quick reputation within his denomination and in wider circles. He wrote prolifically while travelling a preaching circuit through colleges and universities, and his own congregation grew several times over during the same period. After travelling in Europe in the twenties, he was invited to take a teaching post at Union Seminary in New York, where he began to read theology in greater earnest. As he carefully studied Augustine, he was challenged simultaneously by his colleagues and new academic environment to broaden his exposure to the theological spectrum. "The lines of Niebuhr's mature achievement began to take shape during his early teaching years at Union Seminary, in a milieu influenced by theological ferment in Europe, the shaking of old economic certitudes in America by the Great Depression, and the ominous rise of Nazism."<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr warned early against the dangers posed by Hitler and Nazism, protesting anti-Semitic policies with Jewish friends in New York. He later became a significant contact for the German underground, at least partly responsible for Paul Tillich's safe flight to America. Influenced by world events and disillusionment with both capitalism and politics, President Coffin of Union noted that Niebuhr gradually "changed from being a violent social reformer to being a theologian."<sup>28</sup> This change was confirmed by Niebuhr's appointment to deliver the Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh in 1939, for which he prepared by extensive reading of Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Plato, Aristotle,

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<sup>25</sup>Cited in *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup>*Brown*, 35.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>28</sup>*Bingham*, 165.

Kant, Heidegger and Kierkegaard, whose influences may all be found in his work in some form or another.

Niebuhr continued to influence the events and people of his day, particularly in the post-war years through the debate over communism. But it was the encounters of his developmental years which provided the foundation and challenges for his later thought. An examination of his interaction with politics, economics and ecumenism would provide a substantial study in itself. Likewise, the influence of his colleagues; his wife Ursula, a college professor in her own right; and his brother Helmut Richard should not be underestimated. Further, his interaction with neoorthodox theology from the Continent should be noted, and will be explored more fully later. But the events and encounters of his life examined here briefly contribute to an understanding of Niebuhr's theological formation, his political and theological realism as it developed through his career, and his rejection of liberalism in favour of neoorthodoxy.

### **American Neoorthodoxy**

Despite his pietist background, Niebuhr adopted much of the Ritchlian theology of his professors. Classical liberalism dominated much of the theological scene not only on the Continent, but in America as well.<sup>29</sup> It "took hold during the last quarter of the nineteenth century when the evangelical consensus began to crack under the intellectual

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<sup>29</sup>See David A. Pailin, *A New Theology?* (London: The Epworth Press, 1964), 4. In an examination of the theological ferment of the early sixties, Pailin identified the most significant modernist influences which formed liberal theological thought, and offered a helpful summary. In particular he noted: Kant's eighteenth century rejection of traditional proofs of God's existence which exalted reason and separated it from faith; Schleiermacher's romanticised version of Christian faith; Hegel's immersion of religion into history and philosophy; Feuerbach's projection of theology from anthropology; and Kierkegaard's existentialism. Niebuhr was not immune to the influence of these thinkers either, and their contributions are obvious at various points in his theological analysis.

pressures of Darwinism, Freudianism, historicism and higher criticism."<sup>30</sup> Liberalism produced an optimistic theology which emphasised the moral progress of humanity in the Kingdom of God. Love was to be the organising principle for an improved society, which would operate on the ethical principles taught by Jesus Christ. While Christian fundamentalists later shored up their resources to do theological battle, liberals eagerly looked forward to a marriage with the new sciences and worldviews. Dennis Voskuil offers a helpful summary of the significance of liberalism for American theology:

Nurtured during an era of national well-being, and building on a base of philosophical idealism, the liberals developed a theological system that breathed optimism and progressivism. It generally assumed the immanence or indwelling of God in nature and humanity, expressed confidence in the goodness and improvability of human nature, stressed the person of Jesus as a universal moral model, embraced higher-critical study of the Bible, and adopted evolutionary theories of human development. Although it sustained consistent attacks from humanists on the left and Christian fundamentalists on the right, liberalism was certainly the most compelling theological movement in America through the early quarter of the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup>

The First World War dealt a significant blow to liberal theology, calling into question its optimistic view of human nature and society. A number of liberal thinkers began to call their former assumptions into question, among them Reinhold Niebuhr.<sup>32</sup> His view of the war and pastoral experience in industrial Detroit led him to re-evaluate his understanding of the human situation and the assumptions of group organisation.

Initially, Niebuhr had found the social gospel to be an attractive model of social ethics based on his acquired liberal theology. As expounded by its most eminent

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<sup>30</sup>Dennis Voskuil, "Neoorthodoxy," *Reformed Theology in America*, ed. David Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 248-249.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>32</sup>Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Walter Marshall Horton, Walter Lowrie, Wilhelm Pauck, and Edwin Lewis were among the many American thinkers who shifted their theological emphasis away from liberalism during this era.

proponent, Walter Rauschenbusch, a theologian who had experienced his own pastoral crisis in New York's Hell's Kitchen, the social gospel embraced optimistic liberal assumptions about people and society.<sup>33</sup> The social gospel appealed to Niebuhr in the midst of social crises in Detroit, but at the same time, "Niebuhr's own mind was filled with unresolved tensions, his early idealism colliding with experience as he wrote his first book" in 1927 entitled, *Does Civilization Need Religion?*<sup>34</sup> While critical of many liberal proposals, the book was essentially a restatement of the social gospel, "grounded in the still dominant Ritchlian theology of the American Protestant milieu in the 1920's. . . . [I]t called for a fusion of religious goodwill and reason to solve urgent problems of modern civilisation - a strategy Niebuhr five years later criticized as inadequate . . . ." <sup>35</sup> Yet even this optimistic religious moralism was beginning to show cracks, as Niebuhr wrote, "humans are never as good as their ideals."<sup>36</sup>

As the international situation deteriorated, Niebuhr increasingly questioned the ability of classical liberalism to provide adequate answers to the current crisis. He made note of Augustine's comment that "the truest interpretations of the Christian faith may come in such crises, when a proud culture is humbled."<sup>37</sup> Further to this comment, Niebuhr finally declared that "all forms of modern secularism. . . whether bourgeois humanist or Marxist or Nazi, contained an implicit or explicit self-glorification."<sup>38</sup> This admission allowed Niebuhr to make "a decisive break with the social gospel synthesis, opening a way for the soul to save itself beyond the necessities of society and politics."<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>Cf. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York, NY: 1917).

<sup>34</sup>Brown, 33.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Cited in Ibid., 33.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>38</sup>Cited in Ibid., 62.

<sup>39</sup>Donald B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Political Realism, 1919-1941* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1960), 240.

Donald B. Meyer has described Niebuhr's break with modern theological trends in this way: "Social gospel pastors tried to give positive and economic content to religious ideas. Niebuhr's thought, on the other hand, was a gradual theological elaboration of what was at first merely socio-ethical criticism. He was unable to ground his 'timely' analysis of the crisis in the West except in 'timeless' theological categories."<sup>40</sup>

Scholars like Niebuhr continued to erode the hold of liberalism on American theology. "Their persistent attacks upon liberal doctrines of divine immanence, human efficacy, and cultural accommodation were certainly predicated upon the incipient doctrines of divine transcendence, human sinfulness, and culture resistance. Still, neo-orthodoxy did not cohere as theological movement until the early 1930's. . . ." <sup>41</sup> While "American neoorthodoxy began as a theological corrective. . . its critique of liberalism eventually developed into a constructive and self-sustaining theological program," which would set the American theological agenda for two decades.<sup>42</sup> At the forefront of this movement was Reinhold Niebuhr, who published the movement's first early treatise in 1932 entitled, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*.<sup>43</sup>

As Niebuhr's reputation grew in America, so did the neoorthodox theology of Karl Barth and Emil Brunner on the Continent. Niebuhr's bilingualism allowed him access to Continental thought before English translations were available, and he interacted with both Barth and Brunner, though he preferred the theology of the latter. In 1928, Niebuhr met Brunner, who would later recall the significance of the meeting: "What I said in my lecture about sin led to an animated and passionate discussion. The concept of sin in those

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 238.

<sup>41</sup>Voskuil, 253.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 255.

<sup>43</sup>Sometimes referred to as the treatise for American neoorthodoxy, this book signalled Niebuhr's eventual further retreat from liberalism. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932).

days had almost disappeared from the vocabulary of enlightened theologians. But I sensed how this basic term seemed to stimulate Niebuhr, and set fire to his imagination."<sup>44</sup>

Barth never managed to stimulate Niebuhr's thought to the same degree Brunner did. Niebuhr accused Barth of ignoring the social and ethical dimensions of faith, yet in many ways, the two theologians had much in common. Joseph Bettis writes: "Both recognised that social ethics was decisive for theological reflection during their generation. And both recognised that in order to deal with social ethics adequately they would have to develop a way of thinking about theological problems very different from the tradition of nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism they inherited."<sup>45</sup> Though they held in common an existential emphasis on faith inherited from extensive reading of Soren Kierkegaard, Niebuhr never shared Barth's deep pessimism about human nature and social organisation. In 1960, Niebuhr wrote, "Barth has long since ceased to have any effect on my thought; indeed he has become irrelevant to all Christians in the Western world who believe in accepting common and collective responsibilities without illusion and without despair."<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr could not readily embrace Barth's version of neoorthodoxy, rejecting the serious disjunction which Barth drew between time and eternity. Niebuhr found many areas of contact between God and the human person, as an examination of his anthropology will reveal. As a result, Niebuhr reached a balance between God's immanence and transcendence, where Barth was not willing to concede any ground to immanence theology.

In spite of his disagreement with Barth, it is accurate to describe Niebuhr as the father of American neoorthodoxy. Placing a renewed emphasis on the ethical

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<sup>44</sup>Cited in Brown, 38.

<sup>45</sup>Joseph Bettis, "Theology and Politics: Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr on Social Ethics After Liberalism," *Religion in Life* XLVIII:1 (Spring 1979): 53.

<sup>46</sup>Cited in *Ibid.*, 55.

transcendence of God and the reality of human sin led him to pioneer the movement in a vibrant and fresh way in North America. While intent to smash the same liberal icons, Niebuhr undertook the task in a very different manner from his colleagues on the Continent. The approach he would prefer would interpret theology from the perspective of humanity, and would gradually be drawn under the banner of 'Christian realism.'

### **Christian Realism**

Niebuhr's approach to theology grew out of the philosophical school of realism, sharing certain assumptions with moral and theological realism, which were his main concerns.<sup>47</sup> In this respect he was influenced by William James, though he did not agree with all of his theological conclusions.<sup>48</sup> Niebuhr was less interested in offering well-constructed doctrines and more concerned to offer a practical application of absolute principles to a world inhabited by sinful humanity. Realism rejects idealist and utopian philosophies, directing a more objective approach to human behaviour. It assumes the existence of certain truths which apply universally, beyond individual relativities and

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<sup>47</sup>For a full exposition of Niebuhr's Christian realism, see Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1995). The type of realism described by Lovin is the embodiment of Niebuhr's thought, and offers the definition of realism accepted by this author. Niebuhr's realism was shaped, to some degree, by his own teacher D. C. Macintosh. Cf. Douglas Clyde Macintosh, ed., *Religious Realism* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

<sup>48</sup>See Robert H. Ayers "Methodological, Epistemological, and Ontological Motifs in the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Modern Theology* 7:2 (January 1991): 153-173. Ayers describes the influence of James' empirical-pragmatic epistemology on Niebuhr, with respect to his acknowledgement of science as a means of gaining knowledge of the natural world, and his understanding that the usefulness of the experiences of daily life to form a basis for theories about the meaning of life "beyond the narrow scope of scientific thinking." Niebuhr built on James' "radical empiricism." arguing that facts and experiences have no meaning or significance apart from a principle of interpretation. For Niebuhr, that principle was faith, whose "criterion of meaning comes by means of a special revelation which provides clues to the meaning of life and history without abolishing all mystery." Ayers, 163.

circumstantial particularities. In other words, "the moral realist holds that the truth of moral claims depends on a state of affairs that exist independently of our moral beliefs. . . ." According to Niebuhr's realism, "social achievements provide no final goal. The dynamics of history are driven by the human capacity always to imagine life beyond existing limitations. Biblical faith gives vision and direction to that capacity for self-transcendence, but we are best able to challenge and channel our powers when we also understand what is really going on."<sup>49</sup>

Niebuhr's realism set him apart from Rauschenbusch's social gospel, and distanced him from his own flirtation with Marxism. Robin Lovin characterised Niebuhr's shift in this way:

The devotion of revolutionaries to their cause is real enough, but it is unrealistic because the goals they espouse will not finally end social conflict and usher in the age of peace they promise. Moral ideas may be fervently held and actively practised, and to that extent they will have real effects. To be realistic in Niebuhr's sense, however, they must also be true.<sup>50</sup>

Identification and application of this principle is no easy task, yet "no one is more conscious than he of the problems and difficulties involved in relating an absolute, transcendent norm to the contingencies of particular situations. . . ."<sup>51</sup> This commitment to the task of Christian realism entwined Niebuhr in the use of a dialectical approach to Christian doctrine and ethics, which will be examined more fully later. In Niebuhr's own words:

The ethical fruitfulness of various types of religion is determined by the quality of their tension between the historical and the transcendent. This quality is measured

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<sup>49</sup>Lovin, 1.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 11-12.

<sup>51</sup>Gordon Harland, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1960), 193.

by two considerations: The degree to which the transcendent truly transcends every value and achievement of history, so that no relative value of historical achievement may become the basis of moral complacency; and the degree to which the transcendent remains in organic contact with the historical, so that no degree of tension may rob the historical of its significance.<sup>52</sup>

Realism served as Niebuhr's framework for understanding humanity, ethics, and society in general, and striving for an understanding of its dialectical significance becomes crucial to a proper critique of Niebuhr's theology.

It is partly Niebuhr's Christian realism that has made him difficult to label, allowing him to be claimed as mentor by conservatives and liberals alike.<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr's realism "was not a formal doctrine or even a set of positions on issues. It was a dynamic orientation towards the world, a cultivation of tension in one's apprehension of it. . . . The living of Christian realism promoted changes of opinion as the Christian constantly renegotiated the balance between taking the world as it was and demanding that it embody higher standards of justice."<sup>54</sup> According to Richard Fox, there is no peace for a Christian realist, "only an occasional deep breath before the next in a never-ending series of re-examinations."<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr was particularly focused in this direction as the development of his theological thought matured, and he sought to adjust his worldview accordingly. "The genius of Niebuhr's Christian realism," writes Fox, "was its capacity to generate an active

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<sup>52</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1956), 18.

<sup>53</sup>Ayers attributes misunderstanding of Niebuhr to a failure to grasp Niebuhr's epistemology and ontology: "It may be that Niebuhr was at fault for not dealing with the issues of methodology, epistemology, and ontology in a direct, simple, and systematic way in separate essays so that his positions in these areas would be immediately obvious. Had he done so perhaps some of the confusion concerning his theological positions could have been avoided . . . ." Ayers, 169.

<sup>54</sup>Richard Fox, "Reinhold Niebuhr - The Living of Christian Realism," *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (London and Oxford: Mowbray, 1986), 10.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 22.

commitment to social and political action while holding that action under the sanction of divine judgement." Fox further identifies the reason why Niebuhr's realistic theology appealed to different schools of thought at different levels:

At its best Christian realism was a distinctively modern yet identifiably traditional faith. It grasped the fundamental relativity of modern existence, the need to remain open to new experience, and the stultifying smugness of religion or piety that failed to appreciate the brokenness of human life. But it also grasped the enduring promise of historic orthodoxy, which viewed human nature as 'determined' yet still 'free' to devote itself to good or to evil in this earthly vale of tears.<sup>56</sup>

This method of Christian realism with its elements of naturalism and pragmatism was eventually applied to politics as well. Though a thorough examination of such application is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to understand the moral ambiguities and dialectical tensions which realism would imply in Niebuhr's anthropology and approach to social ethics. The ideal of love and its realistic application in a striving for proximate justice would yield varied results which never negated the attempt.

Carnell dismissed the term 'realism' simply as a synonym for American neoorthodoxy. He stated that the American scene "refuses complete identification with Continental neoorthodoxy because its own retreat from liberal immanence is less ambitious."<sup>57</sup> While John Bennett perceived Niebuhr as "the soul of Europe hovering over American thought," Carnell described him as seeking "to tack between the failures of the liberals and the extremes of the Barthians, while yet returning to both to convert each into a more realistic framework."<sup>58</sup> In any case, his achievement of dialectical balance through this realistic approach could be understood as prescriptive to his theology,

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>57</sup>Edward John Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 37.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 38.

whereas the term 'neoorthodox' is used more as a theologically and historically descriptive term, when applied to Niebuhr. The struggle to find ethical, religious, and scientific epistemological balance would lead him to embrace a mythical understanding of scripture, which served as the foundation upon which his theology was constructed.

### **Myth and Symbol**

Since Niebuhr believed that Christian doctrines must maintain a tension between the actual and the ideal in order to bear ethical fruit, he assumed that, "this tension must first illumine the ethical problems of history without sanctifying any actual condition in history, and second, be credible in light of modern science and experience. For Niebuhr, the concept of myth functioned to resolve both these problems."<sup>59</sup> To abandon traditional Christian doctrines which were no longer intellectually acceptable to the modern world was to baptise modern science and philosophy as the ideal. At the same time, while orthodox Christianity was viewed as superior to liberalism, Niebuhr criticised it because its religious truths are "still imbedded in an outmoded science" and "its morality is expressed in dogmatic and authoritarian moral codes. . . which have, whether legitimate or accidental, now lost both religious and moral meaning."<sup>60</sup> Niebuhr preferred to think of Christian truths as embodied in myths, "for what is true in the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception."<sup>61</sup> Comparing the temporal process to an artist's canvas, Niebuhr described it

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<sup>59</sup>Beckley, 257. For Niebuhr, the great symbols of Christianity such as incarnation, atonement, judgement, etc., are not to be understood literally from scriptural revelation. As myth they are true, but not literal. For example, the second coming is appreciated in its symbolic sense, as it represents the triumph of the transcendent over history, and lends hope to human ethical striving. It does not necessarily refer to the physical, visible return of Christ to earth.

<sup>60</sup>Niebuhr, *Ethics*, 14.

<sup>61</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 3.

as one dimension upon which two must be recorded. "This can be done only by symbols which deceive for the sake of truth."<sup>62</sup> Because biblical stories such as the account of creation cannot be fully rationalised, they have "been an offence" to philosophers and scientists. Niebuhr was accused by liberals of being a "biblicist" for arguing that such myths and symbols needed to be taken seriously, though not literally. Such deep truths could only be expressed in myth, he argued, in terms that outrage reason because they describe concepts that are beyond rational conception. Through this approach, Niebuhr preserved his ability to take and use scripture seriously, without completely alienating the modern mindset. Such understanding of the bible as myth should not be confused with Rudolf Bultmann's program of demythologisation, which sought to interpret biblical myth in a consistent fashion, but dismissed much of the historical element which Niebuhr was not willing to abandon completely.<sup>63</sup>

Niebuhr saw myth as the strength of the Christian religion. As opposed to rational or non-mythical religions which "tend to define the ideal in terms of passionless form and the world of actuality as unqualifiedly evil, it is the virtue of mythical religions that they discover symbols of the transcendent in the actual without either separating the one from, or identifying it with, the other."<sup>64</sup> Moreover, he wrote:

This is perhaps the most essential genius of myth, that it points to the timeless in time, to the ideal in the actual, but does not lift the temporal to the category of the eternal (as pantheism does), nor deny the significant glimpses of the eternal and the ideal in the temporal (as dualism does). When the mythical method is applied to the description of human character, its paradoxes disclose precisely the same

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (London: 1960). Niebuhr later regretted his own use of the term "myth", saying: "I am sorry I ever used it, particularly since the project for 'demythologising' the Bible has been undertaken and bids fair to reduce the Biblical revelation to eternally valid truths without any existential encounters between God and man." See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply," in Kegley and Bretall, 439.

<sup>64</sup>Niebuhr, *Ethics*, 79-80.

relationships in human personality which myth reveals, and more consistent philosophies obscure, in the nature of the universe.<sup>65</sup>

Harlan Beckley has suggested that myth was really "the key to Niebuhr's retrieval of Christian doctrines because it expresses truth paradoxically. It uses symbols from the temporal world that point to a transcendent dimension of reality." Though the ideal is never attainable within temporal existence, it nevertheless contains "the ultimate truth about how humans ought to live together within history."<sup>66</sup>

Conservatives have criticised Niebuhr vigorously on account of his view of scripture, especially as a result of his outright rejection of orthodox approaches.<sup>67</sup> In his examination of Niebuhr's approach, E. J. Carnell noted that Niebuhr attempted to take the middle road of the realist, capitulating to the demands of science while rejecting the orthodox view of the Bible as God's objective revelation, true in whole and part. "Niebuhr, thus, is fully congenial to destructive higher criticism," he wrote. "While refusing to go as far as the liberal who supposes that the Bible is just man's search for God in written form, Niebuhr halts far short of historical Protestantism. The Bible contains truth only at those points where it supports both the dialectical interpretation of history and the existential assurances within the race and the individual."<sup>68</sup> Carnell goes even further to assert that Niebuhr has not broken with liberalism with respect to epistemology.

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>66</sup>Beckley, 260. Beckley notes that Niebuhr later exchanged his use of the word 'myth' in favour of the word 'symbol' as a result of the skeptical connotation of 'myth', though their function was the same. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Self and the Dramas of History* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), 97.

<sup>67</sup>See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reflections on the End of an Era* (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934), 122. Niebuhr writes: "In one sense all Orthodox Christian theology has been guilty of the sin of profanity. It has insisted on the literal and historic truth of its myths, forgetting that it is the function and character of religious myth to speak of the eternal in relation to time, and that it cannot therefore be a statement of temporal sequence."

<sup>68</sup>Carnell, 119-120.

"He has simply enlarged the 'kernel' of Biblical truth to include *Heilgeschichte*. But both the kernel-husk theory of the Bible and the tendency to divorce theology from history remain."<sup>69</sup> It may be extreme to accuse Niebuhr of acquiescing to Harnack's hermeneutic,<sup>70</sup> but the observation that his method leaves a gap far too wide between theology and history is valid, as are criticisms of his implied subjective, existential epistemological approach. Difficulty with Niebuhr's method emerges not so much with regard to what he says about myth and symbol, but with what he refuses to affirm regarding historicity.

For certain fundamentalists who cling to the verbal plenary inspiration of scripture, Niebuhr's mythical approach is completely unacceptable, and many have closed themselves to his insights.<sup>71</sup> However, his goal may be defended as a respectable one. His method was radical for his time, when a widely-respected evangelical academy did not exist, and

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<sup>69</sup>Ibid., n. 119.

<sup>70</sup>Cf. Adolf Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. T. B. Saunders (New York, NY: 1957).

<sup>71</sup>See Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, eds., *Challenges to Inerrancy: A Theological Response*, (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1984). In Lewis' article entitled, "The Niebuhrs' Relativism, Relationalism, Contextualization, and Revelation," he argues that scripture must be understood as being human and divine "just as" Jesus Christ was human and divine, and thus rejects Niebuhr's work outright. Modern evangelical interpretation, however, allows for a much wider spectrum of understanding concerning the nature of scripture. Whereas Carnell in 1950 based his most swinging criticism of Niebuhr's liberal interpretation of the bible simply on his use of the term 'second Isaiah,' such terms are debated much more readily in evangelical circles today without the conception or fear that the authority of scripture is compromised. cf. Carnell, "Conservatives and Liberals Do Not Need Each Other," *Christianity Today* (May 1965): 39. He writes, "It is just about as meaningful to say that palm trees and icebergs need each other as it is to say that conservatives and liberals need each other." His comment reveals the attitude of conservatives in the liberal-theological ferment of the sixties. He makes such a remark despite his contention that "it is a cause for no small sorrow that Protestantism is divided into such ideologically competitive camps as conservatives and liberals. What joy would result, if all who professed to be followers of Jesus Christ were to arrive at the unity of the faith." Carnell, "Conservatives and Liberals," 33.

the chasm between liberal and conservative was beyond bridging. But even though his method allows the evangelical scholar to grasp Niebuhr's work because of his serious treatment of scripture, it fails to take into account the different types of literature within the canon, and the intended literal or historic nature of some documents. This will lead to several serious flaws in his anthropology, as shall be explored in subsequent chapters. Although Niebuhr broke with orthodoxy in his understanding of scripture, some have argued that his Reformed heritage was the influence which yet defeated liberal theology in his work, and what led him to maintain more than a thread of historical Protestantism throughout.

### **Reformed Theology**

A further area of influence which must be explored, before a proper understanding of Niebuhr's theology is possible, is the influence of Reformed theology upon the formation of his thought. While Gabriel Fackre has noted that Niebuhr is rarely considered in the context of 'Reformed theologian,' there is reason to consider the possibility, since certain Reformed emphases may be argued to have led him into the task to which he was so committed. Though Niebuhr often criticised Calvin and Calvinism for their biblicism, economic individualism, and determinism, within that school of thought are certain influences from which he did not escape. An emphasis on the majesty and glory of God, juxtaposed with the misery of humanity is one area of correlation, which may be found in the Heidelberg Catechism. "Yet for Reformed piety and doctrine," to which Niebuhr was exposed by his father and early education, "the divine majesty establishes itself as just that by confuting all our human notions of a retributive sovereignty. The freedom of the high God suffuses the fires of judgement with the light of

forgiveness. . . ."<sup>72</sup> These are themes which guided Niebuhr to consider the nature of humanity and the dialectical tensions between time and eternity. Chapter II will demonstrate how deeply these concepts were entrenched in Niebuhr's thought as he elaborated his version of Christian anthropology. Divine sovereignty as a moral imperative, an emphasis on the grace of God, and sinfulness of humanity are Reformed doctrines which are inextricably woven into Niebuhr's theology from the beginning.<sup>73</sup>

In fact, it would seem that the very enterprise which Niebuhr undertook could arise only from a social concern moulded from within a Reformed tradition. For the Reformed theologian, the notion that "the saints are responsible for the structure of the social world in which they find themselves," is a firm conviction.<sup>74</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff argues plausibly that, "One has not caught the peculiar flavor of early Calvinist piety, nor indeed of much of later Calvinist piety, until one sees it as commitment to obedience out of gratitude for blessings received." Such gratitude is expressed in vocational calling, interweaving the secular with the sacred. What arises from this attitude of service through vocational calling is a recognition that while "each occupational role ought to serve the common good, as a matter of fact many are corrupted so that they do not. . . . [I]t will

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<sup>72</sup>Gabriel Fackre, "Reinhold Niebuhr," *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

<sup>73</sup>From a contrasting perspective, G. Brillenburg Wurth has pointed out that many similarities between Niebuhr and the Reformers ends here. In particular, he notes Niebuhr's understanding of justification by faith which leads to some sort of "existential conversion" with "very little of the appropriation of the righteousness of Christ, as held by the reformers." Wurth concludes: "No matter how much Niebuhr's theology can be called stimulating and profitable, our final conclusion is that it is unacceptable when measured by biblical Reformation standards." G. Brillenburg Wurth, *Niebuhr*, trans. David H. Freeman, International Library of Philosophy and Theology Modern Thinkers Series, ed. David H. Freeman (USA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1975), 36, 41.

<sup>74</sup>Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 3. Wolterstorff discusses how this conviction emerged out of Calvinism, and holds it in contrast to other traditions of social understandings.

[then] be impossible to think of the social order as given by God. One will inevitably think of it as made by human beings and capable of alteration. One will think of us as responsible for its structure." The heart of "Calvinist social piety" here rests in "the awareness of a tension between demand and reality."<sup>75</sup> This seems to be a given premise driving the social concern of theologians such as Niebuhr.

Yet, while the search for *how* Christians should insert themselves into such a social order is the task of the Reformed thinker, Baptist theologians must first struggle with *whether* they should be so engaged. The connection between society and the church is assumed for the Reformed theologian where it is not for many others who have abdicated responsibility for social reform under the guise of "separation of church and state." This is an important distinction to grasp before undertaking an examination of Niebuhr's anthropology from the perspective of the historically non-conformist church, and it places many of his assumptions and arguments within a more specific, Reformed context.

This examination of Niebuhr's intellectual development, and of the theological context which nurtured and hosted his thought, provides an adequate foundation for approaching his anthropological insights. His family life, writing and teaching career, reaction to liberalism and flight to neoorthodoxy's realism, mythical understanding of the Bible, and Reformed influences all served to form the theological mind which in turn produced so much material for humanity to ponder for generations to come. Placing Niebuhr within his historical and theological context allows freedom to explore his thought and reapply its strengths for a new millennium. The groundwork laid in this introductory chapter provides a skeleton upon which may be hung some theological flesh, the meat of which is to be found in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, the ultimate expression of Niebuhr's intellectual, social, and personal influences. The following prayer

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 14-15; 16-17; 21.

offered by Niebuhr in 1960 encapsulates much of his theology in a doxological statement, and serves as an appropriate bridge to a discussion of his anthropology:

Eternal God, Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, we worship you. Your wisdom is beyond our understanding, your power is greater than we can measure, your thoughts are above our thoughts; as high as the heaven is above the earth, your majesty judges all human majesties. Your judgement brings princes to naught, and makes the judges of the earth as vanity; for before the mountains were brought forth or ever the earth and the world were made, even from everlasting to everlasting you are God.

Give us grace to apprehend by faith the power and wisdom which lie beyond our understanding; and in worship to feel that which we do not know, and to praise even what we do not understand; so that in the presence of your glory we may be humble, and in the knowledge of your judgement we may repent; and so in the assurance of your mercy we may rejoice and be glad.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup>A prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr which closed his sermon at St. George's Episcopal Church in New York City in 1960. Cited by Fox in Harries, 21-22.

## CHAPTER II

### **Challenges to Justice: Considerations From the First Volume of Niebuhr's Anthropological Elaboration**

Though Niebuhr was more widely considered an ethicist than a dogmatician, the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, elaborated Niebuhr's Christian anthropology through an interpretation of the existential human situation. In the volume entitled, *Human Nature*, Niebuhr introduced humanity as his theological starting point, expounded his perception of the human problem, and discussed the reality, expression, and consequence of human sin, in light of divinely-revealed requirements and responsibilities. Niebuhr outlined the theological problem of human existence and conscience, criticising philosophical idealism for its rationalistic optimism and romanticism for its optimistic naturalism. It is difficult to find agreement with Niebuhr's overall epistemology and symbolic understanding of special revelation, as it leads him to a truncated or even non-existent pneumatology. This neglect seriously affects his anthropological conclusions, and raises questions about his theological method. Despite such weaknesses, Niebuhr's perceptive description of the human situation restored the notion of transcendence to American theology, and reintroduced serious contemplation of the concept of sinfulness which affects not only humans as individuals, but marks the social institutions of which they are a part. His most helpful conclusions provide a positive challenge to evangelicals who may not share his method, as many of his proposals could be rendered acceptable on different epistemological grounds.

### **Theology from Below**

The best place to begin an analysis of Niebuhr's anthropology as it appears in the first volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, is in consideration of his choice of theological starting point. If it is true, as James Gustafson argues, that Niebuhr develops his theology out of ethical considerations and not *visa versa*, then his decision to begin systematic theological elaboration with the condition of humanity is not surprising.<sup>1</sup> Niebuhr's approach disagreed with that of Barth, who claimed that it was the doctrine of God which must first be developed, with ethics as part of and following from the doctrine of God. Niebuhr rejected the method of the modern liberals, though he did not exclude completely the Kantian notion that whatever is said about God is based on ethics, since humans cannot have a knowledge of God based on pure reason.<sup>2</sup> Gustafson argues convincingly that all theologians and ethicists fall somewhere between these two positions: the theism of Barth or the ethicism of Kant, with most weight of preference being placed in one or the other direction. "This weight, if it does not determine the form and content totally, makes a difference at critical points in the development of a position."<sup>3</sup>

For Niebuhr, his ethical concerns led him to existential consideration of the human situation with its emphasis on freedom and sin, as opposed to Barth's approach which began with God and developed an ethic based on grace. Indeed, Niebuhr's entire theological system grew out of ethical concerns existentially discerned and approached

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<sup>1</sup>See James Gustafson, "Theology in the Service of Ethics: An Interpretation of Reinhold Niebuhr's Theological Ethics," in Harries, 24-45.

<sup>2</sup>Although Niebuhr believed knowledge of God came to some degree through self-revelation, he was inevitably subject to the liberalism he sought to challenge, as were most theologians of his time. Indirectly, Kantian thought led Niebuhr's approach to be founded on an ethical, as opposed to metaphysical, basis. Cf. Immanuel Kant, *A Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, (London: 1929).

<sup>3</sup>Gustafson, 25.

through a study of humanity, or, a theology from below. In his understanding, "Every philosophy of life is touched with anthropocentric tendencies. Even theocentric religions believe that the Creator of the world is interested in saving man from his unique predicament."<sup>4</sup>

Niebuhr's intensely practical concerns and social involvements, combined with the modernist influences on his own thinking, led him to conclude that theology must be apologetic if it is to have any significant value. For him, objective revelations of God concerning personhood and historical action were "absurd from a strictly ontological standpoint."<sup>5</sup> His friend Paul Tillich criticised him for his resistance to consider ontology as a valid theological exercise, and yet argued that in the final analysis, Niebuhr's anthropology could not avoid ontological categories.<sup>6</sup> This contention points again to Niebuhr's concept of myth. In an attempt to avoid liberal ontology, "Niebuhr advocated an apologetic that would make clear the ontologically ambiguous status of the concept of personality and history. In the midst of such ambiguities, we must leave room for the nonrational, so that the message of God's relationship to creation as evidenced in the symbols of the Bible can be spoken."<sup>7</sup> Yet, as soon as a discussion of human nature is

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<sup>4</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 3.

<sup>5</sup>Kegley and Bretall, 19.

<sup>6</sup>See Paul Tillich, "Sin and Grace," in Landon, 27-41. Tillich argues specifically that Niebuhr's discussion of humanity's sinfulness cannot be addressed apart from ontological categories. When Niebuhr rejects sin as comprising part of humanity's essential nature, for example, Tillich correctly insists that he has stepped into ontological territory. In reality, as Robert Ayers has noted, Niebuhr was critical of Tillich's epistemology and ontology, "but it does not follow from this fact that he was without an epistemology and ontology." Ayers, 159. Ronald H. Stone points out that Tillich refused to acknowledge Niebuhr's epistemology because of its "strangeness" to his thought: "Niebuhr stood in the empirical tradition of William James, which was anathema to German idealism." Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 148.

<sup>7</sup>Stanley Grenz and Roger Olson, *Twentieth-Century Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 101-102.

undertaken, such ontological issues are raised, and any attempt to avoid them completely proves futile. In any case, it must be acknowledged that Niebuhr's primary motive was apologetic, pragmatic, and ethical, not ontological.

The question must be proposed, "Is it valid to approach theology from the perspective of humanity?" Certainly many would disagree, arguing that any knowledge of God derived from a human perspective is mere anthropocentrism.<sup>8</sup> Yet, it must be acknowledged that there is no other way for humans to grasp even revealed concepts of God apart from their own nature and experience. Such acknowledgement does not negate the possibility of objectivity in theology, nor does it nullify the value of scriptural revelation. Revelation actually contributes to the objectivity of the human theological task, since "the character of Being can be known only if Being reveals itself." While the desire and capacity to engage the search for God rests in human nature, "the knowledge of God comes to us as a gift."<sup>9</sup> As Barth has insisted, the message of the Gospel witnesses was not simply their own impressions or estimates of Jesus, but rather "their theme was God's mighty Word spoken in Jesus' resurrection from the dead which imparted to his life and death, power and control over all creatures of all times."<sup>10</sup> Barth's preservation of the value of specific revelation is admirable, but his extreme presentation of a God who is completely transcendent virtually eliminates any level of human understanding of divine

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<sup>8</sup>In writing on knowledge of God, Barth distinguished his approach from others, like Niebuhr: "By this definition something fundamentally different is taking place from what would happen, if I should try and set before you conceptually arranged ideas of an infinite, supreme Being. In such a case I would be speculating. But I am not inviting you to speculate. I maintain that this is a radically wrong road which can never lead to God, but to a reality called so only in a false sense." Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thomson, (London: SCM Press, 1949), 37.

<sup>9</sup>John Macquarrie, "How is Theology Possible?" *The Honest to God Debate*, ed. John A. T. Robinson and David Edwards (London: SCM Press, 1963), 193.

<sup>10</sup>Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*, trans. Grover Foley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 29.

activity. The theological task inevitably includes elements of the transcendent and the immanent; participation of the Divine and the human.

While theological objectivity is best understood in light of divine self-revelation, it does not preclude the use of philosophical tools to gain deeper access and appreciation of revelation, nor does it eliminate the possibility that human reason and philosophy may serve as indispensable and somewhat objective apologetic tools to bring humans to a point of considering the meaning of revelation.<sup>11</sup> John Macquarrie writes:

When challenged to produce the credentials of his subject, the theologian cannot in the nature of the case offer a proof, but he can describe this area of experience in which his discourse about God is meaningful, he can ask his questioner whether he recognises his own existence in the Christian doctrine of man as finite, responsible and sinful; whether he finds hidden in himself the question of God. He can show that faith is not just an arbitrary matter, and he can make clear what is the alternative to faith. Beyond this, perhaps, he cannot go, but is not this sufficient? For it brings us to the point where we see that this discourse about God has to do with the most radical matter in life, the point where, exercising our freedom in finitude, we decide to take either the risk of faith or the risk of unfaith.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps unwittingly, Macquarrie has summarised Niebuhr's existential approach to theology in a way that highlights its ethical and apologetic value. While specific content for faith is to be derived from special revelation as opposed to human experience, beginning the theological task through an appeal to general revelation, through basic human experience, both individual and shared, is a valid exercise.<sup>13</sup> Offering an

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<sup>11</sup>Macquarrie wrote regarding the possibility of explaining away the experience of grace through illusion or psychology, that theology must continue to go forward in the attitude and risk of faith. Although nothing may be proved, at least something may be described. With "the aid of the concepts of contemporary philosophy and theology, [the] way has been shown to possess a coherent pattern, an intelligible structure, and an inner logic." *Debate*, 193.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Validity may be questioned from a postmodern mindset which finds the notion of a common humanity as illusory. Much of Niebuhr's work would seem as nonsense to the postmodernist whose "concepts of rationality and knowledge emphasise historical and

apologetic which appeals to common human experience as a prelude to the introduction of the necessity of revelation may yet yield helpful results for theology and ethics.

### **Time-Eternity Dialectic**

Even though Niebuhr's theology finds its starting point in humanity, it seeks to reject liberal immanentism by the establishment of a dialectical approach to time and eternity.<sup>14</sup> In the introduction to his critique of Niebuhr's theology from the perspective of classical Reformation orthodoxy, E. J. Carnell proposed the concept of the time-eternity dialectic to be the key to understanding all of Niebuhr's literature.<sup>15</sup> In his study of Niebuhr entitled, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Carnell explained how Niebuhr's dialectical theology emerged in every aspect, from the double environment of humanity, to the significance of the Cross in light of humanity's sinful predicament. It is immediately

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cultural variability, fallibility, the impossibility of getting beyond language to 'reality', the fragmentary and particular nature of all understanding, the pervasive corruption of knowledge by power and domination, the futility of the search for pure foundations, and the need for a pragmatic approach to the whole matter." For this description of postmodernism, see David Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. II (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1989), 291-293. On the other hand, such an approach as Niebuhr's gains validity from a postliberal perspective, which affirms orthodoxy in light of modern critiques and theologies. See William C. Placher, "Postliberal Theology," in Ford, 115-128.

<sup>14</sup>Niebuhr's time-eternity dialectic is based in an existential framework which seeks to balance Divine immanence and transcendence; finds tension between human sinfulness and humans as created in the image of God; and holds in creative juxtaposition the accomplishments of humanity in history and the final judgement which not only stands at the end of history, but looms over it. It is quite distinct from other dialectical approaches, including the Hegelian view of history.

<sup>15</sup>See Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*. In this volume, Carnell explores Niebuhr's dialectic as the organising principle for his thought. His fair and thorough treatment of Niebuhr is unmatched in the orthodox academy, and this paper cannot do justice to his treatment of the dialectical approach. Suffice it to say that his analysis is helpful as well as complete, and contributed to this student's understanding what the relation between time and eternity means for Niebuhr's theology.

clear that Carnell has clearly identified a significant approach to understanding Niebuhr's anthropology, in light of his rejection of liberal modernism. The heart of the dialectical tension is discovered in the debate over the transcendence and immanence of God.

Champions of neoorthodoxy sought to challenge the liberal focus on immanence by reestablishing the transcendence of God. The dialectic that emerged from their thought set up the juxtaposition in greater or lesser degrees. For example, Barth argued early in his work for complete discontinuity between God and humanity, insisting that God is "wholly other," the *deus absconditus*. The reason for discontinuity becomes evident. Humans "can have faith in history only if God is moved out of the involvements of history's sinfulness. There must be a power over and above history if we are to have hope in eternity on the one hand, and a reason for striving in history, on the other." In this vein Barth argued that "anything less than wholly other is but an oversized man."<sup>16</sup> Brunner was somewhat more open to points of contact with natural theology and the *imago dei*, especially in later development, but he maintained that "genuine theology must be dialectical. It is always a conversation between God and man."<sup>17</sup> But neither Barth nor Brunner found whole areas of contact between time and eternity as Niebuhr did.

Unlike traditional orthodoxy, Niebuhr's neoorthodox dialectic drew its conclusions from existential observation rather than from objective revelatory knowledge. This existential foundation was laid by Soren Kierkegaard, who "bequeathed to Barth, Brunner, and Niebuhr their dialectical framework."<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, faith comes from risk and commitment of the self. Revelation becomes significant when humans discover an awareness of sin, in a recognition of their distance from God. It is not objective or

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<sup>16</sup>Carnell, *Theology*, 31.

<sup>17</sup>Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1946), 15.

<sup>18</sup>Carnell, *Theology*, 33.

propositional, rather it comes to humans as a crisis to which they must decide to commit themselves. In this sense, humans contribute something of themselves to the revelatory transaction: they "must respond to the confrontation as well as suffer it."<sup>19</sup> Out of such crises, faith emerges. Kierkegaard asserted: "Without risk there is no faith. Faith is precisely the contradiction between the infinite passion of the individual's inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am capable of grasping God objectively, I do not believe, but precisely because I cannot do this I must believe."<sup>20</sup>

Carnell placed Niebuhr adequately within this dialectical framework:

Niebuhr indeed follows Kierkegaard in defining the relation between time and eternity dialectically, but he recoils from Barthian extremes. Man is a sinner - but not *totally* a sinner. Otherwise, how could he ever know that he is a sinner? God is transcendent - but not *wholly* other. Otherwise, how could man know God or how could God reveal himself to man? Revelation is an offence to reason - but not *completely* so. Otherwise, how could man recognize truth when he saw it? God's law is above our expectation - but not *absolutely* so. Otherwise, how can we distinguish the voice of God from the voice of the devil? Natural theology cannot establish God's existence, but it is not *finally* blind. Otherwise, how could eternity be relevant to history or history be interpreted in light of eternity? Niebuhr, therefore, indicts Barth for *talking* about God and expecting his hearer to understand what he means. If there is no univocal point between time and eternity, meaningful speech about God is impossible.<sup>21</sup>

Here, the subtle differences in the existential dialectic become more obvious. In fact, Niebuhr's critique of Barth's refusal to accept time-eternity continuities is part of the brilliance of his argument. However, in his attempt to establish wide areas of contact within the dialectic, Niebuhr ends up placing far too much ability within humanity for response to the Divine.

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>20</sup>Soren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David Swenson, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1944), 182.

<sup>21</sup>Carnell, 37.

Niebuhr is right in his insistence that there cannot be a complete disjunction between God and humanity, but he does not recognise that the initiative for contact must rest and remain with God, whose grace breaks through the sinfulness of humanity, not only for humanity's sake, but out of God's love and for God's glory. Niebuhr's refusal to deal in ontological categories is particularly glaring here. Although Niebuhr successfully defends against such criticism in his appraisal of the image of God in humanity, in the final analysis, he does not take humanity's sin as seriously as he is accused of doing by some of his detractors. For if humanity's sin is as corrupting as Niebuhr would have us believe, then it is difficult to see what, if anything, humanity contributes to an existential encounter with God. The tension between time and eternity which Niebuhr attempts to highlight is relieved somewhat, when the magnitude of God's grace makes it evident that quite apart from humanity, God is all in all. Nevertheless, on other levels, the dialectic proves quite helpful in struggling with various anthropological issues which maintain consistent tension between time and eternity, including the basic problem of the nature of human existence. Niebuhr's dialectic is comprehended more fully in his elaboration of the problem, and his belief that the Christian view presents the only adequate solution.

### **Finding an Explanation for the Existential Problem**

As Niebuhr saw it, the basic task in understanding human nature, was to determine to what degree humans were intimately bound by or connected to their natural environment and its necessities, and to what degree they were free to transcend the natural world. One Niebuhrian scholar summed up his dilemma in this way: "If the self is identical with the natural world, then it is no more than one of the animals. If the self completely transcends the natural world, it is absorbed into a timeless eternity."<sup>22</sup> To

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<sup>22</sup>Bob E. Patterson, *Reinhold Niebuhr, Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed. Bob E. Patterson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1977): 64.

explore this dynamic more fully, Niebuhr compared various views of humanity, rejecting them in favour of a Christian perspective which did not resolve this dilemma, but held both aspects in creative dialectical tension. None of the classical or liberal views of humanity could explain humanity in a way that satisfied Niebuhr's observations. In his own words:

The obvious fact is that man is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much, latitude. The other less obvious fact is that man is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and his world. . . . How difficult it is to do justice to both the uniqueness of man and his affinities with the world of nature below him is proved by the almost unvarying tendency of those philosophies, which describe and emphasize the rational faculties of man or his capacity for self-transcendence to forget his relation to nature and to identify him, prematurely and unqualifiedly with the divine and the eternal; and of naturalistic philosophies to obscure the uniqueness of man.<sup>23</sup>

Niebuhr found it necessary to spend the first several sections of the volume refuting the claims of those philosophies which identified humans too closely with nature, or offered too much credibility to their rational faculties. He concluded that modern understandings of humanity had a single and common source of error: "Man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express and find itself."<sup>24</sup>

As Niebuhr embarked on an attack of inadequate views of human nature, he began to build the relevance of his case that the Christian view offered the preferred insights for understanding. William Wolf has indicated that "the theological significance of this masterful cultural approach to the doctrine of man is that Niebuhr has illuminated the self-refuting qualities of alternative explanations, and demonstrated in a preliminary way the

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<sup>23</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 3, 4.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

remarkable relevance of the Christian explanation."<sup>25</sup> Niebuhr launched his attack against rationalism and idealism in various classical and modern expressions, centred on the problem of vitality and form, individuality, and conscience. His argument flowed from his assurance that "it is infinitely easier to admit the fact of the double milieu than it is to explain the relation between the two sides without corrupting one or the other."<sup>26</sup> The end result was that Niebuhr "skillfully expose[d] some of the deficiencies in non-Christian anthropology," and through his approach, succeeded in a demonstration that "truth is always seen in sharper contours when contrasted distinctively against error."<sup>27</sup>

Niebuhr defines vitality as human impulses and drives; form as the unities, instincts, cohesions and differentiations of life. Both vitality and form are present in human nature and spirit, with human freedom providing the potential for good or evil, though natural vitalities provide greater attraction to sinful behaviours than those that exist in the spirit. Accusing Platonic thought of negating the value of the body and emphasising the essential value of *nous*, or reason, Niebuhr saves his harshest critique for modern idealists, arguing "Kantian idealism throws the impulses of nature more completely into an outer darkness than any form of Greek classicism."<sup>28</sup> Hegelianism receives the same negative brushstroke, as he accuses that approach to human nature and history of being a "rationalized version and corruption of the Christian view of the unity of human life and the dynamic quality of historical existence."<sup>29</sup> Such approaches fall into a dualistic error which "has the consequence for the doctrine of man of identifying the body with evil and of assuming the essential goodness of mind or spirit."<sup>30</sup> As Carnell observed: "Niebuhr

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<sup>25</sup>Wolf, 235.

<sup>26</sup>Carnell, 46.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 32.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 32-33.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 7.

contends that the idealistic premise follows only when one is not true to the full content of his experience. An existentially sensitive mind is no less conscious of the reality of physical impulses as being part of his real self than he is that the potentialities of ratiocination properly are his."<sup>31</sup> Being true to the whole of human experience means acknowledging that humans are more than simply rational animals. Thus, with the defeat of rationalist philosophy in hand, Niebuhr shifts his attention to a refutation of Romanticism, as it is manifested classically, and in Marxism.

After engaging the thought of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Niebuhr explains how their systems have submerged freedom and reason beneath nature and matter. This form of idealism compromises human individuality as it makes "finite reason so continuous with divine or cosmic reason that essential individuality is finally lost."<sup>32</sup> Although "idealistic philosophy always has the advantage over naturalism in that it appreciates [the] depth of human spirit. . . it usually sacrifices this advantage by identifying the universal perspective of the self-transcendent ego with universal spirit. Its true self therefore ceases to be a self in a true sense and becomes merely an aspect of universal mind."<sup>33</sup> Once again, modern systems of thought have failed to maintain a proper balance of vitality and form, and neglected the seriousness of the time-eternity dialectic for human history. The consequences of such errors are of ultimate significance: "If the individual is nothing, justice for the individual is nothing. And if time is nothing, justice for the individual in time is nothing. Whenever either individuality or time is corrupted, a respect for degrees of justice within history, which alone prevents social betterment from merging with social indifference, is destroyed."<sup>34</sup> The common failure of such systems of thought "to

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<sup>31</sup>Carnell, 47.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 75.

<sup>34</sup>Carnell, 49.

achieve their avowed aim of establishing human individuality on a sure foundation suggests that the Christian concept is more in tune with reality."<sup>35</sup> Idealism in its rationalistic forms, and naturalism in its romantic manifestations are to be rejected on such grounds.

Being unsatisfied with approaches which fail to consider all aspects of human nature in balance, Niebuhr outlines the crisis of modern humanity which overestimates the ability to live out idealisms, and rests easy within mistaken naturalisms. He seems genuinely frustrated with the constant elaboration of similar views, claiming "contemporary history is filled with manifestations of man's hysterias and furies; with evidences of his daemonic capacity and inclination to break the harmonies of nature and defy the prudent canons of rational restraint. Yet no cumulation of contradictory evidence seems to disturb modern man's good opinion of himself."<sup>36</sup> No system of rational thought or education is able to overcome this serious situation which characterises human nature. Though accused of over-generalisation and historical inaccuracy regarding his treatment of cultural history, Niebuhr succeeds in his endeavour to prove that "both the majesty and the tragedy of human life exceed the dimension within which modern culture seeks to comprehend human existence."<sup>37</sup> Even as humanity rests with an easy conscience regarding its predicament, Christianity provides an understanding of this existential problem which takes into account all aspects of human nature and the important dialectical balance within and beyond history. Niebuhr's ability to argue the validity of the Christian approach over and against other worldviews, from a philosophical perspective, represents a particular apologetic strength which may prove particularly helpful to contemporary theology.

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<sup>35</sup>Wolf, 235.

<sup>36</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 94.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

### The Christian View

For Niebuhr, the strength of the Christian view of humanity is found in its nature as a revealed religion which emphasises equally the transcendence and immanence of God, and balances the image of God and creaturely necessities in humanity. As Niebuhr proposed, there are certain corruptions of understanding *within* Christianity as well. Mysticism, for example, overemphasises the immanence of God, equating the depths of the human soul with eternity. Other errors so emphasise transcendence that any possibility of God acting in history is logically precluded. The relevance of a proper view of transcendence and immanence becomes particularly important to Niebuhr's anthropology: "The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is this twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God and upon His intimate relation to the world. In this divine transcendence the spirit of man finds a home in which it can understand its stature of freedom. But there it also finds the limits of its freedom, the judgement which is spoken against it and, ultimately, the mercy which makes such a judgement sufferable."<sup>38</sup> The insights of Christian revelation provide Niebuhr with his next step in his dialectical analysis, whereby humans are perceived as: spiritually self-transcendent in the image of God; weak, dependent, and finite, with respect to their involvement in the necessities and contingencies in the natural world; inevitably but not necessarily involved in denial of their dependence and finitude which leads to evil in humanity, as people seek to escape the anxiety produced by such denial.

Niebuhr clearly points out that neither finitude, nor its accompanying anxiety, are evil in themselves, but humanity's denial of finitude and reluctance to acknowledge its dependent nature leads to evil. Evidently, Niebuhr is dependent upon Schleiermacher for at least part of this analysis.<sup>39</sup> General revelation *vis-a-vis* human conscience and specific

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<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 126.

<sup>39</sup>Niebuhr acknowledges the contribution of Schleiermacher to his thinking on the matter

revelation through history combine to verify Niebuhr's suspicions of the human predicament. In his analysis, "a religion of revelation is thus alone able to do justice to both the freedom and the finiteness of man and to understand the character of the evil in him. . . [T]he revelation of God to man is always a twofold one, a personal-individual revelation, and a revelation in the context of social-historical experience."<sup>40</sup> Niebuhr correctly finds the locus of such dialectical tension in human nature, as it bears the image of God, and yet is bound to sin.

### **Humans as Bearers of the Image of God**

The truth of this dual nature is expressed in the creation myth, which Niebuhr believes offers special revelation of humanity's existential position as finite creatures of God who yet bear his image, and stand under his grace: *simul justus et peccator*.<sup>41</sup> Arguing that all logical concepts of derivation begin and end with the doctrine of God's creation *ex nihilo*, which affirms the potential height of the human spirit, Niebuhr indicates the evil that emerges when humans deny their dependence upon God, and exercise their freedom in negative rather than positive ways. Nevertheless, Niebuhr is careful to emphasise the positive nature of the freedom of self-transcendence which represents the *imago dei*. For Niebuhr's purposes, "creation *ex nihilo* keeps the relations between time and eternity fluid enough to allow for historical progress, and yet rigid enough to keep history tensionally responsive to absolute norms of obligation."<sup>42</sup> He contrasts his understanding with several traditional perspectives, and reaches specific conclusions

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of dependence, but insists the human experience of God entails more than an experience of "unqualified dependence." Ibid., 128.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 127.

<sup>41</sup>Gustaf Aulen highlights this paradox as an important Reformation doctrine. See Gustaf Aulen, "Criticism, Claim, and Confidence: The Realism of the Christian Conception of Man," *Interpretation* III (April 1949): 131-141.

<sup>42</sup>Carnell, 55.

regarding the nature of this paradox, as he interacts with historical Christian views of the meaning of the *imago dei* in humanity.<sup>43</sup>

While some have equated the image of God with reason, Niebuhr argues that it entails more than human rational faculties. He is willing to include reason as part of the image, but freedom or self-transcendence is the key element, which is present in the human spirit. His affection for Augustinian theology becomes apparent here, as "the most profound theologians, beginning with Augustine, have associated the image of God with a human capacity to transcend reason, world, and the self."<sup>44</sup> Unlike Luther, who argued that the image of God is obliterated in humanity as a result of the fall, Niebuhr believed that positive human potential remained intact, though tainted. This is a helpful observation since contact between God and humanity would be precluded if humans no longer bore the capacity for existential encounter of the Divine.<sup>45</sup> This comprises a serious disagreement between Niebuhr's view and Barth's doctrine of the image of God. For Barth, the image of God was borne in human form by Jesus Christ alone. To speak of the image in any other context resulted in analogous reasoning, in which he wanted no part. Niebuhr's view, however, takes into account the capacity that humanity has for good, in accordance with God's declaration at creation, and the freedom God has given in that capacity to know him and experience a relationship with him.

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<sup>43</sup>The image of God in humanity is not to be considered independently of Niebuhr's appraisal of original justice. Though intimately connected, the concepts of image and original justice are not identical. The image relates the historical to the eternal in God, and original justice relates the historical to the eternal in humanity. For Niebuhr, "the concept of the image of God was secondary to that of original justice." See the discussion of the image of God in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1985), 55f.

<sup>44</sup>Beckley, 265.

<sup>45</sup>Fackre, 37. Gabriel Fackre narrows down Niebuhr's description of the image of God to describe it simply as, "The structure through which God makes his presence felt in the conscience of man is the "image of God" in man."

As created in the image of God, humans bear the ability to transcend all the necessities of nature and to exercise freedom of spirit. Herein lies human potential, creativity, and capacity for love and justice. Acknowledging his indebtedness to Augustine, Niebuhr concludes; "Under the influence of Augustinian ideas, Christian theology consistently interprets the image of God in terms of the rational faculties of the soul, but includes among these the capacity of rising to the knowledge of God and (when unspoiled by sin) of achieving blessedness and virtue by reason of subjecting its life to the Creator."<sup>46</sup> This capacity to know God and the ability to subject life to him will be explored in further detail in the following chapter. At this point, it is simply important to recognise Niebuhr's understanding of the *imago dei* in order that it might stand in proper juxtaposition to the doctrine of humans as creatures. The balance found in the dialectical tension between the two doctrines will lend helpful anthropological perspective to the development of a biblical, evangelical social ethic.

## Sin

The very ability to transcend nature allows humanity to recognise its ultimate connectedness to it. Anxiety over dependency and finitude emerges from the tension between the freedom of the *imago dei* and creaturely responsibility to eternal norms. Though freedom and anxiety do not themselves equate to sin, inevitably they lead to sin as they serve the temptation whereby humans seek to condition their environment so as to order or deny their essential necessities, and universalise their own particularities. Niebuhr's elaboration of the sinfulness of the human condition represents his greatest

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<sup>46</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 158. It is important to note, however, that Niebuhr maintains an understanding of human individuality, even within relationship to the Divine. Conversion involves the subjection of self to God but individuality is never completely submerged or dissolved in the divine personality.

theological contribution, and the doctrine he found "most lacking in the modern mindset".<sup>47</sup> The very capacity for self-transcendence which the image of God bestows upon humanity is misused as people refuse to acknowledge their creatureliness.

As Daphne Hampson noted in her feminist critique of Niebuhr's concept of sin, he is thoroughly dependent on Kierkegaard for his categories of analysis.<sup>48</sup> She writes: "Kierkegaard, in *The Concept of Dread* and elsewhere, says that man is a double, both tied-to-nature and spirit, having both necessity and possibility. It is this duality, this *Zweispaltung*, which gives rise to anxiety, to *Angst*. Niebuhr, taking this as given, says that in this situation of anxiety man tries to discard his contingent nature and soar to pretensions of absoluteness."<sup>49</sup> Borrowing here from the Christian tradition from Augustine to Luther, Niebuhr views sin as "that self-centredness whereby the creature in his *hubris* pretends to be adequate of himself, and so sets himself up in the place of God, refusing to be dependent."<sup>50</sup> Anxiety is not sinful in and of itself, rather it is the very presence of that anxiety that makes sin inevitable. Anxiety over the recognition of humanity's finitude leads the ego to make itself the centre of existence, and through its pride and will-to-power, it attempts to subordinate other life to its will, or becomes submerged in its vitalities. "Anxiety, as a permanent concomitant of freedom, is thus both the source of creativity and a temptation to sin. . . . [W]hen anxiety is conceived it brings

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<sup>47</sup>Grenz and Olson, 103.

<sup>48</sup>Daphne Hampson, "Reinhold Niebuhr on Sin: A Critique," in Harries, 46-60. Although Hampson provides a concise and perceptive description of Niebuhr's concept of sin, her conclusions regarding their inapplicability to women are not readily accepted by this author. However, Niebuhr's reliance on Kierkegaard for his analysis here should not be underestimated. Carnell argued that it was questionable "whether one can appreciate Niebuhr fully until he understands his historical lineage in Kierkegaard." Carnell, 71. Niebuhr himself professed Kierkegaard to be "the greatest of Christian psychologists." *Human Nature*, 44.

<sup>49</sup>Hampson, 46.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

forth both pride and sensuality."<sup>51</sup> Hampson is correct in her observation that Niebuhr depends on Kierkegaard's analysis of anxiety to derive his understanding of sin. This in itself, however, does not render his observations incorrect. In fact, there is a strong biblical basis for recognising the nature of sin as pride, as Niebuhr acknowledges.<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr's conclusions here are easily acceptable within the framework of scriptural revelation, but it is important to recognise that the source of his thought is rooted in existentialism rather than revealed truth.

Throughout Niebuhr's analysis, the dialectical tension between the image of God and human sinfulness is consistently maintained. He writes:

The fact is that man is never unconscious of his weakness, of the limited and dependent character of his existence and knowledge. The occasion for his temptation lies in the two facts, his greatness and his weakness, his unlimited and his limited knowledge, taken together. Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the juncture of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity. His sin is never the mere ignorance of his ignorance. It is always partly an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and to obscure his insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits.<sup>53</sup>

Ronald Stone attributes Niebuhr's understanding of anxiety and sin to his reading of Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit*. Drawing on Heidegger's analysis in order to explain "how anxiety is simultaneously the cause of man's achievements and the precondition of his sin," Niebuhr concludes that "man knows his life is limited, but he does not know where the limits are. No achievement represents perfection, and there is no place for man to rest in his struggle to escape his finitude." Given human nature, anxiety is inevitable and necessary, "but only when the situation is misinterpreted does it produce a rebellion by

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<sup>51</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 185-186.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 181.

man against the law of love."<sup>54</sup> In the anxious search to escape human finitude, humanity must either acknowledge its finitude and subject itself to God, or assert itself in sin, rebelling against God. Where trust in God, or faith, is not present, sin inevitably results, on both individual and collective levels.

### **Pride**

Niebuhr describes sin specifically as pride or self-love, which is expressed through human will-to-power,<sup>55</sup> and sensuality. He deals most extensively with the sin of pride, which is expressed in different forms. Pride of power, intellectual or moral pride, spiritual pride, and collective pride all find their roots in anxiety's soil, while "lack of trust in God leads to egotistic self-assertiveness in individual and collective life."<sup>56</sup> In all of its forms, pride is an expression of the individual's desire to assert a will-to-power, which overestimates its ability to overcome the limits of nature and finitude. "Man falls into pride, when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned existence."<sup>57</sup> In the assertion of their will-to-power, humans seek to make people and nature subservient to their egos in a search for secure existence. This also may be expressed on intellectual, moral, and spiritual levels, as individuals are convinced that they possess final truth. The resulting injustice for those subject to this assertion of power is obvious.

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<sup>54</sup>Stone, *Prophet to Politicians*, 97.

<sup>55</sup>Niebuhr's conception of the will-to-power seeks to be biblical and stands in contrast to Friedrich Nietzsche's use of the term. Niebuhr wrote that in Nietzsche's view, ". . .the creation of too broad and too narrow forms for the expression of the will-to-live or the will-to-power, proves the impossibility of penetrating to the paradox of human spirituality from the perspective of romanticism." Moreover, Niebuhr critiqued that, "romanticism, at least in its fully developed Nietzschean form, substitutes brutality for hypocrisy and asserts the particular and unique, whether individual or collective, in nihilistic disregard of any general system of value." *Human Nature*, 39, 91.

<sup>56</sup>Patterson, 88.

<sup>57</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 186.

With such pride, promotion of particular systems may be asserted at the expense of others, with no recognition that all systems fall prey to the same sin of pride and remain under the judgement of eternal principles.<sup>58</sup> This is an extremely helpful observation which serves as a reminder that no human system of ethical action or thought is capable of embodying truth in its entirety. It also explains a major flaw of evangelical ethics (and evangelical theology), which often fall prey to this very temptation. Potential for growth comes when this will-to-power is weakened, and humans come to "recognize that for each of us the school of thought where we feel most at home is not the only theology which is enlightening."<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr's elaboration of sin as pride and will-to-power provides useful building blocks for developing an understanding human nature that explains why humans behave ethically as they do. It provides an apologetic tool as it draws observations from common human experience, and suggests a way forward for further reflection.

### Sensuality

Unlike the sin of pride, sensuality seeks not so much to assert selfhood as to confirm self-love, as it indulges the individual in the drives and desires of nature. If pride

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<sup>58</sup>Carnell points out a significant point in Niebuhr's thought in need of great clarification. If no claims to final truth are valid, then Niebuhr's own claim that the *agape* of Jesus Christ is the norm for humanity must be called into question. Carnell states: "It would seem, therefore, that the sin is not so much that a claim to finality *per se* has been made, but rather that the wrong type of a claim has been advanced. *If this is not valid, then Niebuhr has no more right than his opponent to make a claim to finality; for a principle which undermines everything undermines itself also.*" See Carnell, 79.

<sup>59</sup>This comment was made with respect to the theological ferment of the sixties, but carries a continually valuable caveat which characterises Niebuhr's approach. See Albert H. van den Heuvel, "The Honest to God Debate in Ecumenical Perspective," *The Ecumenical Review* XVI (3, April 1964): 289. E. J. Carnell also warned early that "Conservatives must be careful not to define saving faith too narrowly." E. J. Carnell, *The Case for Biblical Christianity*, ed. Ronald H. Nash, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 123.

is sin rooted in spirit, sensuality is sin rooted in nature. Finding the anxiety of finitude unbearable, sensuality either seeks to enhance the ego, or to escape it completely. Yet, as sensuality is indulged, the anxiety only grows in increasing torment. Patterson summarised Niebuhr's description of the cycle in this way: "Sensuality begins with self-love or self-gratification. Futility soon ensues, and sensuality becomes self-escape in forms of indulgence that soon reach a point where they defeat their own ends. When a sensuous process is deified it proves disillusioning, and a plunge into unconsciousness is made."<sup>60</sup> As Carnell indicates, "the individual who tries to make a final alliance with the flesh will come to grief inevitably, for the elements in the union are incompatible. Spirit and flesh cannot finally marry."<sup>61</sup> The allusion to a Pauline description of the struggle between spirit and flesh makes adequate reference to the human refusal to acknowledge the very existence of such tension, in the midst of an indulgent sensuality.

It is unfortunate that Niebuhr did not elaborate the concept of sensuality to the same extent as the sin of pride. His inclusion of materialism, drunkenness, and sexual indulgence or perversions as sins of sensuality leaves many open avenues for understanding his social ethics, especially in the modern age where individuals are more interested in accumulating goods and experiences for themselves, out of intense self-love, to the neglect of society as a whole. Harlan Beckley has noted that this aspect of Niebuhr's analysis stands in relative isolation to the rest of his thought, since he never worked out its implications for justice as he did with the sin of pride. Niebuhr's neglect carries significant implications: "Had he integrated sin as an escape from freedom into his theory and conception of justice, Niebuhr might have had more to say about the dangers of passivity in the face of injustice." Beckley's observations carry particular relevance to the present study, as passivity is perceived as a particular weakness of the evangelical

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<sup>60</sup>Patterson, 93.

<sup>61</sup>Carnell, 82.

church. It is regretful that Niebuhr never worked out the implications of his thought in this regard. "Although he criticized Protestant orthodoxy and neo-orthodoxy for 'defeatism' in the early thirties and again in the second volume of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Niebuhr was far more concerned about injustice resulting from inordinate assertions of power than about injustice as a consequence of refusing to exercise our freedom to achieve relative justice."<sup>62</sup> The importance of following through on the relevance of this aspect of Niebuhr's thought will be elaborated in the final chapter of this paper.

### **Collective Egoism**

Although the will-to-power may be modified on an individual basis through faith, justice, and love, the problem is compounded on a collective level. On a collective level, sin is not conditioned by conscience, as individuals submit to an ethic of a lower common denominator. The insecurity, egotism, and greed which drive individual sin is significantly compounded on a group level. As groups make "unconditional claims for their conditioned values," they mistake their natural particularities such as race or nationhood for values of universal significance.<sup>63</sup> Pride causes them to ignore the injustice which may grow out of their assertions of power, and overlook the sinfulness inherent in their own systems. Niebuhr writes: "Whenever the group develops organs of will, as in the apparatus of the state, it seems to the individual to have become an independent centre of moral life. He will be inclined to bow to its pretensions and to acquiesce in its claims of authority, even when these do not coincide with his moral scruples or inclinations."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Beckley, 272-273.

<sup>63</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 213.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 208.

Groups lack the freedom for self-evaluation which emerges on an individual level through self-transcendence. Being unable to distinguish between healthy self-criticism and self-destructive inner conflict, moral rebels and criminals are treated together as enemies of the group system. For Niebuhr, collective egoism represents the very essence of sin:

Collective pride is thus 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. It can hardly be surprising that this form of human sin is also most fruitful of human guilt, that is of objective social and historical evil. In its whole range from pride of family to pride of nation, collective egoism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride.<sup>65</sup>

The problem appears insurmountable, but it is not hopeless. "Niebuhr contends that neither the individual nor the state can understand its true limitations until it sees itself from beyond itself, *i.e.*, until the voice of God is heard speaking to and against the ego." The implied Christian perspective which balances the time-eternity dialectic is "gained only within Biblical presuppositions."<sup>66</sup> Even though love and justice cannot bear on a group in the same way they do in the lives of individuals, grace allows a measure of love and justice to work out in society to the ethical betterment of the collective. The implications of the solution are worked out more fully in Chapter III. But the observation of the reality of collective pride, and its potential for modification is an important anthropological theme to be taken into consideration in the development of any social ethic. The question remains, however, how humans are to be considered responsible for sin if it is actually inevitable.

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<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 213.

<sup>66</sup>Carnell, 85.

### **Inevitability and Responsibility**

Following the declaration of Kierkegaard that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom," Niebuhr wanted to assert the significance of the observation that "the same freedom which tempts to anxiety also contains the ideal possibility of knowing God."<sup>67</sup> He believed that "if man knew, loved and obeyed God as the author and end of his existence, a proper limit would be set for his desires including the natural impulse of survival."<sup>68</sup> In reality, however, people do not acknowledge their creaturely dependence. As they assert their pride and power, they confirm the pre-existent condition of original sin.

Though he later regretted his use of the term, Niebuhr's understanding of original sin contributes to the formation of his contention of responsibility despite inevitability.<sup>69</sup> In Niebuhr's thought, the inevitability of sin is due not simply to the strength of temptation, but to a presupposed human condition. This precondition is present in the creation myth, because creation implies the dialectic of freedom and dependency, with its resultant anxiety which presents the temptation for sin. Without the temptation, sin would not exist, and without prior sin, temptation would not exist. Niebuhr points to the myth of the fall of the devil to argue for the precondition of sin as any assertion of self that grows out of freedom and finitude. Herein lies the paradox which renders sin inevitable, but not

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<sup>67</sup>Niebuhr cites Kierkegaard's *Begriff der Angst*, upon which he is thoroughly dependent for this analysis. He elaborates: "The anxiety of freedom leads to sin only if the prior sin of unbelief is assumed. This is the meaning of Kierkegaard's assertion that sin posits itself." Niebuhr is not content to adopt a purely existential understanding of sin as anxiety, as he includes the most important element of sin as rebellion against the loving will of God. See *Human Nature*, 252ff.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 253.

<sup>69</sup>See the preface of *Human Nature*. Niebuhr does not regret the content of his description of original sin, rather the use of the term which had little relevance for the modern mind. Thus, his intention does not represent a change in position so much as a desire to clarify the apologetic task in which he was engaged.

necessary. The freedom which lies in the self-transcending image of God leaves humanity with a choice, whereby humans are aware of their participation in sin, and thus do not escape accountability.

Hans Hofmann noted that "Niebuhr will never deny either the burden of sin or the freedom of man which is the first condition of responsibility."<sup>70</sup> If humanity could rationalise or educate its way out of sin, the inevitability of original sin would be denied, and if humanity was so utterly submerged beneath the marks of sin so as to obliterate the image of God, they could not be considered accountable for sin. According to Niebuhr, accountability for sin is confirmed by the conscience: "The fact of responsibility is attested by the feeling of remorse or repentance which follows the sinful action." It is important to notice that conscience does not establish guilt, but rather confirms it. As the self contemplates the sinful act, "it discovers that some degree of conscious dishonesty accompanied the act, which means that the self was not deterministically and blindly involved in it." The result of such contemplation will lead to remorse and repentance, which "are similar in their acknowledgement of freedom and responsibility and their implied assertion of it. They differ in the fact that repentance is the expression of freedom and faith while remorse is the expression of freedom without faith."<sup>71</sup> Though Niebuhr acknowledges the possible complacency which may emerge in the conscience through deception and habitual patterns of action, he maintains individual accountability for sin, arguing "that habitual sin can never destroy the uneasy conscience so completely as to

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<sup>70</sup>Hofmann, 197.

<sup>71</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 255. Niebuhr writes further regarding the difference between remorse and repentance: "The one is the 'Godly sorrow' of which St. Paul speaks, and the other is 'the sorrow of this world which worketh death.' It is, in other words, the despair into which sin transmutes the anxiety which precedes sin."

remove the individual from the realm of moral responsibility to the realm of unmoral nature."<sup>72</sup> Again, Hofmann offers a helpful summary of Niebuhr's thought:

Sin belongs to the unfathomable mystery of God, who never lets sinful man fall out of His hand nor from the domain of His seeking love. Else the God who is Almighty would not be also absolute love and would not be the only true and just judge. Man's conscience, which so long as it speaks at all testifies that man in his original state decreed by God is truly a person, and accuses him of perversion, is based upon this understanding of sin and proves its correctness. It is man, loved by God, loved in freedom and endowed with will, man at the meeting place of finiteness and freedom, of nature and spirit - it is only this man who can really sin. Sin is the final, almost unbelievable, denial by man of the basis of his own existence.<sup>73</sup>

Niebuhr's observations are helpful and insightful as they reinstate sin as rooted in the will of humanity, something which liberalism had gone to great lengths to deny. Indeed, his conclusions represent a great step forward for theological anthropology. At the same time, it must be admitted that "the final authority which Niebuhr bows to is not the Biblical witness, but rather the psychological experiences which men pass through when they analyse their own acts of wrongdoing."<sup>74</sup> The result is that the very depth of sin, which Niebuhr tries to establish, is denied, and the human conscience given greater autonomy as the locus of authority than is warranted, given Niebuhr's previous analysis. He argues the pre-existence of sin forms its inevitability within the will of humans, but

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<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 256.

<sup>73</sup>Hofmann, 197-198. Recognising Niebuhr's thought as not completely original, Hofmann reads "between the lines here the experience of a vital and honest man, an experience such as we find in Augustine's *Confessions*. The thinking parallels Luther's statement that by our power much is accomplished, surprisingly much, but not the whole. Just when we desire to do the whole, to complete our great and foolish rejection of our own potentiality as given and ordained by God, we fall helpless and hopeless, in our fall pulling down everything around us."

<sup>74</sup>Carnell, 89.

stops short of acknowledging sin as a constitutional deficiency.<sup>75</sup> On the contrary, he argues, finally, that the true essence of humanity is justice, expressed in love, and demonstrated in the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

### Original Justice

According to his understanding of the creation myth, Niebuhr does not hold to a temporal state of perfection prior to the fall.<sup>76</sup> He assigns such belief to a literal and false reading of the biblical account. Perfect essence is regarded as the true nature of humanity as God intended at creation, known only through the revelation of Jesus Christ, who displayed the true essence of human nature. For both natural and spiritual elements of human nature, there is a corresponding intended perfection. While natural law corresponds to the natural essence of humanity in its perfected state, love is the corresponding principle of perfection to the spirit. The corresponding elements of perfection are not only desirable for humanity, but they serve as its requirements, and are

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<sup>75</sup>Carnell's analysis is particularly interesting. He writes: "One of the most glaring lacunae in Niebuhr's system protrudes here. Niebuhr tells us very clearly why *sinning* (on his definition of sin) is inevitable - it is because men persistently refuse to remain within their appointed limits. But what Niebuhr does not oblige to explain with persuasion is why this *refusing* is inevitable. He rejects the notion that there is a sinfulness in the race which has come down through Adam through natural heredity - 'an Augustinian corruption,' in his words. But may it not actually be that man is far more constitutionally sinful than existentialism is willing to concede? How else can we explain the refusal of man to remain within his limits? When an automobile continually breaks down, one soon suspects that there is a constitutional deficiency in the machine. What, likewise, of man?" Carnell, 92. Carnell is correct in his criticism regarding the desirability of recognising sin as a constitutional deficiency. However, even though Niebuhr does not explicitly describe original sin as an inherent constitutional corruption, the notion is not completely foreign to his thought. Sin may not be seen as total destruction of essential nature, but it is regarded as a corruption. See *Human Nature*, 269, 275-276. In any case, Niebuhr certainly stands apart from his liberal colleagues who argue the virtues and potentialities of humanity, while he consistently reiterates the inevitable sinfulness of humanity.

<sup>76</sup>Cf. Pannenberg, n. 56.

possible because humanity's essential nature, though corrupted, is not destroyed by sin. Niebuhr is aware of the possibility that such concessions to human self-esteem may contribute to the sin of pride, yet he is anxious to correct the "errors" of the Protestant doctrine of total depravity, and the Catholic understanding of the *domum supernaturale*. The perfection of humanity's essential nature serves as law to individuals through self-transcendent memory of essence corrupted but not destroyed, a law not completely external to individuals, but "written on their hearts." Niebuhr recognises these laws are not simple possibilities for humanity, but rather they are to be understood as ultimate possibilities.

Love becomes the most significant moral requirement, because unlike any law or system of justice, it binds human spirit to human spirit, in a way that transcends natural particularities. "The law of love is thus a requirement of human freedom; and the freedom of the self and of the other both require it."<sup>77</sup> Love as the *justitia originalis* of human nature carries particularly demanding moral requirements, and represents the fulcrum of all of Niebuhr's theological and political writing:

In its freedom it constantly rises above. . . laws and rules and realizes that they are determined by contingent factors and that they fall short of the ultimate possibility of loving the neighbour "as thyself". A sense of justice may prompt men to organize legal systems. . . through which a general sense of obligation toward the needy neighbour is expressed. But no such system can leave the self satisfied when it faces particular needs among those who are the beneficiaries of such minimal schemes of justice. The freedom and uniqueness of the other also raise moral requirements above any scheme of justice. . . . Love is thus the end term of any system of morals. It is the moral requirement in which all schemes of justice are fulfilled and negated. . . . It does not carefully arbitrate between the needs of the self and of the other, since it meets the needs of the other without concern for the self.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 295.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

To what degree the original righteousness of love may be realised in the history of sinful humanity becomes Niebuhr's obvious concern, to which he directs his attention in *Human Destiny*, volume II of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Those aspects of Niebuhr's anthropology addressed here retain unique and enduring relevance to social ethics. The notion of approaching theology from below offers apologetic strength, though appeals to common human experience become less useful in a postmodern age, unless the human story is told from a narrative approach. This is possible using Niebuhr's anthropological paradigm, considering the broad philosophical history he addresses. Humanity as the starting point of theology relates well to a world which is consumed by reflection and appreciation of itself. Likewise, Niebuhr properly elaborates the existential problem of human existence as rooted in the dialectical tension between humans as bearers of freedom in God's image, and humans as dependent and finite creatures. But Niebuhr's greatest strength is his recognition of the human condition of sin, which holds certain anthropocentric tendencies in check. Sin as pride, will-to-power, and sensuality applies itself well to a social ethic which sees misappropriation and use of power as a significant human problem, and the indulgence of self-love as a significant factor in the neglect of social ethics on behalf of certain groups and individuals. Likewise, the notion that groups are deceived by sin to imagine their particularities to be universally valid and true, leads to a call for confession and repentance. Niebuhr's establishment of responsibility for sin despite inevitability offers an important anthropological reevaluation of relativistic tendencies in ethics, and suggests the notion of spiritual judgement or accountability, related to original justice in humans. Love as the expression of original justice offers a way forward for anthropology in social ethics, and its full meaning in the *agape* of Christ will be revealed in an examination of Niebuhr's second volume, *Human Destiny*.

## CHAPTER III

### **The Possibility of Justice: Considerations From the Second Volume of Niebuhr's Anthropological Elaboration**

Leaving his audience with a sense of need as a result of the intense sinfulness of humanity outlined in *Human Nature*, Niebuhr continued to provide solutions to the problems raised in that volume. Two years after publication of volume I, Niebuhr offered volume II, *Human Destiny*, to the world for consideration. Its themes of Christology and eschatology introduced the solutions of grace and love into the human situation, as revelation and fulfilment. Bob Patterson has noted that Niebuhr's "doctrine of grace has been denied, distorted, or neglected by critics, both friendly and unfriendly."<sup>1</sup> Such mistreatment is true of much of the theology portrayed in Niebuhr's second volume, which has received little attention compared to his doctrine of sin.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, an examination of this volume illuminates a study of Niebuhr's anthropology by providing a solution to the existential problem of humanity's sin, appropriated through the revelation of Christ, and lived out in community through an ethic of love. This chapter will examine Niebuhr's anthropological thought centred on two themes, Christology and eschatology,

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<sup>1</sup>Patterson, 102.

<sup>2</sup>Again, Patterson writes, "The early writings of Niebuhr were far more concerned with an analysis of man's sins than they were about God's grace. His early concern was to shatter the idols of man's self-esteem. The 'growth in grace' in his books came later, finding systematic treatment in volume 2 of his Gifford Lectures. But his treatment of sin in volume 1 was lauded and criticised so extravagantly that it overshadowed the second volume when it appeared two years later." Patterson, 102.

and will relate possibilities for love and justice to the Kingdom of God. Niebuhr's theology suffers here from an apparent lack of doctrinal understanding of the Holy Spirit and ecclesiology, and his symbolic portrayal of biblical truth leaves his method less than satisfying. Nevertheless, his elaboration of the significance of grace and revelation, kingdom and power, for the socio-ethical attitudes and actions of humanity provides many helpful insights in the construction of an evangelical social ethic which takes justification and judgement into equal consideration.

### **Christology**

Niebuhr's Christological presentation was not particularly systematic, but significant to his thought nonetheless. By his own admission, Christology eventually became central to his thought and crucial to his anthropology, though he never elaborated it dogmatically.<sup>3</sup> Interpreting the revelation of Christ in history in relation to his time-eternity dialectic, and from the existential perspective of its meaning for humanity, Niebuhr concluded with an understanding of Christology as it offered a norm and a basis for ethical striving. In the tradition of the Reformation, Niebuhr "moved from the benefits of Christ to his promises, from what Christ does to us to what he is for us."<sup>4</sup> Hans Hofmann has noted that Niebuhr's Christology was intended to be nothing more than an analysis of the truth about *Christus pro nobis* and *Christus in nobis*, and yet Paul Lehmann shows how a

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<sup>3</sup>Niebuhr writes: "The situation is that I have come gradually to realise that it is possible to look at the human situation without illusion and without despair only from the standpoint of the Christ-revelation. It has come to be more and more the ultimate truth. . . . I have come to know with Pascal that only in 'simplicity of the Gospel' is it possible to measure the full 'dignity' and 'misery' of man. Thus the Christological center of my thought has become more explicit and more important. But. . . I have never pretended to be a theologian, and so I have elaborated the Christological theme only in the context of inquiries about human nature and human history." See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Response," in Kegley and Bretall, 439.

<sup>4</sup>Patterson, 105.

rereading of Niebuhr's theology from the perspective of his Christology reveals "a fresh and rewarding discovery of an intrinsic unity."<sup>5</sup> As Lehmann has made clear, one would not expect an extended treatment of Christology in a treatise on human nature and human destiny. Nevertheless, in Niebuhr's examination of what Christ has done in and for humanity, as the second Adam and as the Son of God, the anthropological significance becomes clear. "Plainly, if unobtrusively, Niebuhr's account of Jesus Christ is the presupposition of his anthropology."<sup>6</sup>

As for his theology in general, Niebuhr's Christology grew out of a rejection of liberal Protestant formulations of optimism and triumphalism, which left the problem of evil either defeated or unresolved. It was his concern to challenge such simplified notions of history, which do justice neither to the power of love nor the seriousness of sin. Niebuhr wrote:

If the revelation of history's meaning is given through vicarious suffering of a guiltless individual or nation this means one of two things. It may mean that vicarious love is a force in history which gradually gains the triumph over evil and therefore ceases to be tragic. This is the optimistic interpretation which liberal Christianity has given the Cross of Christ. According to this interpretation the power of love in history, as symbolized by the Cross, begins tragically but ends triumphantly. It overcomes evil. But the idea of the suffering servant in history may also mean that vicarious love remains defeated and tragic in history; but has its triumph in the knowledge that it is ultimately right and true. Such a tragic conception still leaves the problem of the evil in history unresolved.<sup>7</sup>

For Niebuhr, the concepts of revelation and history are inseparable. History gives humanity its freedom and its accompanying sinful assertions of self-interest, and at the same time bears the redeeming activity of God. Hans Hofmann observed, "Because

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<sup>5</sup>See Hofmann, 204f.; Paul Lehmann, "The Christology of Reinhold Niebuhr," in Kegley and Bretall, 253.

<sup>6</sup>Lehmann, 254.

<sup>7</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 45.

history is the bearer of God's redeeming activity moving towards its goal, and also at the same time the bearer of man's self-will and rebellion, intolerable tension exists between the redemptive will of God and the sinful will of man, between grace and sin."<sup>8</sup> Dialectical tension must remain the motif for interpreting the action of Jesus Christ in history, which implicitly rejects liberal misrepresentations of the human situation. Any interpretation which does not take freedom, sin, or history seriously "must be judged inadequate and false not only on the grounds of biblical Christology but above all from the viewpoint of realistic anthropology and ethics." If Christ is nothing more than the "ideal man" whose perfect example may be emulated, then "in the background there lies an idealistic and optimistic conception of man, who is in the last resort self-sufficient and who is capable (in the essence of his humanity reached in Christ) of being himself the ultimate ideal and norm."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus Christ reveals to humanity the law of love, which transcends history, even as it enters history. It is a super-historical norm in the sense that it reveals the infinite possibilities of human life, which yet remain unattainable by humanity in history as it consistently falls short of the revealed ideal. In this Christological explanation, Niebuhr shows "there is in the human situation both more and less than was imagined by the all too simple anthropology which is at the background of liberal Christology. . . . By its lineality the humanizing conception of Jesus disturbs this dialectic of human existence."<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr maintains the dialectic with his ethical interpretation of the Cross of Christ. Here, the connection between revelation and history is best illustrated, as it keeps the human dialectic in proper perspective. Hans Hofmann summarises Niebuhr's thought on this

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<sup>8</sup>Hofmann, 204.

<sup>9</sup>J. M. Lochman, "Realism in Niebuhr's Christology," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 11 (1958): 256.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

point: "Only to man in true relatedness to Himself does God in Christ reveal Himself as He is, as the God who in His redeeming love claims man for Himself in order that man may carry that love with its restoring power into society and so be directed toward the goal at the end of the days. . . . Only in that relatedness can man comprehend the true meaning of his own existence and all of history."<sup>11</sup>

Even as Niebuhr sought to refute the claims of liberal Christology, he was equally intent to correct the 'mistakes' of the orthodox understanding of Jesus Christ. Although he moved in an increasingly orthodox direction throughout the development of his Christology, Niebuhr refuted orthodoxy's expression of Christology in metaphysical categories. "According to Niebuhr, the orthodox dogma holds in contrast to the Liberal conception a basic truth when it asserts that Jesus Christ is the fullness but also the transcendent norm of humanity," wrote J. M. Lochman in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*. "But even this dogma misrepresents the final truth when it tries to express the symbolic and dialectical truth about the revelation of God in the terms of Greek metaphysics."<sup>12</sup> For Niebuhr's existential thinking, such a theological model reduced faith and overemphasised human capacity to know the unknowable. Niebuhr believed that whenever attempts are made to express Christological truth in metaphysical terms, "this means, in effect, that an ultimate truth, transcending all human wisdom and apprehended by faith, is transmuted into a truth of human wisdom and incorporated into a metaphysical system."<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr's goal became the successful interpretation of the "metaphysical dogma" about the two natures of Christ in "more personal ethical concepts." It was important for Niebuhr that Jesus was sinless, but especially so on the level of his humanity, as he who was more than human revealed the "impossible possibility," thus depicting the

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<sup>11</sup>Hofmann, 205.

<sup>12</sup>Lochman, 258-259.

<sup>13</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 62.

"basic dialectic character of our situation. It is anthropologically relevant and for that reason more comprehensible to the modern man than metaphysical concepts;" a statement which points again to Niebuhr's apologetic and ethical concerns over his desire to offer dogmatic constructions.<sup>14</sup>

As a presupposition of his anthropology, Niebuhr's Christology is built upon the same existential methodology. His rejection of metaphysics in favour of ethics is apparent throughout his Christological elaboration, and he specifically states his preference in this respect:

Theologies continue to elaborate systems which either claim the authority of the Cross for the relative norms of history or which raise the perfection of the Cross and the sinlessness of Christ to a position of irrelevance. But meanwhile Christian faith has always understood, beyond all canons of common sense and all metaphysical speculations, that the perfection of the Cross represents the fulfilment- and the end -of historic ethics.<sup>15</sup>

This abandonment of metaphysics in favour of ethics represents both strengths and weaknesses of Niebuhr's thought. In one sense, it sharpens his focus in the direction he intends, but it leads to a serious neglect of biblical revelation and historical Protestant theology regarding the meaning of the incarnation and atonement.

Despite Niebuhr's reaction to orthodox Christology, Paul Lehmann argues somewhat plausibly that Niebuhr gradually moved from "a less and less implicitly to a more and more explicitly evangelical Christology."<sup>16</sup> From the very earliest writings, Lehmann suggests, Niebuhr "concentrated upon the gulf between Christianity and contemporary culture and upon the anthropological consequences of that gulf." For

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<sup>14</sup>See Lochman, 261.

<sup>15</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 75.

<sup>16</sup>See Lehmann, 263ff. "Evangelical" in this sense refers to the universal nature and relevance of the Christ event.

Niebuhr, "neither orthodox nor liberal interpretations of the Christian faith have given relevant expression to the insights of Christian faith, so that its truth and power have been obscured."<sup>17</sup> In his twentieth-century version of "the benefits of Christ," Niebuhr relied on a Liberal Protestant framework to underscore the contemporary relevance of Christianity in general and Christology in particular. But true to his Reformed heritage, he eventually shifted from a concern for the relevance of Christ to an interest in the truth of Christ, "and in so doing made contemporary sense of the Christological insights of orthodoxy." Although Niebuhr started with "the benefits of Christ," this beginning ". . . [gave] contemporary meaning and effectiveness to the *Christus in nobis*."<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr's Reformed roots played a role in keeping him theologically grounded:

Unlike the Christology of medieval and Protestant scholasticism, the Reformers broke fresh ground for understanding and interpreting the person and work of Jesus Christ by stressing the link between Christology and anthropology. Niebuhr's Christology stands in this tradition and shares its movement from the benefits to the promise, from the *Christus in nobis* to the *Christus pro nobis*, from what Christ is and does in and to us to what He does and is for us.<sup>19</sup>

The connection between anthropology and Christology is maintained through Niebuhr's conceptual shift, though its point of reference has changed. As Lehmann sums up, "The turning point in the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr is the point at which the concern for the relevance of Christianity is stated less and less with reference to the human situation to which the Christian faith is relevant and more and more with reference to the truth of the Christian faith by which the human situation is illumined and resolved."<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr's shift leads him to attempt to interpret humanity in light of Christology, and once

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 263-264.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 264.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 265.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

*Christus in nobis* is rediscovered, he is able to move once more to the relevance of *Christus pro nobis*.

Jesus Christ as the second Adam presupposes a first Adam. What is to be known about the perfection of humanity in a first Adam can be known only as Christ has revealed it, since perfection of humanity is never realised in history. Niebuhr interprets the orthodox understanding of Christ as human and divine in terms of the "paradoxical relation of a divine *agape*, which stoops to conquer, and the human *agape*, which rises above history in a sacrificial act."<sup>21</sup> This explanation of the doctrine preserves the dialectic of the possibilities and limitations of history. As the possibilities and limitations of history are revealed and affirmed in their significance for humanity, themes of grace and atonement become particularly relevant to Niebuhr's anthropology.

Niebuhr understood grace in a two-fold nature. It is both truth and power: truth as it confronts humanity with the "impossible" ideal in Christ; power as that which makes the truth "possible" in history. Christ as the second Adam revealed the perfection of human nature, which is part of human essence, but impossible within history which involves freedom and finitude. Christ as the Son of God revealed the divine love of God whose grace offers forgiveness for sin and empowerment to strive for proximate justice even in the midst of sinful conditions, out of gratitude for God's great love. Spiritual regeneration is the resulting process from acknowledgement of Christ as second Adam and Son of God. Niebuhr centred on three aspects of Galatians 2:20: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me. . . ." In this verse he saw an explanation of the process of regeneration, wherein the converted self confesses new life as the result of divinely infused power. "Niebuhr maintained that the new life, a product of the grace of God, is a reality; but the new life is never a fully accomplished reality. It is

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<sup>21</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 71.

fully accomplished in intention rather than achievement. Grace does not completely remove the contradiction between God and man."<sup>22</sup>

Wanting both to support and deny the sovereignty of divine grace, Niebuhr preserved human responsibility by "interpreting God's electing grace and man's free will as an existential relation. He said that the relation cannot be subjected to a precise logical analysis. Free will as a force working independently of grace is true on one level of experience (the sinful self), while God's grace as the exclusive source of human redemption is true on another level (faith)."<sup>23</sup> In this way, existential conversion "is theoretically as repetitious in the individual as the experience of the 'fall' itself. . . the dialectic is broken if the conversion experience is not kept as much a marching of truth within history as the experience of falling."<sup>24</sup> As Niebuhr wrote, "The shattering of the self is a perennial process and occurs in every spiritual experience in which the self is confronted with the claims of God, and becomes conscious of its sinful, self-centred state."<sup>25</sup> Here, Niebuhr departed from orthodox understandings of conversion, which "the classic Reformers taught with singleness of mind. . . was a unique experience in man and was not repeated."<sup>26</sup> This error is due, in part, to Niebuhr's limited view of the atonement.

Niebuhr is quick to dismiss liberal understandings of the atonement, which misinterpret the meaning of the incarnation, and the need of humanity.<sup>27</sup> But in Niebuhr's

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<sup>22</sup>Patterson, 114.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>24</sup>Carnell, 189.

<sup>25</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, n.5, 109.

<sup>26</sup>Carnell, 190.

<sup>27</sup>Niebuhr accuses Hastings Rashdall of being "a typical Anglican rationalist," by undermining the importance and the significance of the atonement. *Human Destiny*, 59. Cf. Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*, (London: 1919). This volume upholds an exemplarist theory of atonement, rejecting substitutionary theories as incompatible with modern conceptions of justice.

thinking, "there can be no simple abrogation of the wrath of God by the mercy of God." It is a complex notion whereby "the wrath of God is the world in its essential structure reacting against the sinful corruptions of that structure; it is the law of life as love, which the egotism of man defies, a defiance which leads to the destruction of life. The mercy of God represents the ultimate freedom of God above his own law; but not the freedom to abrogate the law." This mystery is grasped only as God's justice and forgiveness are recognised together as one. Knowledge of the divine mercy through God's justice and forgiveness brings humanity to despair, without which "there is no possibility of the contrition which appropriates the divine forgiveness." Moreover,

It is in this contrition and in this appropriation of divine mercy and forgiveness that the human situation is fully understood and overcome. In this experience man understands himself in his finiteness, realizes the guilt of his efforts to escape his insufficiency and dependence and lays hold upon a power beyond himself which both completes his incompleteness and purges him of his false and vain efforts at self-completion.<sup>28</sup>

For Niebuhr, this appropriation of righteousness, through human realisation of guilt and reception of forgiveness through grace, represents the significance of the atonement. This conception stands in critical contrast to other explanations.

Niebuhr especially criticises historical orthodox positions, which he accuses of falling prey to Greek metaphysics, to the peril of faith and existential understanding. It is Niebuhr's misunderstanding of the nature of sin which leads to this somewhat truncated version of the atonement. If sin is not something which humans do *against* God, then there is no need of a Christ who reconciles them metaphysically *and* existentially *to* God. In Carnell's view, Niebuhr's Christology reveals that he does not really take sin seriously at all:

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<sup>28</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 56-57.

Man is only in an existential predicament. He does not stand under the wrath of a severe God into whose hands it is a fearful thing to fall. The transition from sinfulness to eternal salvation is rather painless. Sin will easily be forgiven, for God will take all of our sins into and upon Himself. Niebuhr speaks very often of judgement, but his descriptions are always informed with a half-hearted liberalism. God is pictured in a way man *hopes* that He is, and not according to the way Jesus Christ warned in advance that He actually *is*.<sup>29</sup>

The result is that Niebuhr does not faithfully balance the dialectic of God's justice and mercy. For in the end, God's justice is swallowed up in his mercy, and the need of humanity for a radical, metaphysical solution to sin is watered down to a simple recognition of human finitude. At this point, Lochman insists that we encounter Niebuhr "at the frontier of religious idealism dressed up as 'realism' and in the Christological sphere we are near a certain form of docetism."<sup>30</sup>

Niebuhr's Christology as it appears in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* certainly represents a maturation of his thought from earlier writings. Niebuhr himself wrote in 1939 that his early Christological thought contained all of the "theological windmills" against which he was then fighting so vigorously.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, it must be argued that he never fully recovered from those early liberal influences on his thinking, as Lochman has demonstrated convincingly. Lochman points out significant weaknesses of Niebuhr's Christology which remain central to his analysis throughout its development. While Niebuhr's dialectic "has some justice done to it by traditional Christology," there are "traces of a methodological approach which make it questionable from a theological point of view." The major weakness of Niebuhr's methodology is that its symbolism leads to formulation where "we find in Jesus Christ an illustration, a reflection of the general

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<sup>29</sup>Carnell, 201.

<sup>30</sup>Lochman, 258.

<sup>31</sup>See Reinhold Niebuhr, "Ten Years That Shook My World," *Christian Century* 56 (April 26, 1939): 542.

problems of anthropology and ethics rather than a unique and concrete event in which the real God in the real man intervenes in our history."<sup>32</sup>

Niebuhr rejected outright Barth's denial of the *Anknuepfungspunkt*, which Niebuhr believed "exists in man by virtue of the residual element of *justitia originalis* in his being."<sup>33</sup> Moreover he wrote: "The relation between the truth, apprehended in God's self-disclosure, and the truth about life which men deduce through a rational organisation of their experience, might best be clarified through the analogy of our knowledge of other persons." Niebuhr's affection for analogous reasoning became very apparent here. Even so, Niebuhr maintained that the other self cannot be understood in the depths of personality unless he speaks. "Only the 'word' of the other self, coming out of the depth or height of his self-transcendence can finally disclose the other "I" as subject and not merely object of our knowledge. Only this communication can give the final clue to the peculiar behaviour of the other."<sup>34</sup> The revelation in Christ is acknowledged, but its relevance reduced to what it reveals of humanity, rather than what it means for God. "For Niebuhr Christology is relevant so far as it explains this [dialectical] view of world and of man. In so far as it contradicts this it is rejected."<sup>35</sup> In this way, Niebuhr consistently

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<sup>32</sup>Lochman, 256-257. While Patterson argues, "Niebuhr eventually came to the place in his Christology where he emphasized equally well the truth of the Christian faith and the relevance of this truth to the human situation," (Patterson, 105), it seems questionable whether such a dialectical balance was ever explicitly reached. This is at least partly due to Niebuhr's failure to elaborate his doctrinal understanding in a more systematic fashion. To be fair, his intention was always to provide a foundation and motivation for human behaviour rather than offer elaborate doctrinal explanations. But Niebuhr's symbolic interpretation of the Cross-Resurrection event does little justice to his understanding of history and its significance as a solution for the human situation.

<sup>33</sup>Niebuhr regarded Brunner as being closer to the truth on this issue, as he engaged in vigorous debate with Barth. Niebuhr conceded that Barth was successful in pointing out inconsistencies in Brunner's work, but argued that alone did not prove him wrong. See *Human Destiny*, 64.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>35</sup>Lochman, 262.

based his Christological analysis on existential observation, adjusting the orthodox understanding as deemed necessary, rather than allowing the historical witness to stand as a corrective to his own theology.

Overall, Niebuhr's Christology remains unsatisfying and unconvincing. As for most Christologies of Niebuhr's time, "the price paid for a more plastic and to the modern man more comprehensible formulation of the fundamental meaning of history is too high."<sup>36</sup> Especially significant for ethics is Niebuhr's binitarian approach to theology which neglects the ongoing role of the Holy Spirit in the world, particularly in relation to efforts of justice. This concern will be addressed more fully later in relation to Niebuhr's understanding of the Kingdom of God. An appropriation of Niebuhr's concept of grace as truth and power may yet prove helpful in an evangelical ethical construction, but his overall understanding of incarnation and atonement leaves the problem of sin unsolved, and thus the potential of the struggle for justice is weakened, if not obliterated.

### **Eschatology and Ethics**

Robin Scroggs has written that the interpretation of ethics will ultimately depend on the kind of eschatology chosen as the model.<sup>37</sup> This has proven true from Albert Schweitzer's "consistent eschatology" to C. H. Dodd's "realized eschatology" and beyond. For Niebuhr, his views of history, Christology, and eschatology, are all dependent one on the other, as they together relate to and assist his understanding of the human situation. Getting from Niebuhr's conception of sin and justification, Christ and divine love, to an obligatory social ethic, necessitates travelling *via* his eschatology. Niebuhr's eschatological presentation as it validates human action within history, and yet supersedes

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 263.

<sup>37</sup>Robin Scroggs, "The New Testament and Ethics: How Do We Get From There to Here?" *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 2:4 (Winter 1984): 79.

it with an unattainable ideal and transcendent culmination yields most helpful results with respect to anthropology and ethics. The challenge provided by the expectant and empowered interim between Christ's appearance as the fulfilment of history, and the *parousia* which represents the end of history gives value to historical efforts which strive for justice, while acknowledging the limited nature such efforts will have. It also satisfies the biblical eschatological requirement which sees ultimate fulfilment of justice and righteousness as possessed and given only by God in the culmination of history (beyond history), without negating human responsibility to approximate such ideals within history. Niebuhr's eschatology is the place where anthropology finds all of its meaning with respect to the revelation of Christ, and the ethical requirement of love revealed in the Cross. It maintains the dialectics of history, humanity, and God, understanding that all historical fulfilment is in God alone. The symbols of second coming, last judgement, and resurrection give meaning to the interim period where humans are responsible to display love in societal relationships in light of the divinely-revealed essential nature of humanity. The dialectic between what is possible for humanity and what is required, reveals the Kingdom of God in humans whose uneasy consciences validate the reality of the Cross, and atonement for sin.

Hans Hofmann sums up Niebuhr's view of eschatology in relation to his other doctrines quite succinctly in the following paragraph:

In His creative love, God made man a creature in His own image, fitted for loving in freedom. Man in his obstinate self-seeking tore himself loose from love. The man, so ruined and lost in chaos of his own making, God restored through His redeeming act in Jesus Christ. Finally it is God who in the fulfilment of historical time, in His final judgement and His final redemption ends the confusion and torture of human sin. By and from this end, God gives now faith and trust to the man who surrenders himself to Him. God illuminates history with a meaning given

by this end and fulfilment. So God establishes the individual unity of man's being and action, here and now, under the light of this last judgement.<sup>38</sup>

Niebuhr viewed the difference between end as goal and end as extermination as a key to eschatological understanding. He used the terms *telos* and *finis* to describe these two concepts, which are beyond history, but give history its meaning.

The interim between *telos* and *finis* adequately provides an understanding of Niebuhr's "impossible possibility," validating the need to strive for justice in society as the temporal expression of eternal divine love. The tension between revealed perfection and attainable, proximate ethics provides a way of understanding the failure of humanity to achieve love on a socio-political level, and provides further evidence for Niebuhr's refutation of utopian social systems. At the same time, if the doctrines of second coming, last judgement, and resurrection are understood strictly in a symbolic sense, even the depth of meaning such symbols impart to history will seem to fall short of the fullness of these doctrines provided by orthodox Christianity. Understanding their "symbolic" meaning for existential experience is helpful, but it lacks a further dimension whereby the eternal interacts with history metaphysically as well as existentially, making these symbols much more serious in light of eternity, and also lending increased meaning to history as interim.

Niebuhr was correct in his assertion that the eschatologically-revealed nature of God forms the primary ethical sanction. This view stood in direct contrast to other popularly-held notions of ethics in relation to eschatology. Albert Schweitzer argued, for example, that Jesus believed in the immediate future realisation of the Kingdom.<sup>39</sup> In this case, "ethics can only have occupied a subsidiary place in his thinking, as governing the

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<sup>38</sup>Hofmann, 225.

<sup>39</sup>Cf. Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: Black, 1925).

brief interim between the present and the anticipated apocalypse of the Kingdom."<sup>40</sup> In Schweitzer's understanding of "interim," not only were the eschatological views held by Jesus mistaken, but the interim ethics are not to be considered normative, and "are invalid for determining proper behaviour" today.<sup>41</sup> Some have come to Schweitzer's defence, arguing that he "was not advocating that the content of Jesus ethic was derived from his belief in the Kingdom, rather that the impetus from the urgency of repentance was due to the nearness of the end."<sup>42</sup> In any case, this notion is contrasted by Niebuhr's symbolic interpretation of last judgement, which stands over and at the end of history at all times, making the ethical task an urgent and necessary one. In this way, Niebuhr maintained the urgent nature of the interim while still holding onto its reality in the present, and through all of history from the *telos* to the *finis*.

Niebuhr's view also protected him from the type of incomplete eschatology which C. H. Dodd elaborated.<sup>43</sup> Dodd's "realized eschatology" freed ethics from the time constraints placed on them by Schweitzer. For Dodd, "Jesus' ethic is a moral idea given in absolute terms and grounded in fundamental, timeless, religious principles, for the Kingdom of God is the coming of the eternal into the temporal."<sup>44</sup> So far, Niebuhr would agree. But Dodd contended that eschatology essentially fails to play a significant role for ethics, and ethics can dispense with eschatology all together. Since the Kingdom was fully realised in the appearance of Jesus, the eschatological element is no longer

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<sup>40</sup>Bruce Chilton and J. I. H. MacDonald, *Jesus and the Ethics of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 7.

<sup>41</sup>See Ronald Russell, "Eschatology and Ethics in 1 Peter," *The Evangelical Quarterly* XLVII:2 (April-June 1975): 78.

<sup>42</sup>Hiers, cited by Douglas Elzell, "Eschatology and Ethics in the New Testament," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* XXII:2 (Spring 1980): 76.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. C. H. Dodd, "The Kingdom of God has Come," *Expository Times* 48 (1936-37): 138-42.

<sup>44</sup>See George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 121.

relevant. This is easily contrasted with Niebuhr's understanding, whereby the ethical ideal stands above and at the end of history in judgement of human actions. Moreover, the Kingdom of God in humanity bears out the truth of these symbols through the conviction of conscience, heightened because of the eschatological reality of the Kingdom of God. For Niebuhr, social ethics are impossible without eschatology.

George Eldon Ladd has argued that Jesus' ethics had a measure of both continuity and discontinuity with the Law as he reinterpreted it by his own authority.<sup>45</sup> He showed respect for the Law, but the arrival of the Kingdom challenged its interpretation and understanding. In this sense, the Kingdom of God has been "realized" in history, in the person of Jesus, but contrary to Dodd's thinking, eschatology continues to provide the framework for ethics because the Kingdom awaits final consummation. Therefore, Ladd contended "that Jesus' ethics can be best interpreted in terms of the dynamic concept of God's rule which has already manifested itself in his person but will come to consummation only in the eschatological hour."<sup>46</sup> Ladd concluded, "The essential righteousness of the Kingdom, since it is a righteousness of the heart, is actually attainable, qualitatively, if not quantitatively. In its fullness it awaits the coming of the eschatological Kingdom; but in its essence it can be realised here and now, in this age."<sup>47</sup> Although it must be acknowledged that Niebuhr's actual view of what constitutes Christian ethics would differ somewhat from Ladd's, it is clear that the biblical view of the eschatological ethical sanction is maintained in both cases. Niebuhr would heartily agree with the notion of qualitative ethical realisation in an interim period between the realisation and fulfilment of the Kingdom of God.

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<sup>45</sup>For this interpretation, see George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974).

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 283.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 294.

Amos Wilder is another scholar who has written extensively on the topic of ethics and eschatology.<sup>48</sup> He argued convincingly for the intimate and necessary connection between both subjects: "Jesus speaks as though the *present* Kingdom of God presupposes a different relation between man and man, and man and God, and therefore a different ethic. . . . And in so far as the Kingdom is already come, a new order of relationships and responsibilities is offered."<sup>49</sup> In this respect, eschatology becomes the very foundation of Christian ethics, as it was for Niebuhr. Moreover, Wilder suggested that the essential sanction for righteousness is the nature of God, revealed eschatologically in the person and ministry of Christ. He described the concept of judgement as being closely related to the essential sanction, but itself forming only a formal, secondary sanction. Niebuhr would subscribe to this understanding, with love serving as the essential sanction for righteousness, as revealed in Christ. Judgement, standing beyond history, provides a constant secondary sanction as well, reminding the conscience of the rule of God, through his Kingdom which awaits final consummation. Niebuhr, in this case, would not include individual ethics in the discussion, but would focus strictly on the social ethical sanction demanded by love and expressed through justice. The character of God, and God's judgement need not be seen as separate essential or secondary ethical sanctions, rather, the fact of judgement reveals something of the character of God's justice and righteousness. In this sense, the two concepts become inseparable, and the primary ethical motivation remains the character of God, which was revealed for Niebuhr in the *agape* of the Cross. In any case, it may be concluded that the realisation and the consummation of the Kingdom together form one inseparable, essential sanction for ethics, as Niebuhr argued.

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<sup>48</sup>See especially Amos Wilder, *Eschatology and Ethics* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978).

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 147.

Liberation theologians seem to have borrowed heavily from Niebuhr's view of eschatology. Juan Bonino makes clear his belief that "an eschatological faith makes it possible for the Christian to invest his life historically in the building of a temporary and imperfect order with the certainty that neither he nor his effort is meaningless or lost."<sup>50</sup> Leonardo Boff speaks of the Kingdom of God as a metaphor for a "transcendent reality which is the divine salvation of human beings."<sup>51</sup> Many liberation theologians adhere to a dialectical understanding of Kingdom and history. But many have not heeded Niebuhr's caveats closely enough to avoid falling into the traps of immanentism and utopianism.<sup>52</sup> Niebuhr warned that no mere political-ideological movement was capable of obtaining perfect justice within history. Niebuhr's dialectic always maintained a proper balance between God's immanence and transcendence, and the ability to achieve this provides direction to any enterprise in social ethics which seeks to be faithful to the biblical account, and to orthodox Christianity.

A major weakness of Niebuhr's eschatology, however, is revealed in his understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God. This aspect of his thought is not completely clear, as he offers no distinct definition of what constitutes the Kingdom. It may be derived from his discussion of the Kingdom and justice, that he embraces an Augustinian understanding of the eschatological Kingdom, toward which all of humanity moves, under the grace of God. Niebuhr is not so naive as to think that the Kingdom is ever achieved by a sinful humanity, but he sees the institution of laws and use of politics as

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<sup>50</sup>Juan Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age*, (London: SPCK, 1975), 152.

<sup>51</sup>Leonardo Boff, *Faith on the Edge*, trans. Robert Barr (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1989), 146.

<sup>52</sup>Referring to the dialectical tension between the "already" and the "not yet" of the Kingdom of God, John Stott writes, "An overemphasis on the 'already' leads to triumphalism, the claim to perfection. . . which belongs only to the consummated kingdom, the 'not yet'." See John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1986), 240.

tools which move humanity toward the Kingdom in increments of history.<sup>53</sup> Niebuhr's argument seems particularly self-defeating here, since the notion of the sinfulness of humanity, expressed through collective egoism, is somewhat overlooked if humanity is progressing toward an improved existence. Niebuhr is eager to point out that his is not a view of human progress toward some utopian future, yet even the use of laws to promote justice assumes the human ability to manipulate history toward positive goals. Of course, Niebuhr's doctrine of the image of God and original justice discussed in Chapter II, combined with the grace of God in Christ, allow the possibility of improvement and progress. But his proposals regarding the application of balance-of-power theories and systems of democracy, themselves fall prey to human assertions of sin. Niebuhr's application, perhaps more than his theology, needs to be updated.

Before proper application of Niebuhr's eschatology can be made, his view of the Kingdom of God requires some clarification and correction.<sup>54</sup> Although Niebuhr does not equate the Kingdom with the world, neither does he distinguish it from the world. He is correct in his assertion that the Kingdom stands in tension between realisation and consummation, but he neglects to point out that it is the Kingdom, not the world, which is moving in anticipation of future perfection. The world is not to be considered evil, but neither is it to be equated with the Kingdom.<sup>55</sup> Niebuhr would agree with such a statement, but he does not make his position altogether clear. Again, his refusal to deal in ontological categories means he limits his understanding of the Kingdom to human conscience and experience.

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<sup>53</sup>See Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 244-286.

<sup>54</sup>For a particularly helpful biblical exposition of the meaning of the Kingdom of God, see G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986).

<sup>55</sup>George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed., ed. Donald A. Hagner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993): 51-52.

Part of Niebuhr's failure to clarify the distinction between the Kingdom and the world is rooted in his neglect of pneumatology and ecclesiology, and how they bear on the human situation as he describes it. He mentions his belief that it is the Holy Spirit who brings about repentance and faith, but he does not elaborate the role of the Spirit working through the Kingdom to bring about transformations of humanity.<sup>56</sup> Nor does he specify how the Holy Spirit works through the church to confront the world with the realities of the Kingdom of God. Contrary to Niebuhr's belief, it is not in humanity but in the church, where God meets the world in Christ, through the power of his Holy Spirit.

These weaknesses bear particular relevance when Niebuhr's application is taken into consideration. He would be the first to acknowledge that his concepts of balance-of-power and democratic capitalism have been given far too much credence, given the realities of human nature. Even as he stood on the edge of a "potential international community," he suggested that it would

be constructed neither by the pessimists, who believe it impossible to go beyond the balance of power principle in the relation of nation to each other; nor by the cynics, who would organize the world by the imposition of imperial authority without regard to the injustices which flow inevitably from arbitrary and irresponsible power; nor yet by the idealists, who are under the old illusion that a new level of historic development will emancipate history of these vexing problems.<sup>57</sup>

Rather, he argued, that the new world must be built by those who are resolute, who "when hope is dead will hope by faith"; who will neither seek premature escape from the guilt of history, nor yet call the evil, which taints all their achievements, good. There is no

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<sup>56</sup>Cf. Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 112. Niebuhr's doctrinal weakness with respect to pneumatology is particularly glaring here, as he attempts to explain the role of the Holy Spirit in human transformation. Later, in his discussion of the Kingdom, pneumatology is either completely absent, or confused with his doctrine of grace.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 285.

escape from the paradoxical relation of history to the Kingdom of God."<sup>58</sup> Those who have applied Niebuhr's ideas doggedly and unswervingly to theology, politics, ethics, and history, have failed to follow his own caveat. Niebuhr's warning, and his challenge, remind those who seek to apply his anthropology to social ethics to examine their own systems and applications, constantly and consistently. This is particularly relevant as some Christian social ethicists have come to understand that,

our social systems are not eternal or absolute but reflect the ambiguous nature of humankind and the angelic guardians of culture. Our institutions are not just a constraint on sin. . . they themselves are full of sin. The structures of social life contain both good and bad. Because of the hold of self-interest we will tend to see only the good in those social forms which favor our interests unless we have a strong theology of sin. Our social life is fallen with us, and no social system is beyond the need of reform or perhaps even of reconstitution.<sup>59</sup>

Freedom to re-evaluate and reconstitute social systems is possible when humanity sees its social organisations in light of the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom which is an eternal reality directed by the Spirit of God allows humanity to see their own structures as finite, meaning reform and renewal are possible. Such a view of the Kingdom of God strengthens Niebuhr's argument that human endeavours are always tainted by sin, and humanity must be cautious to recognise the tentative nature of all efforts.

Niebuhr's anthropological understanding of the eschatological sanction for ethics is best summed up in the following statement by Carnell: "What man does in history makes a difference in eternity."<sup>60</sup> This is the single most important conclusion of Niebuhr's thought which must be appropriated into any theoretical-ethical construction. Christ stands as the revelation of eternity to a humanity in turmoil of sin because of its refusal to

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<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 285-286.

<sup>59</sup>Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>60</sup>Carnell, 181.

accept its finite nature. The revelation of the essential ethical nature of humanity makes striving for the ethical ideal possible, even as judgement stands over and the end of history. There is a need for humanity to be convinced of its finiteness, that it might accept this revelation, and understand the necessity of ethical social action in history. For those Christians who have accepted the revelation and judgement of Christ, there is a need to demonstrate continually the ethical sanction embodied in that revelation, and the responsibility for justice embodied in judgement. Niebuhr's 'mythical' interpretation of eschatological symbols notwithstanding, the very meaning of history in the interim between *telos* and *finis* as found in the notion of service and self-sacrifice for the Kingdom of God validates his eschatological ethical sanction.

## Chapter IV

### **Recasting The Mould of Justice: Conclusions on the Contemporary Relevance of Niebuhr's Anthropology for Evangelical Social Ethics**

To this point, much of Niebuhr's anthropology has been examined, along with its related methodological issues and theological assumptions, and its outgrowth of social ethics. The task remains, then, to gather together those aspects of Niebuhr's anthropological thought which might be appropriated into a framework for an evangelical social ethic, and to identify and abandon those positions which are simply unacceptable to orthodox Christianity. This is not to say that some of Niebuhr's ideas will not seriously challenge widely-held assumptions within evangelical circles, which have not been examined consistently with the kind of self-critical analysis demanded by the urgent needs of society.<sup>1</sup> In fact, much of Niebuhr's approach stands as a judgement over indulgences of individuality, and a corrective to self-interested socio-political evangelical theology,

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<sup>1</sup>John Stott refers to the abandonment of social ethics by evangelicals as "the great reversal," quoting works by Timothy L. Smith and David O. Moberg. Stott summarises their conclusions to suggest that a focus on the fundamentals of the faith, premillennial eschatology and a reaction against liberal approaches all contributed to the decline in social concern among evangelicals. Although there was somewhat of a renewed concern growing out of the Lausanne movement of the 1970's, evangelicals have never fully recaptured their heritage of social involvement. However, British evangelicals have experienced more of a renewed concern than their North American counterparts. See John Stott, *Decisive Issues Facing Christians Today*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1990), 6-10. Cf. Timothy L. Smith *Revivalism and Social Reform*, (New York and Nashville: Abingdon, 1957); David O. Moberg, *The Great Reversal*, (UK: Scripture Union, 1973).

particularly in North America. Perhaps Niebuhr's most significant contribution will be seen as the mould of justice is recast from the perspective of anthropology, giving new relevance to evangelical social ethics, and supplying an apologetic tool in the process of evangelism.<sup>2</sup>

### Identifying the Problem

In recent decades, evangelical Christianity has stood apart from Niebuhr's strategy for social engagement as evidenced by Carl Henry's watershed work, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, published in 1964. In his volume, Henry defines the argument existing between Niebuhr and evangelical Christianity, as represented by the evangelist, Billy Graham. Henry seeks to discover "whether the evangelist by his emphasis on spiritual decision and dedication offers a solution too simple for presumably insoluble social problems, and whether the professor by his reliance on legislation and compulsion as the means of social betterment minimizes and neglects the transforming power of the Holy Spirit."<sup>3</sup> Although Henry's intentions expressed in this volume offer a corrective in themselves, his claim that regeneration serves to transform society so that it will become more loving and just does not take into consideration the complexities of human nature and social existence, as Niebuhr does.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>The appendix of this paper offers an example of how a paradigm built on Niebuhr's anthropology may be applied, in order to evaluate a particular issue of social relevance.

<sup>3</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 15.

<sup>4</sup>Henry actually turned to prescriptions for individuals in order to attack social problems. While Niebuhr would agree that regeneration is important to the application of love and justice in society, he recognised that the sin of human nature would never be overcome in history, and so ethical applications would always be proximate, not final solutions. He also recognised that even regenerate humans exhibit a lower form of morality when functioning as part of a social group. Niebuhr's realism offers an important corrective to Henry's somewhat naive and idealist approach.

In a recent article in *Christianity Today*, Philip Yancey notes the lack of love and grace in the attitudes of many "Christians" toward people of opposing ethical persuasions. Such attitudes polarise individuals and shift the focus from social to personal ethics, where walls are erected and enemies defined. Evangelical Christianity has been particularly guilty of getting "caught up in the polarization" and shouting across picket lines at the "enemy on the other side."<sup>5</sup> Yancey asks:

Who is *my* enemy? The promiscuous person dying of AIDS? The abortionists? The Hollywood producers polluting our culture? The secularists attacking my moral principles? The drug lords ruling our inner cities? If I cannot show love to such people, then I have not understood Jesus' gospel. I am struck with law, not the gospel of grace. If my activism, however well-motivated, drives out such love, I betray Jesus' kingdom. . . . Jesus declared that Christians are known by one distinguishing mark: not political correctness or moral superiority, but *love*.

In this single, concise paragraph, Yancey has defined a significant shortcoming of contemporary evangelical ethics, and confirmed the continuing relevance and value of Niebuhr's anthropological approach.

Contemporary evangelical ethics tend to neglect the social aspect of love, while fixated on a divisive us-them dichotomy between church and society, otherwise identified as the 'culture war'.<sup>6</sup> Fed by the proliferation of existentialist philosophy and its appropriation into postmodern culture, individuals and groups use the very relativism they

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<sup>5</sup>Yancey 35.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce Reed confirms this analysis as he comments on the tendency to view ethical questions from a position of individual morality, out of a failure to see humans in the context of their social relationships. "Unfortunately, modern methods of evangelism frequently reinforce this outlook instead of transforming it. Those who are converted feel themselves to be over against the rest of the world. . . . In his attack upon the 'social gospel,' the evangelical frequently denies the validity of social ethics for the Christian, and is consequently unable to see the way God is acting in every situation and area of human activity." See Bruce Reed, "Biblical Social Ethics: An Evangelical View," *Christian Social Ethics in a Changing World: An Ecumenical Theological Inquiry*, ed. John C. Bennett (New York and London: Association Press and SCM, 1966), 105.

seek to defeat, to defend their own perspectives. As Carl Henry lamented in his book of three decades ago, those who choose to deal with the social aspect of ethics, tend to focus more upon ethical materialism and its simple prescriptions without considering the necessity of a theological foundation. Henry wrote:

Since the rise of the "social gospel," Protestant ethical theory has lost vital contact with biblical perspectives. Instead, Protestant expositors have tended to promote the "practical idealism" of Anglo-Saxon social philosophy in the name of Christian religion. Christian social ethics, therefore, has preoccupied itself mainly with material betterment. Although now and then asserting a Christological foundation in broadest generalities, Protestant moralists have addressed the social situation in terms of particular programs having ecclesiastical approval rather than in terms of a theological interpretation of social order. Neither motivations nor goals are distinguished clearly in relation to justice or love.<sup>7</sup>

The need for serious ethical reflection of positions and approaches is as evident as it was when Henry wrote his social ethics.<sup>8</sup> There is clearly an obligation to build a theological-philosophical foundation for any ethical system, and Niebuhr's ability to do this was his genius.

### **Anthropological Foundations**

As nearly every social ethicist admits, a proper ethic arises from a proper view of humanity. For this reason, Niebuhr's focus on anthropology as a theological foundation

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<sup>7</sup>Henry, 159.

<sup>8</sup>Alan Sell has argued that theoretical ethical reflection should not be as scarce as it is. In its absence lies the way of "wanton moralising and that thoughtless jumping upon passing ethical bandwagons of which we have so much at the present time." He writes further: "While not arguing for antisocial ethics or even for asocial ethics, I do feel that some move far too quickly to socio-ethical prescriptions. We can see where they have arrived, but since we cannot make out the route by which they have travelled, their conclusions are offered for acceptance only on their own authority." Sell is correct in his observations that such authoritarian legalisms are ethically unacceptable regardless of whether those advocating them are theologically conservative or liberal. See Alan P. F. Sell, "A Renewed Plea for Impractical Divinity," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 8 (1995): 70.

for ethics reveals a helpful approach, and a possible corrective to theological error. Niebuhr's commitment to understand humanity as it exists within history; to illumine humanity's weaknesses and strengths; to balance the time-eternity dialectic within human nature and destiny; and to take scriptural revelation seriously serves as a strong foundation for a proper social ethic.

Niebuhr avoided anthropomorphism of God in his approach, always keeping his understanding of humanity under the judgement of revelation, but it is easy to fall prey to error when building a theology based on anthropology. Many who have borrowed from Niebuhr have made serious mistakes, failing to ascribe to God those qualities which are God's alone. Peter Beyerhaus has recognised the difficulty which some anthropological systems have experienced when "theologians use the name 'God' to denote humanity's own destiny [and] they ascribe to man in his corporate appearance divine dignity and power. . . . With this, the primal temptation of the snake in the Garden gains a frightening new relevance and actuality: '*Eritis sicut Deus!*'"<sup>9</sup> Niebuhr's ability to avoid such difficulties lends further credibility to his particular anthropological approach.

Part of the reason Niebuhr could build his theology successfully on an anthropological system successfully was due to his maintenance of the time-eternity dialectic at every level of analysis. At no point is this more evident than his elaboration of the dual nature of humans as finite creatures, yet bearing the image of God. Despite the fact that Niebuhr often reached such conclusions based on existential philosophy, their usefulness may yet be affirmed by a proper reading of scripture, and so they bear a particular relevance for evangelical theology. John Stott readily affirms the dialectical nature of humanity as a key to understanding social ethics. He writes:

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<sup>9</sup>You shall become as Gods! Peter P. J. Beyerhaus, *God's Kingdom and the Utopian Error* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1992), 127.

The biblical understanding of humankind takes equal account of the Creation and the Fall. It is this that constitutes the 'paradox of man'. We human beings have both a unique dignity as creatures made in God's image and a unique depravity as sinners under his judgement. The former gives us hope; the latter places a limit on our expectations. Our Christian critique of the secular mind is that it tends to be either too naively optimistic or too negatively pessimistic in its estimates of the human condition, whereas the Christian mind, firmly rooted in biblical realism, both celebrates the glory and deplores the shame of our human being. We can behave like God in whose image we were made, only to descend to the level of the beasts. We are able to think, choose, create, love and worship, but also to refuse to think, to choose evil, to destroy, to hate, and to worship ourselves. . . . This is 'man', a strange bewildering paradox, dust of earth and breath of God, shame and glory. So, as the Christian mind applies itself to human life on earth, to our personal, social and political affairs, it seeks to remember what paradoxical creature we are - noble and ignoble, rational and irrational, loving and selfish, Godlike and bestial.<sup>10</sup>

The truth is that Niebuhr's understanding of humanity in its dual nature is a solidly Protestant orthodox portrayal of anthropology, when examined from a biblical perspective. On the one hand, humans bear the image of God which affirms their freedom to fulfil potential and possibilities. On the other hand, humans are bound by creaturely necessity, which inevitably yields sin.

Understanding humans as bearers of God's image, as elaborated by Niebuhr, and supported by the biblical and historical witness, carries particular implications for social ethics. If all human beings bear the image of God, then certain requirements for treatment of others are implied. Out of this grows Niebuhr's concept of mutual love, which is rooted in scriptural revelation, and the example of Christ. "The commandment to love one another is grounded on this common image of sharing in the image of God - on the fact that my fellow human being is, in Isaiah's words, of my 'own flesh and blood'."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, as Calvin wrote, "Whenever I see a man, I must, of necessity, behold myself as

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<sup>10</sup>Stott, 38.

<sup>11</sup>Wolterstorff, 78.

in a mirror."<sup>12</sup> The image of God gives humans the responsibility to care for one another, even as it affirms the freedom and ability to act in accordance with the revealed ethic of love.

The other side of the dialectic, that humans are also creatures, bound by physical necessity and finitude, balances the image of God in humans with humans as sinners. The need to recapture a doctrine of sin before humanity is able to apply itself to social reform has been expressed on various levels by evangelical scholars. Kenneth Hamilton has affirmed the need for a doctrine of sin on an individual level, while Stephen Mott has made a similar plea on a collective level.<sup>13</sup> Niebuhr's explanations of sin as pride, expressed in will-to-power and self-indulgent sensuality are particularly helpful in constructing an ethic which takes social sin seriously. As expressed in Chapter II, the will-to-power explains the desire of humans to exert control over others for their own protection and gain, and sensuality explains the passivity of many Christians in the face of grave injustice.<sup>14</sup>

While the acknowledgement of humans as sinners balances anthropological assessment of human potential, Niebuhr's more helpful contribution comes by way of his explanation of sin as expressed through collective egoism. Mott does an admirable job of explaining biblically how sin manifests itself in structures as they are made up of collectivities of individual, sinful people.<sup>15</sup> This parallels Niebuhr's assertion that humans tend to assert their particularities as universalities, as an expression of sin on a collective

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<sup>12</sup>Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, trans. Williams Pringle (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956), 1:304, cited in Wolterstorff, 78.

<sup>13</sup>See Kenneth Hamilton, *Earthly Good: The Churches and the Betterment of Human Existence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 70-77; Mott, 3-21.

<sup>14</sup>Mott is helpful here, as he asserts that "some of our greatest evils are characterized by this absence of conscious individual decisions on critical issues." Moreover, he affirms that "our churches are not exempt from this moral myopia." Mott, 12-13.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 3-21

level. Niebuhr's caution to grasp always the tentative nature of human systems, and be open for evaluation in light of divine judgement is one to be taken seriously by an evangelical social ethic. This is a particularly relevant caveat for many evangelical social thinkers today. Traditionally, there has been an unwillingness among evangelicals to evaluate their own social structures, as Robert Fowler has noted. In his research of evangelical involvement in the hunger movement of the sixties and seventies, he found that with only some exceptions,

most evangelicals involved in the hunger concern were not radical regarding Western institutions nor interested in sweeping structural changes. Indeed, that was one of the most important, and possibly most attractive, aspects of the hunger issue for evangelicals. It was a vehicle, a sincere and purposeful vehicle, for those evangelicals who wanted to participate in a new mood of social concern but had no intention of supporting radical, not to say revolutionary, schemes. Hunger was always an important issue - and usually a safe one.<sup>16</sup>

Fowler's observations are confirmed by a cursory glance of several contemporary evangelical social thinkers, including Ronald Nash. For example, Nash is very intent to point out that Third World poverty has no connection with the First World, thus abdicating responsibility for two-thirds of the world's poor. Asserting that "nations are poor primarily because of internal factors and not because of such external factors as exploitation," Nash proceeds to explain that poverty is attributed more to lack of education and ambition than anything else.<sup>17</sup> Such views confirm Niebuhr's analysis regarding collective egoism and the assertion of human pride through a will-to-power. Wolterstorff confirms that these "views concerning the roots of mass poverty are almost entirely mistaken and that their popularity among academics and the general public can

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<sup>16</sup>Robert Booth Fowler, *A New Engagement: Evangelical Political Thought, 1966-1976*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 184.

<sup>17</sup>Ronald Nash, *Poverty and Wealth: The Christian Debate Over Capitalism*, (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1986), 193.

only be attributed to the fact that it serves our self-interest to hold them."<sup>18</sup> Therefore, Niebuhr's anthropology becomes not only a tool for analysis of external social activities, but a crucial aspect of self-examination as well.

There is a caveat to be heeded here, however, in order to avoid removing the concept of sin from its biblical roots. Sin in its collective interpretation should accompany, rather than replace, the concept of sin on an individual level.<sup>19</sup> Mott is careful to point out that social evil is not to be separated from individual evil, since social institutions are made up of individuals and individual decisions.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Beyerhaus argues that "the redemptive reign of Christ is misunderstood in a 'theology of liberation' which interprets his death on the cross not as the ground for the forgiveness of sins, but rather as an exemplary confrontation with historical powers in order to liberate the innocently suffering poor from captivity. . . ." Perhaps equally mistaken, is a theology which equates every biblical description of principalities and powers with sinful social structures.<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr's dependence upon Christian revelation which understands sin as rooted in human nature, offers a corrective to this potential error, and serves as a proper framework for evaluation.

Niebuhr's solution to sin, namely the grace that is available to humanity as truth and power, may also be derived from biblical principles. The grace and justice of God which stand in judgement over human endeavour also make attainment of relative justice

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<sup>18</sup>Wolterstorff, 86. Only under such self-evaluation as advocated by Niebuhr are academics such as Wolterstorff able to reach the conclusion that "the mass poverty of the Third World is for the most part not some sort of natural condition that exists independently of us; quite the contrary, a good deal of it is the result of the interaction of the core of the world-system with the periphery over the course of centuries. . . . Underdevelopment has a history, a history inseparable from ours."

<sup>19</sup>Wolterstorff is mindful of this in his discussion of Gustavo Gutierrez's *Theology of Liberation*, 46-48.

<sup>20</sup>Mott, 14.

<sup>21</sup>Beyerhaus, 160.

possible. This historical Reformation doctrine offers hope to humanity, even as it empowers attempts at social reform. Donald Hay affirms the dialectical balance of human justice in relation to God's justice from an evangelical perspective: "God's principles for human life represent a first best towards which fallen man can at least strive. A second best conscientiously developed with regard both to what God requires and to what sinful man can achieve, will be the content of human justice."<sup>22</sup> Again, Niebuhr's approach is affirmed: the proximate nature of human justice never negates the call to strive for an increasingly just social ethic.

As noted in detail in Chapter III, Niebuhr's eschatology lends a helpful ethical context to human striving for justice. This is an approach supported by Ladd, who writes: "We would contend that Jesus' ethics can be best interpreted in terms of the dynamic concept of God's rule, which has already manifested itself in his person but will come to consummation only in the eschatological hour."<sup>23</sup> Here, Niebuhr's dialectic of the fulfilment of history resting in God alone, motivates rather than nullifies efforts toward justice. The notion that God's eschatological judgement stands over and at the end of human history as ethical sanction, is one that has been seriously neglected by evangelical social ethics, even though it is firmly rooted in scripture. Henry barely acknowledges this aspect as he states that God "commands justice among his creatures; he will judge human justice eschatologically by divine justice."<sup>24</sup> Niebuhr's doctrine that humanity stands constantly under the judgement of God is one that maintains humility and balances the human will-to-power with repentance and submission to the revealed *agape* of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>22</sup>Donald Hay, *Economics Today: A Christian Critique*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 80.

<sup>23</sup>Ladd, *Theology*, rev. ed., 122.

<sup>24</sup>Henry, 169.

So far, it has been demonstrated how aspects of Niebuhr's anthropology may be incorporated into a social ethic that is theologically orthodox and evangelical. Niebuhr's system is not only intriguing, but helpful in identifying weaknesses, and drawing together various components of evangelical social ethics into a foundation for a more comprehensive theology. The usefulness of the resulting paradigm is illustrated in the appendix of this paper, where Niebuhr's anthropology is applied to a specific socio-ethical problem. But to be fair to Niebuhr, several of these appropriations of his thought have been lifted out of his theological context in order to be preserved, and applied in the present. It would be difficult and unreasonable to embrace Niebuhr's system *in toto*. However, much of Niebuhr's anthropology is too valuable to discard out of disagreement with some aspects alone. The attempt made here has been to understand Niebuhr in his context, then appropriate and apply those aspects of his thought which bear relevance outside of his context, in accordance with an evangelical theological understanding. Niebuhr's anthropology contains enough historical Protestant orthodoxy to make this exercise entirely possible without forcing him into a new Procrustean bed. In order to maintain the integrity of the exercise, however, certain weaknesses, and disagreements with Niebuhr's approach must be summarised, which will lead to several recommendations for further study.

### **Anthropological Questions**

Before summarising critical questions about Niebuhr's anthropology, it must be admitted that "Niebuhr cannot be evaluated with clinical objectivity. The most that one can do is to place oneself in the middle of the warmth and challenge of the system, sensitively matching Niebuhr's claims with the witness of reality itself. Critical estimates

cannot be decisive; hence, a compromise which the reader must patiently accept."<sup>25</sup> Even so, observations about Niebuhr's epistemology lead to other concerns about his neglect of certain doctrines, including pneumatology and ecclesiology, as previously mentioned. Similarly, questions about his epistemological basis call into question his presentation of soteriology, and portrayal of the Kingdom of God in relation to human conscience. Overall, these questions lead to serious misgivings about Niebuhr's system as a whole, but do not negate the attempt to salvage those parts of his anthropology which are acceptable on different epistemological grounds, as the previous discussion demonstrated. Such questions present a challenge to delve deeper into Niebuhr's thought, in order that those aspects of his thought which are retrievable might be understood and applied in a way that lends integrity to the theological task, and remains faithful to Niebuhr's intentions.

Niebuhr's contention that humanity must avoid the pride of universalising its particularities, and considering its systems as possessors of final truth, is a helpful caveat, but it becomes unacceptable when followed to its logical conclusion.<sup>26</sup> At this point, even Niebuhr's dialectic starts to break down. Carnell clarifies this in his discussion of Niebuhr's conception of epistemological tolerance:

Either tolerance rests on the scepticism that final truth cannot be had, and thus Christianity's objectivity is lost; or we widen our epistemology to include final, contextual knowledge of God, Christ, sin, grace, and forgiveness, and then the relation between time and eternity is no longer exclusively dialectical. Either the

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<sup>25</sup>Edward John Carnell, "Niebuhr's Criteria of Verification," in Kegley and Bretall, 388. This author agrees with Carnell that: "The more I ponder Niebuhr's arguments, the less successful is my escape from their force. But the soteric standards seem somewhat less than satisfying. Try as I may, in my most charitable moments of meditation, I am unable to avoid concluding that Niebuhr's theology rests on disappointing subjectivism and skepticism."

<sup>26</sup>At this point, Niebuhr's analysis would appeal to the postmodernist, who holds to the relativity of truth.

dialectic renders final truth invalid, or final truth renders the dialectic invalid. This is a forced option.<sup>27</sup>

While Carnell's position is overstated somewhat, he is correct in pressing Niebuhr on this point. Niebuhr agrees that truth is attainable, and appeals to scripture to provide a measure of objectivity to his anthropology, but his system, when followed consistently, would render his own truth claims as nothing more than an assertion of pride.<sup>28</sup>

Niebuhr counters such accusations by holding fast to his time-eternity dialectic, and explains existentially how he believes truth may be known, but he is unsuccessful in proving himself free from the subjectivity against which he argued so vehemently.<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr explains that "The personal encounter in religious experience is determined by the pattern set in the revelation in Christ and would not be conceivable without this revelation. The experience is 'subjective' only in the sense that the forgiveness of God must be appropriated in repentance, trust, and commitment, involving the whole of the self." He continues to point out the potential for error, as "any liberalism which can be intellectually accepted, and any Biblicism which changes belief from repentance and commitment to the mere acceptance historical propositions, equally rob the experience of its resources of 'wisdom and power'."<sup>30</sup> In this observation, Niebuhr is correct. It is not in his explanation of subjectivity, or even its defence, that he falls into error, but in his dogged maintenance of the dialectic where it contradicts his own epistemology. He argues against Carnell:

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<sup>27</sup>Carnell, "Criteria of Verification," in Kegley and Bretall, 390.

<sup>28</sup>Carnell agrees that "Niebuhr's appeal to the Bible gives the impression of being lifted from the quagmire of subjectivism, and for this happy inconsistency I register thanks; but in such a case he solves the dialectical riddle by plowing with my heifer." Ibid., 389.

<sup>29</sup>Regarding his understanding of the subjectivism for which Carnell accused him, Niebuhr wrote: "I believe this kind of 'subjectivism' has corrupted much of liberal Christianity and that it is important to insist on the Biblical idea that the soul encounters God as the 'divine other' if not the 'wholly other.'" Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in Kegley and Bretall, 443.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

Professor Carnell is concerned to know upon what basis one can maintain the absoluteness of the Christian faith while recognizing the relativity of any formulation of the meaning of the faith and the corruption of the experience to which it may be subject. My answer is that the faith proves its absoluteness precisely where its insights make it possible to detect the relativity of the interpretations and to question the validity of any claim, including our own, that we have been redeemed. At those points it is proved that faith has discerned and is in contact with the 'true' God and not with some idol of our imagination.<sup>31</sup>

Niebuhr's contention regarding the existential nature of encounter with God may be placed in a more helpful context through a faithful exegesis of scripture.

It is in Niebuhr's understanding of scripture as myth that the notion of the authority of biblical ethics, as expressing specific divine commands, is called into question. Niebuhr argues that individuals may subscribe to the ethic of Jesus, but that it is inapplicable on a collective level. While this observation holds some merit, and would make an interesting study in itself, it does not seem immediately substantive. The possible result of such a view is that some valid elements of anthropology and ethics are overlooked in favour of single guiding principles. Henry argues, for example, that

Scripture warns against so fusing and confusing righteousness and love that the dominance of either nullifies the other. The Bible stands sentry against speaking of God's love as the foremost or conditioning divine attribute; it discredits fitting God's justice to love's convenience. Whenever love triumphs at the expense of holiness, whenever love takes priority over righteousness, we have moved outside the scriptural orbit.<sup>32</sup>

While Henry may be overstating his case, especially as it is applied to Niebuhr, he does raise significant questions about why love must be considered prior in the development of social ethics. Is love, and its expression through justice, the only ethical requirement, from a scriptural perspective? Does proper contextualisation mean the abandonment of

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Henry, 169.

appropriation and application of specific ethical admonitions in scripture, as Niebuhr seems to argue? There are certainly other perspectives on this issue.

Donald Hay argues against Ronald Preston's notion that cultural distance and contextualisation render application of scriptural ethical admonitions invalid.<sup>33</sup> Hay contends that scripture may be examined and applied with integrity, such that individual principles will fit together to form a consistent whole. Niebuhr's anthropology allows the possibility of such an approach, but he does not subscribe to it himself. The result is that little examination is made of specific ethical teachings in scripture, especially those which may have social relevance.

Carnell has noted that throughout his dialectical philosophy, Niebuhr "retains a critical autonomy over the system of Scripture." He continues,

whether such autonomy is good or bad depends upon how seriously one accepts or rejects the Bible as a system of thought. Orthodoxy is persuaded that one has no final truth about God until he submits to the Bible's self-testimony. Neoorthodoxy judges the Bible by dialectical insights; orthodoxy judges dialectical insights by the Bible.<sup>34</sup>

Despite such scathing observation, Carnell is forced to admit that Niebuhr indeed defends the Bible as the Word of God, though his purposes are not to find in it specific ethical admonitions and principles, for social theory, or anthropology. There is a wide circle of scholars who disagree with such notions. Virtually all evangelical scholars view the ethical

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<sup>33</sup>Hay writes that "Preston believes it is difficult, if not impossible, to give any prior description of what the Christian ethical input is going to be. He acknowledges that it will come from Christian theology in its understanding of God and man. But the content is not made clear. This precludes any rigorous thinking about Christian social ethics." Hay, 66. Cf. Ronald H. Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task* (London: SCM, 1983).

<sup>34</sup>Edward John Carnell, "Reinhold Niebuhr's View of Scripture," *The Case for Biblical Christianity*, ed. Ronald H. Nash (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1969), 109.

authority of scripture as providing theological content to some degree, including the Old Testament.<sup>35</sup>

To carry these questions or objections any farther would be to abandon the scope of the present study. Suffice it to say, at this point, that Niebuhr's epistemological basis in general, and his approach to scripture in particular, are responsible for raising the majority of questions about his anthropology, which is otherwise insightful, challenging, and widely supported by the scriptural record. It is the existential, dialectical, symbolic reading of scripture that renders several specific aspects of Niebuhr's anthropology unsatisfying, including: the role of the Holy Spirit in conviction, regeneration, and empowerment for social engagement; the relationship between anthropology and ecclesiology, especially in relation to social ethics; and the concept of the Kingdom of God in relation to humanity and the struggle for justice. These aspects will be included as recommendations for further study, since a full exposition would move beyond the anthropological focus of this paper.

### **Recommendations for Further Study**

The first recommendation for further study which would enlighten understanding of his anthropology, is to engage in further reflection upon Niebuhr's view and use of scripture. It would be useful to examine Niebuhr's socio-political writings to see if and how he uses scripture when discussing particular issues of anthropological or ethical significance. Furthermore, exploration into how the bible ought to be used in social ethics would prove useful, especially with respect to laying an anthropological foundation.

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<sup>35</sup>See, for example, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord: The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995); Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*; Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989).

Questions to be answered would include: Is the approach faithful to scripture? Does it take into consideration a holistic view of scriptural teaching? To what degree may scriptural admonitions be used by free yet finite humans to establish social norms? More specifically, Niebuhr's application of anthropology to particular ethical questions would need to be held against the scriptural witness for evaluation. Such an exercise would reveal to what degree he remains faithful to his expressed understanding of scripture.

Similarly, further research into Niebuhr's understanding of the nature of conversion would yield helpful information regarding his understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit, in the individual and the church, as they relate to the Kingdom of God. His existential appraisal of human encounter with the divine raises questions regarding the efficacy of grace, and God's imparted righteousness. If Niebuhr's process of conversion is an experience which takes place over and over again, at what point does the imputed righteousness of God defeat sin in the lives of Christians? Niebuhr would argue in his dialectical style, that sin is never defeated in the life of a believer, which is existentially true, but metaphysically false. This is an ontological category which may not be overlooked, because it bears far-reaching implications for anthropology and social ethics. For example, if the Kingdom of God is present in the life of a Christian, does it simply come and go, at the whim of the Divine? In what sense does the Holy Spirit become a present and enduring reality in the life of believers, individually and collectively, convicting of social sin, and empowering for social transformation? Since pneumatology is such a neglected area of study for Niebuhr, it would prove an interesting exercise to accumulate all references to the Holy Spirit in his writings, in order to make some observations about his understanding of pneumatology, especially as it relates to his doctrine of humanity.

If Niebuhr understands the Kingdom of God as that power which comes to bear in the human conscience, then it raises the question of whether he confuses the Kingdom of God with the Holy Spirit. His great anthropological contribution of sin in humanity is

undermined, if the Kingdom of God, as it bears on the human conscience is considered the locus of ethical authority. Evidence demonstrates that the conscience is neither lasting nor rigorous as a basis of ethical decision, even when enlightened by the Holy Spirit. In this sense, Niebuhr again falls prey to the subjectivity against which he argues. Further investigation into his understanding of the Kingdom and human conscience is required.

It is intriguing to notice that Niebuhr has elaborated a thorough description of human nature and destiny without relating humanity, in any concrete way, with the church. He has failed to describe the relationship between the Kingdom and the church; the church's role in confronting the world with God's love and justice; and how the church, as a collective of believers contributes to the moulding of justice in the minds and lives of such believers. Further study would explore Niebuhr's other writings on this subject, and would examine how his anthropology informs his view of ecclesiology, and *visa versa*.

The present study has focused anthropological reflection to two of Niebuhr's volumes, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. The next logical step would be to trace out the implications of Niebuhr's anthropology as it is worked out in his later writings, particularly those of political-ethical significance, such as *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*. Tracing out Niebuhr's own application of his anthropological thought, would provide clues to such application in the present, in a way that is faithful to Niebuhr's understanding of how his theology bears on ethical matters.

Other studies which might prove informative and revealing would be comparisons of Niebuhr's anthropology with that of other social ethicists. The areas in which he differs from other approaches, or which others have borrowed from his thought, would prove particularly enlightening.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, further study on the application of Niebuhr's anthropology to specific issues of social concern would be the final goal of any study of

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<sup>36</sup>This is the very strength of Beckley's examination of Niebuhr, as he compares Niebuhr's understanding of justice to that of Rauschenbusch and Ryan.

Niebuhr's thought. To understand him within his historical context is necessary, but to retrieve those elements of his thought which bear enduring relevance in uncovering the mysteries of human collective existence, is the goal of any study of Niebuhr's theology, the present endeavour included.

Jacques Ellul wrote that the Christian must plunge into social and political problems,

in order to have an influence on the world, not in the hope of making it a paradise, but simply in order to make it tolerable - not in order to diminish the opposition between this world and the Kingdom of God, but simply in order to modify the opposition between the disorder of this world and the order of preservation that God wills for it - not in order to 'bring in' the Kingdom of God, but in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed, that all. . . [humanity] may really hear the good news. . . .<sup>37</sup>

The theological foundation needed to plunge into such a task is provided by Reinhold Niebuhr. His anthropological system, despite its weaknesses, offers challenge, courage, and motivation for the ethical task. Gabriel Fackre concluded that "the past's provisions served Niebuhr well in his journey through an era that had to be reminded of forgotten things - the biblical wisdom about the sin in man and the tragic in history. Realism was healthy food, and Niebuhr a good guide for having been strengthened by it."<sup>38</sup> While it must be acknowledged that the pilgrim now faces a new leg in the journey, it is not necessary to leave such a competent guide behind. Inviting Niebuhr along to face new challenges and issues, would prove him to be a wise choice as travelling companion. For although times and issues have changed, human nature remains the same, and so the value

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<sup>37</sup>Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1951), 47.

<sup>38</sup>Fackre, 97.

of Niebuhr's anthropology, and its relevance for social ethics, endures. As the journey continues, and the task of striving for justice is confronted afresh, may it be with confidence that travellers move on, making Niebuhr's prayer their own:

O God, you have bound us together in this bundle of life; give us grace to understand how our lives depend upon the courage, the industry, the honesty, and the integrity of our fellows; that we may be mindful of their needs, grateful for their faithfulness and faithful in our responsibilities to them; through Jesus Christ our Lord.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Cited in Horton Davies, ed., *The Communion of Saints: Prayers of the Famous*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 120.

## APPENDIX I

### **SURFING THE WEB WITH REINHOLD NIEBUHR: THE RELEVANCE OF CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY FOR A SOCIETY LOST IN CYBERSPACE**

The President of Acadia University, Dr. Kelvin Ogilvie, has heralded the Acadia Advantage program as "the single most significant educational project ever undertaken" in the history of the institution.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that the re-wiring of the entire campus, through a marriage with big business, for participation in the new millennium of information technology is an important and necessary developmental step if students and educators are not to be "left behind" in the rapid growth of technology. The eschatological undertones of these conversations are not to be overlooked. They point to the value which such educational leaders and others are placing on information technology, to such a degree that computers are portrayed as sitting at some utopian future, smiling and reaching out their hands for us to grasp and receive the salvation from ignorance by which we are inevitably bound. The only action ensuring future hope is to immerse oneself in technology, surf the web, and obtain an e-mail address. As one who partakes of such technological advantage and yet maintains an uneasy wariness of its utopian eschatological propositions, I intend to evaluate the current societal enchantment with computer systems from the perspective of Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian anthropology, as portrayed in his two-volume *magnum opus*, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.<sup>2</sup> Using Niebuhr's paradigm, this paper will refute the notion of technological utopia; contrast the power and potential of computers with the limits of information technology in society, portraying it as value-laden rather than value-neutral; and examine some implications for justice and society. The paper will argue that a conversion is necessary, but not of the type offered by technology. Instead, it will support the appropriation of an evangelical "third birth", whereby Christians enmeshed in individualistic, self-serving

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<sup>1</sup>Kelvin Ogilvie, cited in "Acadia Advantage a First," *Bulletin* The Acadia University Alumni Magazine, 80:3, (Spring 1996): 3.

<sup>2</sup>See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol I *Human Nature* and Vol II *Human Destiny*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941 and 1943). These two volumes represent the most mature, systematic expression of Niebuhr's thought, and reveal clearly the anthropological basis of his theology.

instruments of society repent of their participation in and perpetuation of sinful structures, and under the judgement and imparted righteousness of God's grace in Christ, receive the empowerment of the Holy Spirit to strive for more universally just and socially beneficial applications of the use of information technology.

## I

While information technology is being heralded as the future of education, not only at the post-secondary level, but in grade school as well, the notion that humanity is able to achieve some type of utopian perfection within history remains unchallenged by many who are responsible to confront issues of present and future ethical significance.<sup>3</sup> Within such a philosophy, computers become the new "idol" in the pursuit of humanity to reach higher levels of development and attain to possibilities previously unconceived.<sup>4</sup> Every generation of every culture and civilisation falls prey to the self-deception which seeks to challenge the limits of human capability, without understanding the nature of those limits.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Edward LeRoy Long Jr. documents the growth of attention gained by information technology through the nineteen eighties by science and humanities scholars. In the same period, there was little increase in publication of articles reflecting ethical consideration of related issues, at least from a Christian perspective. A cursory glance through periodical literature in the current decade confirms his observation that "The development of the computer, which is having a profound effect on many aspects of our lives, has received relatively little attention from Christian social ethicists. See Edward LeRoy Long Jr., "The Moral Assessment of Computer Technology," *The Public Vocation of Christian Ethics*, eds. Beverly W. Harrison, Robert L. Stivers, and Ronald H. Stone (New York, NY: The Pilgrim Press, 1986), 241-258. There is an increase in ethical attention to issues precipitated by the advent of the World Wide Web, but it focusses primarily on issues of privacy, criminal activity, and personal ethics, rather than the social ethical aspect, as evidenced by random web searches, and the reading lists of university courses offered on the subject.

<sup>4</sup>This analysis is confirmed by Henry Wiseman, a political scientist who claimed, "This is the age of the virtual deification of technology." See his foreword "The Challenges of Technology," *Ethics and Technology: Ethical Choices in the Age of Pervasive Technology*, eds. Jorge Nef, Jokelee Vanderkop and Henry Wiseman (Toronto, ON: Wall and Thompson, 1989).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Tower of Babel," *Beyond Tragedy*, (New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937). In this collection of essays on the Christian interpretation of history, Niebuhr cautions "In every civilisation its most impressive period seems to precede death by only a moment. Like the woods of autumn, life defies death in a glorious pageantry of colour. But the riot of this colour has been distilled by an alchemy in which life has already been touched by death. Thus man claims immortality for his spiritual [and rational] achievements just when their mortal fate becomes apparant; and death and

Christian ethical reflection is required, because as "true religion," Christianity creates a "profound uneasiness about our highest social values. Its uneasiness springs from the knowledge that the God whom it worships transcends the limits of finite man, while this same man is constantly tempted to forget the finiteness of his cultures and civilisation and to pretend a finality for them which they do not have. Every civilisation and every culture is thus a Tower of Babel."<sup>6</sup> For that reason, "an ethic that has no categories for relating to the technological forces that are shaping our lives is irresponsible and irrelevant. An ethic that avoids decisions, or sinks into apathy, or focuses only on small, private matters without developing categories for naming and dealing with the principalities and powers is deciding to let the principalities rule without challenge."<sup>7</sup>

As Reinhold Niebuhr challenged the assumptions of human progress when he observed the human cost of the industrial revolution, so do his reflections endure in their relevance for the present technological revolution. He vigorously refuted utopian philosophies of humanity which maintained the basic goodness of human rationality, or those which immersed human potential within the necessities of nature. For Niebuhr, in either perspective, "Man is not measured in a dimension sufficiently high or deep to do full justice to either his stature or his capacity for both good and evil or to understand the total environment in which such a stature can understand, express and find itself."<sup>8</sup> The problem of the computer age is echoed proleptically in Niebuhr's earnest criticisms of utopianism's rationalism, and of the autonomous individuality of Renaissance philosophies: "The prophetic-Biblical note of God as the judge of men whose thoughts are not our thoughts is wholly lost in the contemplation of God who is the fulfilment of each unique human individuality but not the judge of its sin."<sup>9</sup> The uneasiness regarding the expectations of humanity immersed in information technology is given perspective within Niebuhr's time-eternity dialectic.<sup>10</sup>

Niebuhr's dialectic challenged the modernist emphasis on the immanence of God, within an anthropological context, as Niebuhr joined other champions of neoorthodoxy in re-establishing the concept of divine transcendence. At the same time, neither Barth's *deus absconditus*, nor Brunner's understanding of *Anknuepfungschpunkt* as "conversation"

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mortality are stangely mixed into, and potent in, the very pretension of immortality." p.41

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>7</sup>Roger Shinn's thought is encapsulated here by Glen Stassen, "A Computer-ethical Call to Continuous Conversion," *Review and Expositor* 87 (1990): 203. For a full exposition of Shinn's perspective, see Roger Lincoln Shinn, *Forced Options: Social Decisions for the 21st Century* 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Pilgrim Press, 1985).

<sup>8</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 124.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>10</sup>Philosopher-theologian Edward John Carnell explored Niebuhr's dialectic as the organizing principal of his thought, and the key to understanding his theology. See his very thorough treatment in *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1951).

found whole areas of contact between time and eternity as Niebuhr did.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, Niebuhr saw the unique ability of Christianity to explain the dialectic of human nature:

The most important characteristic of a religion of revelation is this twofold emphasis upon the transcendence of God and upon His intimate relation to the world. In this divine transcendence the spirit of man finds a home in which it can understand its stature of freedom. But there it also finds the limits of its freedom, the judgement which is spoken against it and, ultimately, the mercy which makes such a judgement sufferable.<sup>12</sup>

The insights of Christian revelation provided Niebuhr with the next step in his dialectical analysis, whereby humans are perceived as: spiritually self-transcendent in the image of God; weak, dependent, and finite with respect to their involvement in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world; inevitably but not necessarily involved in denial of their dependence and finiteness which leads to evil in humanity, as individuals and groups seek to escape the anxiety produced by such denial. The basic problem in understanding human nature, as Niebuhr saw it, was to determine to what degree humans are intimately bound by or connected to their natural environment and its necessities, and to what degree they are free to transcend the natural world. As Bob Patterson commented, "If the self is identical with the natural world, then it is no more than one of the animals. If the self completely transcends the natural world, it is absorbed into a timeless eternity."<sup>13</sup> The tension between the finitude of nature, and the self-transcendence of human spirit which comprised Niebuhr's time-eternity dialectic on this level, affirms the contemporary tension between what humanity is able to achieve through information technology and the limits which characterise every human endeavour. For

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1946), 15. See also Carnell, 37. Carnell explains:

Niebuhr indeed follows Kierkegaard in defining the relation between time and eternity dialectically, but he recoils from Barthian extremes. Man is a sinner - but not *totally* a sinner. Otherwise, how could he ever know that he is a sinner? God is transcendent - but not *wholly* other. Otherwise, how could man know God or how could God reveal himself to man? Revelation is an offense to reason - but not *completely* so.

Otherwise, how could man recognize truth when he saw it? God's law is above our expectation - but not *absolutely* so. Otherwise, how can we distinguish the voice of God from the voice of the devil? Natural theology cannot establish God's existence, but it is not *finally* blind. Otherwise, how could eternity be relevant to history or history be interpreted in light of eternity? Niebuhr, therefore, indicts Barth for *talking* about God and expecting his hearer to understand what he means. If there is no univocal point between time and eternity, meaningful speech about God is impossible.

<sup>12</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 126.

<sup>13</sup>Bob E. Patterson, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, *Makers of the Modern Theological Mind*, ed. Bob Patterson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publisher, 1977), 64.

Niebuhr, the strength of the Christian view of humanity is found in its nature as a revealed religion which emphasises equally the transcendence and immanence of God, and balances the image of God and creaturely necessities in humanity.<sup>14</sup>

## II

There is reason to believe that humanity is able to accomplish great things through the use and development of information technology. The fact of its existence says much about the ability of humanity to transcend itself and conceive of progress which seems almost limitless. Edward LeRoy Long Jr. has acknowledged that "human intelligence includes the capacity to wonder, even to wonder about what computers will do, to discern meanings in facts and interpret the significance of events, as well as to gather information. Human intelligence continuously transcends itself and even asks what selfhood is."<sup>15</sup> The capacity of humanity to wonder and contemplate, about its own existence affirms the potential of information technology.

In theological terms, Niebuhr finds the capacity for self-transcendence rooted in the human spirit, as a part of the *imago dei*. It is a quality of freedom unique to humanity which enables it to reach beyond itself and to conceive of itself in relation to its environment. While some have equated the image of God with reason, Niebuhr argues that it entails more than human rational faculties. While reason may be included as a part of the *imago dei*, freedom and self-transcendence of the human spirit is the key to understanding its meaning. Unlike Luther, who argued that the image of God is obliterated in humanity as a result of the fall, Niebuhr believed that positive human potential remained intact, though tainted. This is a helpful observation since contact between God and humanity would be precluded if humans no longer bore the capacity for existential encounter of the Divine.<sup>16</sup> Acknowledging his indebtedness to Augustine,

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<sup>14</sup>For a helpful discussion of the balance between creaturely necessity and possibility in technological society, see Max L. Stackhouse, "Godly Cooking? Theological Ethics and Technological Society," *First Things* 13 (May 1991): 22-29. Cf. Richard L. Gorsuch, "Computers: The Old/New Problem of Dominion," *Review and Expositor* 87 (1990): 189. Gorsuch writes, "Computer idolatry has as a principal danger the denial of authority and dominion which God has entrusted to us. Instead, we turn that task over to the computer, giving it power and authority over our lives and over our culture. Computers, even as the idols of Baal, are made with human hands. They have no authority or dominion other than that which we choose to give them." For further elaboration on technological idolatry, see Ronald G. Ragsdale, "Technology: Possible=Permissible?" *Journal of Christian Education Papers* 95 (June 1989): 13f.

<sup>15</sup>Long, 248. Long acknowledges, by comparison, the limits of artificial intelligence, which do not have completely self-programming capabilities necessary for self-transcendence.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Gabriel Fackre, *The Promise of Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Philadelphia, PA: Lippencott,

Niebuhr concludes, "Under the influence of Augustinian ideas, Christian theology consistently interprets the image of God in terms of the rational faculties of the soul, but includes among these the capacity of rising to the knowledge of God and (when unspoiled by sin) of achieving blessedness and virtue by reason of subjecting its life to the Creator."<sup>17</sup>

In the image of God, humans bear the ability to transcend all the necessities of nature and to exercise freedom of spirit. Herein lies every human potential, creativity, and capacity for love and justice; the ability to order the environment to meet human needs and desires. It becomes evident that it is the image of God, with its self-transcendent freedom, that allows the development and application of technologies of all kinds, including information technology. The *imago dei* gives humanity the freedom inherent in technology, which "reduces the degree to which humans must passively depend on the givens of the bio-physical order," and allows it to order life in a manner which benefits society.<sup>18</sup> Previously fatal diseases are now curable, communication is no longer bound by time and space, and cultures are able to exchange ideas and perspectives in ways never before conceived.

However, this freedom does not give humanity any notion of its limits and liabilities with respect to technology and the ability to progress infinitely. Max Stackhouse writes:

The capacity to transcend the constraints of circumstance and bio-physical determinism and the ability to overcome given limitations of time and space are necessary ingredients of human society; but one thing they cannot do for us is tell us how we ought to use our freedom. Indeed, as we know, the freedom bought by technology is often used precisely to violate human rights, to constrict for some what it enhances for others, as well as to construct instruments of destruction.<sup>19</sup>

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1970), 37. Fackre describes Niebuhr's thought in relation to the *imago dei* simply as, "The structure through which God makes his presence felt in the conscience of man is the 'image of God' in man." This represents a serious disagreement between Niebuhr's view and Barth's doctrine of the image of God. For Barth, the image of God was borne in human form by Jesus Christ alone. To speak of the image in any other context resulted in analogous reasoning, in which he wanted no part. Niebuhr's view, however, takes into account the capacity that humanity has for good, in accordance with God's declaration at creation, and the freedom God has given in that capacity to know him and experience a relationship with him.

<sup>17</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*, 158. It is important to note that Niebuhr maintains an understanding of human individuality, within the human-Divine relationship. Conversion involves the subjection of self to God, but individuality is never completely submerged or dissolved in the divine personality.

<sup>18</sup>Stackhouse, "Godly Cooking," 24.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

This highlights Niebuhr's understanding of self-transcendence, extending beyond the simple freedom of *homo faber*, to the spiritual freedom to "violate both the necessities of nature and the logical systems of reason."<sup>20</sup> Self-transcendent freedom deceives humanity, as the ability to survey the whole of nature leads it to consider itself to be the totality of existence. Closely related to the human capacity for self-transcendence is the "inclination to transmute. . . [its] partial and finite self and. . . [its] partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies. . . [humanity's] sin," which cautions and conditions human expressions of limitlessness.<sup>21</sup> For Niebuhr, the view of humans as bearers of the *imago dei* must be balanced with a perspective of their creaturely necessities.<sup>22</sup> Subsequently, Niebuhr's theological observations lead one to question seriously the "infinite" potential of information technology, as proclaimed by its contemporary prophets.

### III

The limits of information technology in society, and an understanding of all that computers cannot do, are appreciated best in light of Niebuhr's anthropology of sin. For Niebuhr, the very ability to transcend nature allows humanity to recognise its ultimate connectedness to it, and anxiety over dependency and finitude emerges. This existential reading of the human situation is helpful in so far as it portrays the creaturely balance of the image of God and responsibility to eternal norms. Freedom and anxiety lead to sin as they serve as the temptation whereby humans seek to condition their environment by ordering or denying their essential necessities, and universalising their own particularities. The capacity for self-transcendence which God bestows on humanity through the *imago dei* is misused as people refuse to acknowledge their creatureliness. The resulting anxiety leads the ego to make itself the centre of existence, and through pride and self-love, it attempts to subordinate other life to its will, or become submerged in the vitalities of nature. In the anxious search to escape human finitude, humanity must either acknowledge its finitude and subject itself to God, or assert itself in sin, rebelling against God. Where faith is not present, sin results on both individual and collective levels.

In Niebuhr's understanding, lack of faith, or refusal to trust in God "leads to egotistic self-assertiveness in individual and collective life."<sup>23</sup> Pride is expressed through self-love in the human will-to-power. In the assertion of their will-to-power, humans seek to make people and nature subservient to their egos in a search for secure existence. The resulting injustice for those subject to this assertion of power is obvious. It is also

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<sup>20</sup>Niebuhr, *Human Nature*, 124.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Carnell, 55. He writes that for Niebuhr's purposes, the doctrine of "creation *ex nihilo* keeps the relations between time and eternity fluid enough to allow for historical progress, and yet rigid enough to keep history tensionally responsive to absolute norms of obligation."

<sup>23</sup>Patterson, 88.

expressed in intellectual, moral, and spiritual levels as individuals become convinced that their grasp of final truth is to be appropriated by the collective. With such pride, promotion of particular systems may be asserted at the expense of others, with no recognition that all human systems fall prey to the same sin of pride and remain under the judgement of eternal principles.<sup>24</sup>

Remarkably, the claims made by computer enthusiasts for the future of information technology fall well within this paradigm. It is becoming increasingly evident in the world that "computers give much power to those who program them, those who own them, those who are skilled in their use, and those who own the companies that make them. The biblical question is who gets this power and who gets left out?"<sup>25</sup> Purveyors of computer technology advocate its development as the norm for all of society, and so assert their will-to-power, even while they accumulate the benefits of power which information technology generates. Glen Stassen observes in the following caveat that "computers bring dangers of centralisation of great power, accumulation of great influence, and exclusion of a great many people."<sup>26</sup> Is it any surprise, then, that those who already hold a great deal of power in big business, who were among the first to exercise the power of information technology, have such a keen interest in the computerisation of education? As the cost is handed down to students, higher education becomes the exclusive domain of the wealthy. The implications persist on a global level, where wealthy countries have the opportunity to extend their power over and above the continually neglected two-thirds world. What relevance does access to information technology have to a society which struggles to meet the most basic needs of its people? If the axiom is true, that knowledge is power, the implications for future global power structures become obvious.

Unlike the sin of pride, the sin of sensuality seeks not so much to assert selfhood as to confirm self-love, as it indulges the individual in the drives and desires of nature. Patterson has described Niebuhr's presentation in this way: "Sensuality begins with self-love or self-gratification. Futility soon ensues, and sensuality becomes self-escape in forms of indulgences that soon reach a point where they defeat their own ends. When a

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<sup>24</sup>Carnell notes that this significant point of Niebuhr's thought requires great clarification. If no claims to truth are valid, then Niebuhr's own claim that the *agape* of Jesus Christ is the norm for humanity must also be called into question. Carnell states, "It would seem, therefore, that the sin is not so much that a claim to finality *per se* has been made, but rather that the wrong type of a claim has been advanced. *If this is not valid, then Niebuhr has no more right than his opponent to make a claim to finality; for a principle which undermines everything undermines itself also.*" Carnell, 79. To be fair to Niebuhr on this point, the finality he referred to was of the type that sought to universalize natural particularities within society, and within history. It does not seem that Niebuhr was referring to eternal truths, whose validity he established through philosophical argument as standing over and beyond history, but rather those historical, natural contingencies which humanity imagines to be of eternal significance.

<sup>25</sup>Stassen, 198.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 199.

sensuous process is deified it proves disillusioning and a plunge into unconsciousness is made."<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr included materialism, drunkenness and sexual perversion in his understanding of sin as sensuality, which represent the kind of self-love to which contemporary society falls prey, even in its enchantment with computer technology.

It is unfortunate, as Harlan Beckley has noted, that this aspect of Niebuhr's analysis stands in relative isolation to the rest of his thought, as he never worked out its implications for justice, as he did the sin of pride. Niebuhr's neglect carries significant implications: "Had he integrated sin as an escape from freedom into his theory and conception of justice, Niebuhr might have had more to say about the dangers of passivity in the face of injustice." Beckley's observations carry particular relevance to the passivity caused by the self-indulgence of those captivated by computer technology. "Niebuhr was far more concerned about injustice resulting from inordinate assertions of power than about injustice as a consequence of refusing to exercise our freedom to achieve relative justice."<sup>28</sup> While power is certainly an anthropological-ethical issue to consider in relation to the use of computers, the notion of self-indulgence to the neglect of serious social needs takes on even more significance.

Stassen admits that "a world of computers contains too much power for a merely individualistic ethics to cope. . . computers give great power to some; we need an ethic of justice, laws, and covenant to cope with their expanding power."<sup>29</sup> He has prophetically described the present passivity to the accumulation of power in his assertion that the age of computers "cries out for an ethic that works for social change, and discloses the pernicious impact of narrow interests. When computers are power, discrimination and underfunding in education are disempowering, debilitating, and demonic."<sup>30</sup> The same observation regarding the exclusion of marginal groups applies beyond the realm of education, to social programs and foreign aid.<sup>31</sup> But the extension of power and the

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<sup>27</sup>Patterson, 93.

<sup>28</sup>Harlan Beckley, *Passion for Justice*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1992), 272-273.

<sup>29</sup>Stassen, 197.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>31</sup>Gorsuch has noted that "big business could well misuse computers to magnify the differences between the rich and the poor. The 'have' countries are moving into the computer age first and could use the advantage of computers to assure their prominence and the subjugation of the 'have not' countries." Gorsuch, 188. Edward LeRoy Long supports this view, insisting that "it must be recognized that computer literacy can easily become another means for exacerbating social inequalities. When public school financing is done by local districts, the affluent districts will have the resources to purchase computers, whereas the marginal districts will not. Privileged groups will be given the opportunity to learn the skills that make advancement possible, while impoverished groups will not. Such a consequence can be counteracted by intentional social policy, but the ideological climate in which we find ourselves seems adverse to the idea that the affluent should help the impoverished." Long, 252.

neglect of passivity will only be challenged when humans recognise their limits and confess their pride as sin. Gorsuch supports this view in his contention that "technology does indeed give us considerably more power, authority, and dominion over the world around us but. . . such power does not equate to wisdom. Given our sinful natures, the major result of great power is that we can make greater mistakes and create greater abuse than we were capable of before technology."<sup>32</sup>

#### IV

The first step toward an ethic which deals with the anthropological issues of computer technology is to recognise the value-laden nature of such technology. In an article in *The Conrad Grebel Review*, Robert Fortner discusses this issue, arguing that humans can become so awed by technology that they become blind to its consequences. He insists that the computer has a built-in bias toward efficiency for which it was produced and "developed within an historical and traditional context which constrains human choice, even if the technology was the *product* of human decision."<sup>33</sup> In other words, "the computer is an instrument, but it is not a neutral instrument, since its use is socially and historically conditioned. . . ." <sup>34</sup> As C.S. Lewis observed, "Man's conquest of Nature turns out, in the moment of its consummation, to be Nature's conquest of Man."<sup>35</sup>

In Niebuhrian terms, the more humans seek to deny their finitude by extending their pride and power through the use of technology, the more sin is manifested which leads to injustice and exploitation of the less powerful. The manipulation of the environment by human beings who bear the image of God may bring benefits to society, but the sin of the creature's lack of dependence and faith in God restricts those benefits to the advantage of a few. When God's grace comes to bear on this situation, through the revelation of Jesus Christ, a way forward is made available.<sup>36</sup> As the ultimate norm of *agape* is revealed, so is the required response of humans to repent of sin and strive for justice in society. In the end, "we may need to repent for an inadequate ethic, and to ask

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<sup>32</sup>Gorsuch, 188.

<sup>33</sup>Robert Fortner, "Privacy is not Enough," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 7/2 (Spring, 1989): 164-165.

<sup>34</sup>Abbe Mowshowitz, "The Bias of Computer Technology," *Ethics and the Management of Computer Technology*, eds. W. Michael Hoffman and Jennifer Mills Moore, (Cambridge, MA: Oelgeschlager, Gunn & Hain, Publishers, Inc., 1982), 30-31. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1964). Ellul discussed decades ago the threat that technology poses to value systems.

<sup>35</sup>C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, (Glasgow: William Collins Sons, 1943 & 1978), 41.

<sup>36</sup>For a fuller understanding of Niebuhr's Christology see Niebuhr, *Human Destiny*.

God to convert our ethic and make it stronger. What we may not do is to see computers as ethically neutral and let them remove our responsibility for God and community."<sup>37</sup>

Niebuhr's ethic of love and justice stands at the beginning of ethical reflection on the human enchantment with computer technology. It challenges the inherent evil in social structures without neglecting human responsibility for social sin. Humanity will be able to rise to such challenge only when it recognises that our social institutions "are not just a constraint on sin. . . they themselves are full of sin. . . . Our social life is fallen with us, and no social system is beyond the need of reform or perhaps even of reconstitution."<sup>38</sup> As the revelation of Christ entered history and God's judgement stands over history, grace through faith enables humanity to humbly repent of its nearly blind participation in the sin of idolatry, self-assertion and self-indulgence, with respect to computer technology, and its accompanying social consequences.

This process has been described by Stassen as the process of "continuous conversion", but a proper pneumatology would allow for an existential experience of repentance and conversion whereby humanity is illuminated and empowered for social self-examination and change.<sup>39</sup> The individuality of evangelicalism has resulted in a second birth experience which is divorced from social responsibility.<sup>40</sup> The concept of a "third birth," empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit, would take into consideration the necessary growth in faith which must be taken seriously if humanity is to deal biblically and theologically with the anthropological and ethical challenges of the computer age.<sup>41</sup>

The reality is that "the new liberation brought by technology poses an old ethical problem: the peril of freedom without norm."<sup>42</sup> It is evident that computer and information technology is enjoying the freedom with which humanity has endowed it, and it is left with theologians and ethicists to wrestle with the issues it raises, not only with respect to individual dilemmas, but social concerns as well. The technology is already well advanced beyond the level of ethical reflection. Now is the time to "begin to apply the Truth of the Word to our choices, rather than to accept the choices of the world to which

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<sup>37</sup>Stassen, 196.

<sup>38</sup>Stephen Charles Mott, *Biblical Ethics and Social Change*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14.

<sup>39</sup>See Stassen, 209. Cf. Niebuhr's theology which offers a truncated pneumatology at best.

<sup>40</sup>Richard Mouw writes that "the proclamation 'Jesus saves' is incomplete until it is clearly related to the building up of the life of reconciliation that salvation brings." *Political Evangelism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1973), 14. The reality is that contemporary society has so emphasized "individualism", that the social aspect of conversion has been completely neglected. Since it was not part of the original conversion of the evangelical "second birth" of the majority of Christians, it is to be seen as a subsequent acknowledgement of social sin, repentance of participation, and Holy Spirit empowerment for the task of justice, which was Niebuhr's chief concern.

<sup>41</sup>Cf. the two-fold biblical mandate of Christ to love *both* God *and* neighbour.

<sup>42</sup>Stackhouse, 22.

we seek to witness."<sup>43</sup> As President Ogilvie enthusiastically proclaims, "Grab your electronic surfboard because the wave is upon us," I would like to introduce him to my friend Reinhold Niebuhr, and offer the following caveat, "Don't go surfing alone."

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<sup>43</sup>Fortner, 177.

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