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ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF “CHRIST THE TRANSFORMER
OF CULTURE” IN THE THOUGHT OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR

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This dissertation entitled

**ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF "CHRIST THE TRANSFORMER OF CULTURE"
IN THE THOUGHT OF H. RICHARD NIEBUHR**

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In memory of Dr. Joe Crawford
encourager, mentor, and friend

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the world view slogan, “Christ the transformer of culture,” in the thought of its creator, H. Richard Niebuhr. Although the phrase is popular in Neo-Calvinist circles, this study finds that its meaning in Niebuhr's theology deviates from Reformed orthodoxy.

In order to understand what Niebuhr intends by Christ transforming culture, we begin by outlining his understanding of the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. Niebuhr describes the triadic community that exists between God, individuals, and the rest of creation. Unfortunately, humanity has always broken this community by distrusting God and being disloyal to his cause. Such depravity manifests itself in various henotheisms and polytheisms, which at bottom is a form of anthropocentrism. Nevertheless, God will inevitably reconcile the world to himself by instilling radical monotheism within people. Such radical faith learns to trust God and then serve his cause in the world by “transforming the culture.”

In view of his entire theology, we discover that Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism quite possibly influences his failure to make adequate or clear distinctions concerning the transformation of culture in four important areas. First, Niebuhr's failure to preserve personal distinctions within the Godhead leads him to subscribe to Unitarianism. This Unitarianism prohibits Niebuhr from giving adequate attention to the Holy Spirit, which in turn prevents him from stating precisely how the transformation of culture occurs and from giving humanity an active role in the process.

Second, Niebuhr fails to maintain temporal distinctions between the events of creation, fall, and redemption. This mistake leads him to interpret the human problem as ontological rather than ethical and to limit its solution to the cognitive domain. Third, Niebuhr fails to ascertain that various members of the human race will attain different soteriological ends. This universalism leads Niebuhr to espouse inclusivism and to limit divine judgment. Fourth, Niebuhr is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. This ambiguity prevents him from prioritizing cultural acts, stating precisely how fallen humans may still perform natural good, and understanding how redemption reconciles the present tension between humanity's natural and supernatural ends.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

I. Nature of the Problem

“Christ the transformer of culture” is a popular slogan among world-conscious evangelicals. Numerous theologians and institutions that seek to develop a Christian world and life view, especially if they are Reformed, express their *modus operandi* as some variant of “Christ the transformer of culture.” For example, Richard Mouw speaks of the need to transform the politics of creation with the politics of Christ.¹ Likewise,

¹Richard J. Mouw, “Creational Politics: Some Calvinist Amendments,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 23 (1993), 193. Besides Mouw, other influential evangelical writers who use variants of the phrase “Christ transforming culture” include Donald Bloesch, “God the Civilizer,” in *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 194, 197; D. A. Carson, “Preface,” in *God and Culture*, ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), viii-ix; Charles Colson, *Against the Night* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1989), 137; Colson and Jack Eckerd, *Why America Doesn’t Work* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1991), 85-92; Kay Coles James, *Transforming America From the Inside Out* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 71, 82, 92; Allen Johnson, “Reformed Fundamentalism in America: The Lordship of Christ, the Transformation of Culture, and Other Calvinist Components of the Christian Right” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 1994), vii; Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979), 360; Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 18-19; John Piper, *God’s Passion for His Glory* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 99-113; Roger Shinn, “The Lover’s Quarrel of the Church with the World,” in *Crisis in the Church*, ed. Everett C. Parker (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1968), 16; Christian Smith, *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), xi; and Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded by Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 23.

Reformed writers who use the phrase include John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 201; Craig M. Gay, *With Liberty and Justice for Whom?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 132; D. G. Hart, “J. Gresham Machen, the Reformed Tradition, and the Transformation of Culture,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 68 (1996): 307-8; Michael Scott Horton, “Introduction,” in *Power Religion*, ed. Michael Scott Horton (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1992), 16; Mark A. Noll, *One Nation Under God?* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 21; and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., “The Concern of the Church in the Socio-Political World: A Calvinist and Reformed Perspective,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 18 (1983): 190-91.

Others who use different terms but still allude to the phrase “Christ transforming culture” as a Reformed notion include Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 80; Kelly Clark, *When Faith Is Not Enough* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans,

Trinity International University is typical of many Christian schools, writing in its catalogue that it is “committed to engaging the culture and seeking to transform it for Jesus Christ.”²

Nevertheless, this Reformed acceptance of “Christ the transformer of culture” language is remarkable, given its source. The phrase does not come from Scripture, nor even from classical Reformed theologians reflecting upon Scripture.³ For instance, while Neo-Calvinist leaders such as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck taught the conversionist concept that Christians must seek to redeem all of life, neither explicitly expressed this goal in terms of transformation.⁴ Instead, this transformational language

1997), 186; Scott Hoezee, *Remember Creation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 86; Philip LeMasters, *Discipleship Between Creation and Redemption* (New York: University Press of America, 1997), 27-28; Sang Hyun Lee, *The Philosophical Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 214; J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *The Transforming Vision* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984), 100-03; Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 64, 151, 171; John Murray, “Common Grace,” in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, volume two, (Carlisle, P.A.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 102-3, 117; Mary Stewart Van Leeuwen, *Gender & Grace* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 30, 48-50; Henry R. Van Til, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 20; Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Educating for Responsible Action* (Grand Rapids: Christian Schools International and Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1980), 7-12; “The Mission of the Christian College at the End of the Twentieth Century,” *The Reformed Journal* 33 (June 1983): 14-18; and *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983; reprinted 1987), 3-22.

² *Trinity International University, 1998-99*: 6. Catalogues from other schools whose mission statements contain transformative language include: *Calvin College Catalog, 1998-99*: 7; *Dordt College Catalog, 1998-99*: 5; *Redeemer College, Academic Calendar--1998-1999/1999-2000*: 6; *Spring Arbor College Undergraduate Catalog, 1998-2000*: 8; and *Trinity Christian College, College Catalog--1997-98*: 2.

³ The term “transformed” (μεταμορφουσθε) does appear in Romans 12:2, where Paul encourages Christians to be transformed by the renewing of their minds rather than to be conformed to this fallen age. However, while this passage supplies a biblical foundation, it is not the immediate source of the phrase, “Christ the transformer of culture.”

⁴ Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone Lectures* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1899), 154-56, 171-72; Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 224, 238, 246; and “Common Grace,” trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 53, 54, 60-63. Cf. Jan Veenhof, “Nature and Grace in Bavinck,” trans. A. M. Wolters from Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, 345-65 (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies). Following Kuyper and Bavinck before him, the late Neo-Calvinist Albert Wolters also emphasizes Christ’s redemption of creation and culture without calling it “transformation.” See Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 57-71.

comes from H. Richard Niebuhr, who in his 1951 book, *Christ and Culture*, popularized the conversionist theme of Calvinist thought as “Christ the transformer of culture.”⁵

Niebuhr’s book and the remainder of his corpus indicate that he himself espoused this view. While he found merit in other positions, which he labeled as “Christ against culture,” “Christ of culture,” “Christ above culture,” and “Christ and culture in paradox,” he believed that “Christ the transformer of culture” was the most appropriate Christian response to the world. Consequently, since Niebuhr both created and advocated this important phrase, it behooves Reformed Christians who use the expression to examine what Niebuhr himself intended by it.

Such is the goal of this dissertation. By analyzing “Christ the transformer of culture” within the entire context of Niebuhr’s theology, this dissertation will illumine many of the benefits and dangers of proposing the transformation of culture. We will discover that “Christ the transformer of culture” comes with too much Niebuhrian baggage for direct Reformed consumption, but that when tempered by insights from Neo-Calvinism, it remains useful for expressing a Reformed Christian world and life view.

II. Survey of Scholarship

This dissertation is the first attempt to explicitly assess and critique “Christ the transformer of culture” within the context of Niebuhr’s entire theology. There are works that address the phrase “Christ the transformer of culture” and others that examine the larger scope of Niebuhr’s theology, but none that join the two aspects. For instance, some authors, such as John Bolt, Rodney Clapp, Stanley Hauerwas, William Willimon, Jack Schwandt, Glen Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Yoder, fault Niebuhr’s typology of

⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1951), 190-229. Niebuhr is not unrelated to Reformed theology. In 1934 his denomination, the German Evangelical Synod of North America, united with the Reformed Church in the United States to form The Evangelical and Reformed Church. In 1957 this group merged with the Congregational Christian Churches to create the United Church of Christ. See Jon Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World* (Macon, G.A.: Mercer University Press, 1986), 2-3.

Christ's relation to culture.⁶ However, these authors do not explore the broader theological context for Niebuhr's types, and subsequently their analyses are sometimes mistaken.⁷

Others have published helpful secondary literature on various aspects of Niebuhr's theological system, such as Jon Diefenthaler, James Fowler, John Godsey, David Grant, L. A. Hoedemaker, Jerry Irish, Lonnie Kliever, Melvin Keiser, and Paul Ramsey.⁸ However, these authors do not use their knowledge of Niebuhr to deeply analyze what he intended by "Christ the transformer of culture."

Still others have written helpful dissertations on Niebuhr. The most pertinent for our topic include works from W. Stanley Johnson, who examines Niebuhr's understanding of human sin and redemption,⁹ John Mawhinney, who studies Niebuhr's universalism,¹⁰ Ingrid Olsen-Tjensvold and David Trickett, who explore Niebuhr's views

⁶ John Bolt, *Christian and Reformed Today* (Jordan Station, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1984), 106-15; Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 59, 174-77; Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 40-41; Jack Schwandt, "Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*: A Re-examination," *Word & World* 10 (Fall 1990), 368-73; and Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).

⁷For example, Clapp, *A Peculiar People*, 174-75, discredits Niebuhr's typology because it naively implies that culture is some monolithic block set over against the church which one must either accept, reject, or transform in its entirety. However, even a cursory reading of Niebuhr's writings reveals that he possesses a more sophisticated view of culture. He is well aware of the cultural aspects of the church itself and the need to discriminate between which products of culture to accept and which to reject.

⁸Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, James W. Fowler, *To See the Kingdom* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974); John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970); C. David Grant, *God the Center of Value* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1984); L. A. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970); Jerry A. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983); R. Melvin Keiser, *Roots of Relational Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); Lonnie Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr* (Waco: Word Books, 1977); and Paul Ramsey, ed., *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957).

⁹W. Stanley Johnson, "H Richard Niebuhr's Concepts of Sin and Grace: A Study of Human Redemption" (Ph.D. diss., Saint Louis University, 1982).

¹⁰John Joseph Mawhinney, "The Universalistic Thrust of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Temple University, 1977).

on nature,¹¹ Douglas Ottati, who proposes that Niebuhr's theology successfully balances commitment to Scripture and intelligibility to his audience,¹² Charles Scriven, who examines the idea of the transformation of culture in Christian social ethics after Niebuhr,¹³ Terrence Sherry, who argues that Niebuhr's theology is christocentric,¹⁴ Glen Stassen, who investigates the implications of divine sovereignty in Niebuhr's theological ethics,¹⁵ and David Williams, who compares Niebuhr's understanding of church-world relations with Hauerwas.¹⁶ Although more than thirty Ph.D. dissertations have been written on Niebuhr, none have yet addressed what this dissertation proposes: to critically evaluate Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" within the context of his entire theology.

III. Method of Investigation

This dissertation's attempt to ascertain Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" by setting it within the larger context of Niebuhr's theological system is made difficult by Niebuhr's lack of an explicit system. Niebuhr had planned to

¹¹Ingrid Olsen-Tjensvold, "Response to Creation: Christian Environmentalism and the Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1978) and David George Trickett, "Toward a Christian Theology of Nature: A Study Based on the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Southern Methodist University, 1982).

¹²Douglas F. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, 1982).

¹³Charles Wayne Scriven, "The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Graduate Theological Union, 1985).

¹⁴Terrence Owen Sherry, "Shaped By Christ: The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., The Claremont Graduate School, 1997).

¹⁵Glen H. Stassen, "The Sovereignty of God in the Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1967).

¹⁶David Edward Williams, "The Church Engaging Culture: A Comparison/Contrast of Church-World Relations in Selected Works of H. Richard Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas" (Ph.D. diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1994).

write his *magnum opus*, a systematic treatment of Christian ethics, but he died before he made much headway.¹⁷ Insofar as his writing does reflect a theological system, Niebuhr seems to have favored existential or social models. The majority of the secondary literature follows Niebuhr here, explaining his theology from the perspective of the individual and his faith relations with God and other beings.

While such analyses are helpful, this dissertation will organize Niebuhr's theology by imposing an external grid upon his thought. Specifically, we will arrange Niebuhr's theology according to the biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption. We believe that such a construal of Niebuhr's thought will best enable us to understand how Niebuhr intended and used the phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture."

While Niebuhr himself does not arrange his theological ethics according to the pattern of creation, fall, and redemption, we believe that our use of this narrative format is highly appropriate. First, Niebuhr himself encourages narrative theology, or retelling the biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption. He notes that it is not sufficient to memorize grand metaphysical statements or doctrinal beliefs. Rather we should follow the example of the early church, which expressed its faith in terms of the redemptive events of history.¹⁸

Second, Niebuhr states that "Christ the transformer of culture" is superior to the other Christ and culture types because it best understands the biblical theology of creation, fall, and redemption. Since creation, fall, and redemption supply the criteria by

¹⁷Richard R. Niebuhr, preface to *The Responsible Self*, by H. Richard Niebuhr (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 1-2 and William Stacy Johnson, introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, ed. William Stacy Johnson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), xix.

¹⁸Niebuhr argues for narrative theology in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1941): 43-59. Furthermore, he specifically acknowledges the creation, fall, redemption format in "Man the Sinner," *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935): 280; "An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* (New York City) 14 (January 1963): 2; and *Christ and Culture*, 191-96.

which Niebuhr evaluates between types and comes to prefer the conversionist position, it seems necessary to understand Niebuhr's perspective on these matters.¹⁹

Third, this biblical-theological pattern is popular among late Neo-Calvinists, who use it to explain how Christ redeems or transforms the fallen creation.²⁰ Since Niebuhr shares this same concern, it seems appropriate to consider his theology in terms of the same model.

Finally, the most compelling reason for arranging Niebuhr's theology according to the pattern of the biblical narrative is that it is orderly. Just as any good story contains an introduction, plot, and resolution, so a theological system arranged according to creation, fall, and redemption is easy to follow. We believe that constructing Niebuhr's theology according to the order of the biblical narrative will best enable us to perceive what he means by the phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture."²¹

IV. Conclusions of the Investigation

This dissertation will demonstrate that despite popular attempts to appropriate "Christ the transformer of culture" as the classic Reformed world view, the phrase as intended by Niebuhr expresses a theological vision that is significantly at odds with the Reformed tradition in general and Neo-Calvinism in particular. While Reformed theologians may continue to use the phrase, they must correct important elements of Niebuhr's understanding with key insights from the Neo-Calvinist tradition. Only in this manner can Reformed theologians escape the problems within Niebuhr's theology and establish a biblically informed, theologically accurate view of the world.

Chapter 2 begins to lay the groundwork of Niebuhr's theological system by discussing his understanding of the creation and fall. There we find that, like many of his

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 191-96.

²⁰ Wolters, *Creation Regained*, 12-71 and Middleton and Walsh, *The Transforming Vision*, 41-90.

²¹ See p. 15-16 of this dissertation.

contemporaries, Niebuhr believes that creation, fall, and redemption are logically but not necessarily chronologically distinct. Creation, fall, and redemption are not three temporally discrete acts, but rather they represent three different facets of the one act of God. Nevertheless, he does assert that the notion of creation logically supposes a perfect world where each creature dwells in triadic harmony with God, self, and other creatures. Indeed, the unity between God and his creation is so intimate that Niebuhr appears to espouse a form of pantheism. Despite this immanent view of God, Niebuhr does emphasize that God is the final and ultimate end, the sole source of value. Everything in creation, from angels and humanity to plants and animals, possesses value only because it exists in relation to God.

Unfortunately, creation's community with God and among itself is also fallen. Niebuhr contends that the fall represents humanity's inherent distrust and disloyalty to God. He does not tend to believe that the fall was some cataclysmic event that ruined a formerly good relationship between people and God. Rather it is the nature of finite individuals to fear the infinite power of their ultimate environment. Uncertain whether God is on their side, people take their survival into their own hands. They become anthropocentric, or loyal only to themselves, as they lash out against God and any other creature that threatens their survival. They erect false gods, adopting various forms of henotheism and polytheism, in a futile attempt to bolster their own existence. Such anthropocentrism is universal. Its presence in every person accounts for the numerous conflicts between individuals and groups. If left unchecked, it ultimately leads to universal despair and destruction.

Chapter 3 completes the outline of Niebuhr's theology by supplying his understanding of redemption. Niebuhr proposes a helpful definition of redemption, asserting that it restores the relationship between God and humanity by repairing humanity's damaged faith. Just as anthropocentric individuals distrusted and so became disloyal to God and his creation, so radically monotheistic people regain faith in God.

They express this new found confidence by loyally serving God and others within his creation.

A strong believer in divine sovereignty, Niebuhr asserts that the application of redemption lies in the prerogative of God. Because God is both sovereign and good, Niebuhr believes that every person and every part of creation will ultimately be redeemed. God's grace must repair everything that sin destroyed, otherwise the community between God and his creation would not be fully restored. While God is the sole agent of this universal restoration, Niebuhr states that God reveals his redemption to different religions in various ways. The primary Christian symbol of God's revelation of redemption is Jesus Christ, who as a godly man modeled radical monotheism for his followers. Jesus' example challenges Christians to express complete confidence in and allegiance to God. As they do so, they will resist the temptation to defend the uniqueness of their own religion, which would amount to a religious form of anthropocentrism. Because they are solely committed to God, they will allow the possibility that God has other models of radical monotheism in other religions. Thus, radically monotheistic Christians are inclusive, for they recognize that other religions may also possess a correct perspective on the truth of God.

Chapter 4 uses the previous chapters' discussion of Niebuhr's view of creation, fall, and redemption to ascertain the meaning of his phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture." There we find that Niebuhr's typology of Christ and culture arises from his notion of radical monotheism. The two movements of radical monotheism, faith in God and loyal service to his creation, produce an inevitable tension between the poles of God and the world. Niebuhr addresses this tension in his typology, using "Christ" as Christian shorthand for God and "culture" as shorthand for human contact with the world. Thus, the five types of Christ's relation to culture actually reflect the broader concern of God's relation to the world.

Our study of creation, fall, and redemption in Niebuhr's thought now enables us to understand why he prefers the "Christ the transformer of culture" position. Specifically, Niebuhr appreciates the conversionist emphasis on the goodness of creation, the devastation of the fall, and the sovereign power of God to accomplish his universal redemption in the present. The latter is especially important to Niebuhr, and he defends it against the limited and sometimes futurist salvation he finds in "inconsistent" conversionists such as the Apostle John, Augustine, and Calvin. Niebuhr locates only one consistent conversionist, F. D. Maurice. Maurice not only believes in the present potency of a universal salvation, but he also concurs with various other aspects of Niebuhr's theology, such as the simultaneity of creation and redemption, sin as anthropocentrism, and an emphasis on the social aspects of sin. Niebuhr's high praise for Maurice, whose views are expressed in suspiciously Niebuhrian language, indicates that Niebuhr himself is most comfortable within the conversionist position.

The saturation of the conversionist position with Niebuhr's own theology testifies to its importance in his thought. Indeed, we argue that it represents the central tenet of his theology. Niebuhr's core beliefs are that the good and sovereign God is currently reconciling the entire world to himself and that people are able to participate with this inevitable redemption when they commit to radical monotheism. Both concepts are incorporated into Niebuhr's phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture."

Niebuhr believes that this transformation of culture will occur through a theocentric version of the social gospel. Christians must apply salvation to the evils of society, for only when society is redeemed can its individuals, who are social beings, also be saved. But unlike many of his contemporary proponents of the social gospel, Niebuhr refuses to ground concern for society in the anthropocentrism of liberalism. Rather than place hope in humanity's ability to usher in the kingdom, Niebuhr wisely notes that only God's power is sufficient.

Chapter 4 concludes by testing Niebuhr's conversionist position with the problem of war. Because war is the greatest evil found in any culture, it is appropriate to ask whether Niebuhr's transformational language is able to account for it. Niebuhr's six war articles, written within the context of World War II, indicate that he consistently applies his conversionist theology to the evil of war. Niebuhr does not back away from divine sovereignty to make room for war, but rather boldly asserts that all evil, including war, comes from the hand of God. Nevertheless, Niebuhr tempers this hard statement with the recognition that every event that comes from God must also be redemptive. While God's redemptive intent within war may be difficult to discern, it does become visible when viewed through the Christian symbol of the cross. There we discover the vicarious nature of wartime suffering. Just as Jesus' suffering on the cross shames his followers into obedience, so the pain of the innocent victims of war may shame their oppressors into repenting of their aggression. The cross instructs all participants in war to repent from their own self-interest and trust God for the resurrection that certainly follows crucifixion. Niebuhr concludes with a fairly passive human role in the transformation of the culture of war. Since God is powerfully using war to accomplish his redemption, Christians should take comfort in his sovereignty, repent from their own contributions to the war, and aim to stay out of his way.

Chapter 5 presents a critique of Niebuhr's conception of "Christ the transformer of culture." It suggests that although Reformed Christians often use the phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture," they do not entirely mean what its originator, H. Richard Niebuhr, intended by it. Specifically, Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism quite possibly influenced his failure to make adequate or clear distinctions concerning the transformation of culture in four important areas.

First, Niebuhr does not adequately maintain personal distinctions within the Godhead, a mistake that leads him to subscribe to the Unitarianism of the Father. In relation to transforming culture, Niebuhr's Unitarianism prohibits him from giving

adequate attention to the Holy Spirit. This neglect of the Spirit in turn prevents Niebuhr from stating precisely how the transformation of culture occurs and from giving humanity an active role in the transformation process. Unlike Niebuhr, Neo-Calvinists such as Kuyper and Bavinck not only hold to an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity but also give special attention to the Holy Spirit. This focus on the Spirit's role enables Neo-Calvinism to explain better than Niebuhr how God regenerates individuals so that they may actively participate in the transformation of culture.

Second, Niebuhr does not consistently make chronological distinctions between the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption. This mistake leads him to interpret the human problem as an ontological rather than ethical fall. People are fallen merely because they exist. Since the beginning of creation people have naturally distrusted God and been disloyal to his cause. Niebuhr's failure to consistently make chronological distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption also leads him to ground the solution to the human problem in the cognitive domain. The absence of consistent temporal distinctions means that not only have people always been fallen, but also that they have always been redeemed. Thus, redemption occurs when individuals realize that the God they feared is actually their friend. Once they recognize that God is on their side, they understand that they have never been alienated from him, except in their minds. In relation to transforming culture, this cognitive notion of redemption suggests that the method to transform culture is to inform people that they have always been reconciled to God and then to so live as if this was true (i.e., in loyal service to God's cause).

In contrast to Niebuhr, Neo-Calvinism insists that the human race is ethically alienated from God. This ethical alienation is so severe that it can only be reversed by a supernatural act of regeneration. This act of regeneration accomplishes more than merely inform an individual that he has never actually been separated from God. Instead, it reconciles the sinner to God so that now he is no longer alienated. This new child of God is then empowered by the Spirit to redeem all of life, including culture.

Third, Niebuhr fails to ascertain that various members of the human race will attain different soteriological ends. This soteriological universalism leads Niebuhr to espouse an inclusivist view of world religions and to limit the severity of divine judgment. Notwithstanding this mention of soteriological universalism, Niebuhr is curiously vague concerning the nature of the eschaton. It is noteworthy that for all Niebuhr's discussion of the need to transform culture, he does not describe what that final transformation will be. In contrast to Niebuhr, Neo-Calvinism believes that there is an everlasting distinction between the elect and the reprobate. Those who die in Christ will live forever with God, while those who die outside of Christ will suffer everlasting punishment in hell. And unlike Niebuhr's strange silence, Neo-Calvinists such as Bavinck write much concerning the eschaton and the final transformation of culture on a redeemed earth.

Fourth, Niebuhr is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. This lack of clarity prevents him from prioritizing among human cultural acts, stating precisely how even fallen humans may still perform some natural good, and understanding how redemption reconciles the present tension between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. Unlike Niebuhr, Neo-Calvinism clearly distinguishes between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. This clarity enables Neo-Calvinism to explain more precisely than Niebuhr how Christ transforms culture through every phase of the biblical narrative. Regarding creation, Neo-Calvinism holds that actions directed to humanity's supernatural end are superior to those directed only to a natural end. Concerning the fall, it subscribes to a robust doctrine of common grace as the means whereby even unregenerate individuals may contribute to culture. Regarding redemption, Neo-Calvinism expresses hope in a full reconciliation that will ultimately unite all dualisms, including humanity's natural and supernatural ends.

Chapter 5 concludes that in all these ways Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" differs from Neo-Calvinism. Thus, while Neo-Calvinists may

continue to use the phrase to depict their attitude toward culture, they should be careful to recognize their differences from the theologian who initiated the phrase and distance themselves accordingly.

CHAPTER TWO

CREATION AND FALL

Creation, fall, and redemption are inter-related in Niebuhr's thought. Unlike Christian orthodoxy, which views these three as consecutive events, Niebuhr does not consistently make clear temporal distinctions between them.¹ Instead, he asserts that God performs a single act toward the world, a world that has always been alienated from him. This singular action is a rich complex that may be variously construed as creation, providence, judgment, or redemption.

The complex inter-relatedness of Niebuhr's thought defies a universally accepted entry point into his theology. Some scholars, such as Ahlstrom, Gustafson and Mawhinney believe that Niebuhr's theology is radically theocentric. This view tends to promote creation as the proper point of entry.² Others, such as Sherry, Kliever, Grima, Scriven, Frei, Hoedemaker, and Gardner, suggest that Niebuhr's theology is Christocentric. This position leans toward redemption as the appropriate place to begin.³

¹See *The Heidelberg Catechism*, Q. 6-8 and *The Westminster Confession*, Ch. 4-8. These documents assert that a good creation was followed by a disastrous, historical transition into a sinful state, which will be succeeded temporally by the restoration of creation in Christ, culminating in the consummation when every facet of creation will be free from sin.

²Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," 215; Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 29; and Mawhinney, "H. Richard Niebuhr and Reshaping American Christianity," 142-43.

³Sherry, "Shaped By Christ: The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," vi-viii; Kliever, "Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr," *Journal of Religion* 50 (1970): 33, 48; idem, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 138; Grima, "Christ and Conversion: H. Richard Niebuhr's Thought, 1933-37," 29; Scriven, "The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr," 282-83; Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 66-67, 95-96; Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 64; and Edward Clinton Gardner, "Ethical Issues for the 1970's: A Critique of Christocentric Models of Ethical Analysis," *Religion in Life* 39 (1970): 206.

Niebuhr himself suggests that neither creation nor redemption is the proper starting point for a theological system. Instead, he chooses to build his theology upon an analysis of faith, for it is one's faith perspective which supplies meaning to "the general doctrines of creation, of fall, and of redemption."⁴ In contrast to the theocentric and christocentric models suggested above, Niebuhr's emphasis on the analysis of faith seems to indicate a pneumatological system of thought.⁵

We will remember this priority of faith as we analyze Niebuhr's understanding of creation, fall, and redemption. Although we could begin our analysis with any of these three, the "order of right teaching" sides with following the biblical narrative, starting with creation before moving on to the fall and redemption.⁶ This chapter addresses Niebuhr's understanding of the creation and fall, laying the foundation for the subsequent chapter's discussion of Niebuhr's view of redemption.

Regarding creation, this chapter first explores Niebuhr's notion that God's act of creation is simultaneous with his acts of providence, judgment, and redemption. We discover that Niebuhr believes that creation, government, and redemption represent a single divine act viewed from three different perspectives. Next we examine the more

⁴ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros.: 1960), 55. Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, ed. Richard R. Niebuhr (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 88.

⁵ Our claim that the nature of Niebuhr's theology is pneumatological may seem to conflict with our later discovery that Niebuhr does not give full weight to the person of the Holy Spirit (see p. 105-6, 152, 167, 169 of this dissertation). These statements are not actually in conflict, for all we mean by Niebuhr's pneumatological system is that his theology focuses on the believing subject's faith, a faith which the church has always linked to the Holy Spirit. This remains true whether or not Niebuhr develops a robust theology of the third article. Our observation of Niebuhr here is similar to Barth's analysis of Schleiermacher. Despite Schleiermacher's relegation of the Holy Spirit to the appendix of his *Christian Faith*, Barth asserts that Schleiermacher's focus on the believing subject's faith indicates that his system amounts to "a one-sided theology of the third article." Indeed, Niebuhr and Schleiermacher appear to have much in common on this score. See Karl Barth, *Dogmatics In Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), 66, 137.

⁶ Cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), I.1.3.

important question concerning the axiological status of creation. Specifically, we clarify how Niebuhr's relational value theory determines creation's value to God, concluding with a brief look at his doctrine of God. Regarding the fall, this chapter first examines the importance of the fall in Niebuhr's theology and how he interprets the Genesis account. Next, we explain his religious definition of sin as distrust and disloyalty to God and the demonstration of that sin in various forms of henotheism and polytheism. We conclude with Niebuhr's understanding of the ravages of sin and the world's need for redemption.

I. Creation

A. Act of Creation

Niebuhr's understanding of creation is perhaps the most difficult aspect of his theology to comprehend, for he asserts that God's act of creation is simultaneous with his acts of governance and redemption. This section analyzes this claim alongside Niebuhr's concession that these three elements in some sense also occur sequentially. While many commentators justifiably limit their discussion to Niebuhr's use of creation, government, and redemption, we note that Niebuhr's concept of divine government contains two elements: providence and judgment.⁷ Thus, we need to examine a double triad in Niebuhr's thought: creation, providence, and redemption and creation, judgment, and redemption.

1. *Creation, Providence, and Redemption as a Single Act*

Many scholars have observed that Niebuhr conceives of God's act of creation, government, and redemption not as three discrete acts but as three different aspects of a

⁷Douglas F. Ottati, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theocentric Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11 (1988): 269; James M. Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 27; and Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 88.

single divine act. God performs one continuous action towards the world, an action which simultaneously affirms, sustains, and saves his creation. Typical is Hoedemaker's comment: "When we learn to speak of God as Creator, Governor, and Redeemer, we do not mean three different actions of one God, but three ways in which we experience and interpret the one divine action."⁸ Hoedemaker draws this conclusion from his analysis of Niebuhr's unpublished ethics lectures, lectures that he divided into "Response to God the Creator," "Response to God the Governor," and "Response to God the Redeemer."⁹

My own examination of one version of Niebuhr's lecture notes supports Hoedemaker's claim. For example, Niebuhr states that the order between Creator, Governor, and Redeemer is not important, for all three complement and inform the others. He adds, "We would not know Him as creator unless we first knew Him as redeemer. We would know only a power." While this quotation only indicates epistemological unity and order, Niebuhr later expands this to include an ontological unity and order within the divine actions. He remarks that God does not first act as Creator and Governor and only subsequently as Redeemer, but rather the "redeeming action of God is present in all actions of God at all times."¹⁰

⁸Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 87. Cf. Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 28-29. Several other sources elaborate on this threefold perception of God as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 156-57; Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 17, 138-44; Ottati, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theocentric Vision," 269; and George Grima, "Christ and Conversion: H. Richard Niebuhr's Thought, 1933-1937," in *Sylloge excerptorum e dissertationibus ad gradum doctoris in Sacra Theologia vel in Iure canonico consequendum conscriptis* 1979 (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1976; reprint, 1979), 28-29.

⁹Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 30 and Kliever, 139, 200.

¹⁰Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," lecture notes compiled by David Graybeal at Yale Divinity School, winter term, 1947-48, in *Collected Articles* (Madison, N.J.: Drew University Library, 1975, microfiche), 56, 89. Cf. Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 37: "Indeed, for Niebuhr God's redemptive action could not be isolated and confined to a single act. God the Redeemer is the Eternal Son, the Eternal

Because the simultaneity of creation, government, and redemption is a difficult concept to grasp, we will briefly discuss two lines of thought that drove Niebuhr to hold this view. First, in his introduction to Niebuhr's *The Responsible Self*, James Gustafson argues that the simultaneity of creation, government, and redemption arose from Niebuhr's theory of revelation. According to Gustafson, Niebuhr does not regard the authority of Scripture as absolute, since "only One is absolute, and all other beings, purposes, cultural expressions, politics, and religion are relative to Him." In light of the One, Scripture's authority is only a "mediate derived authority."¹¹ At the same time the Bible's authority is "unique both in content and in function...[as] the historical revelation of the transcendent One, the One who is outside our history, standing over against us."¹² In short, the Bible is important insofar as it discloses the Trinitarian character of Christian ethics. Gustafson explains:

It is in Scripture that we find the Trinitarian pattern which is indispensable for understanding the ultimate authority for man's moral existence. God is disclosed as the Creator—the one in whom power is manifest, but goodness is uncertain. He is disclosed in the Son, as God with us—the one in whom goodness is present, but power is dubious. He is disclosed in the Holy Spirit—the one whose presence is manifest, but whose ultimate nature is shrouded in mystery.¹³

Gustafson next observes that "the importance of the historical disclosure of God in the story of life and thought given in Scripture for Niebuhr might well miss the reader

Christ, 'pre-existent and post-existent'; thus no single act of his is to be absolutized as the redemptive act. If God is Redeemer, he is always Redeemer, he was always Redeemer, he will always be Redeemer."

¹¹ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 22.

¹² Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 24.

¹³ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 24. Note that Gustafson implies that Niebuhr's Trinitarian ethics gives primacy to the Father: the One is disclosed *as* the Creator but only *in* the Son and Holy Spirit (emphasis mine). This foreshadows our later claim that Niebuhr minimizes the deity of the Son and Holy Spirit and so becomes less than fully Trinitarian. See p. 257-63 of this dissertation.

of [*The Responsible Self*].” According to Gustafson, that emphasis “would have been the substance of a second volume of his ethics, that dealing with the ‘Principles of Christian Action.’ It would have elaborated the implications of statements in this book about response to God.” Since Niebuhr never completed that task, Gustafson aims “to sketch out Niebuhr’s interpretation of the God who discloses himself in all the actions upon us, the God to whose actions we respond in our actions.”¹⁴

Gustafson begins his exposition by recalling “the most memorable theme in [Niebuhr’s] course of lectures on Christian ethics”: “responsibility affirms—God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.”¹⁵ Gustafson asks: “Who is the God known to us in our action?” The answer points directly to God’s revelation “to the community [of faith] in its history.”¹⁶ Thus, Christian faith and history are inextricably intertwined for Niebuhr. As Niebuhr himself states in *The Meaning of Revelation*: “It remains true that Christian faith cannot escape from partnership with history, however many other partners it may choose. With this it has been mated and to this its loyalty belongs; the union is as indestructible as that of reason and sense experience in the natural sciences. But though this is true the question remains, how can it be true? How can revelation mean both history and God?”¹⁷

To understand Niebuhr’s answer to the question he poses here (the relation between history and God in revelation) we need to anticipate a later discussion

¹⁴ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 25.

¹⁵ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 25 (cf. *ibid.*, 126).

¹⁶ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 27.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59.

concerning Niebuhr's distinction between inner (subjective) and outer (objective) history.¹⁸ Niebuhr explains this distinction as follows: "Events may be regarded from the outside by a non-participating observer; then they belong to the history of things. They may be apprehended from within, as items in the destiny of persons and communities; then they belong to a life-time and must be interpreted in a context of persons with their resolutions and devotions."¹⁹ In a simple formula: "in external history we deal with objects; in internal history our concern is with subjects."²⁰

Niebuhr believes that revelation occurs only on the level of internal history. It is the product of a subject's faith. He writes: "The inspiration of Christianity has been derived from history, it is true, but not from history as seen by a spectator; the constant reference is to subjective events, that is to events in the lives of subjects."²¹ These revelatory events are not "visible to any external point of view." Rather, "One must look with them and not at them to verify their visions, participate in their history rather than regard it if one would apprehend what they apprehended. The history of the inner life can only be confessed by selves who speak of what happened to them in the community of other selves."²² Again he states: "When we speak of revelation in the Christian

¹⁸ See p. 136-39 of this dissertation.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 63.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 64.

²¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 72.

²² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 73. Niebuhr goes on to describe the difference between outer and inner history in Kantian terms, as "the distinction between history as known by the pure and as apprehended by the practical reason... ."

church we refer to *our* history, to the history of selves or to history as it is lived and apprehended from within.”²³

From this view of Niebuhr’s understanding of revelation, Gustafson’s description of Niebuhr’s tendency to speak of God’s action as singular becomes intelligible. It does not matter if outer history records God creating, governing, and redeeming in successive events. It is within inner history that revelation occurs. And there we perceive, in Gustafson’s words, that the one God is “present at the same time and in the same actions upon us as our Creator, Governor, and Redeemer.”²⁴ Gustafson explains:

It was not characteristic of Niebuhr’s exposition to speak of God’s relation to the world as if it had its *own distinct historical chronology*. Indeed, his view of revelation did not permit him to divide God’s activity along some dispensational time line; as if first he created the world; then he governed and judged the world; then he redeemed it. He did create the world, to be sure; but the Creator is the Governor and the Redeemer, and always was so. And he continues to be creative in the world which he governs and redeems. The action of the Sustainer and Judge is the action of the Creator and Redeemer. The action of God the Redeemer is the action of the Creator and Sustainer.²⁵

Here Gustafson calls special attention to Niebuhr’s “dissatisfaction with Lutheran dogma...for their right- and left-handed views of God, being the Creator and Governor with one hand, and the Redeemer with the other.”²⁶ Gustafson elaborates:

[This Lutheran distinction] violates Niebuhr’s sense of God’s Oneness, and his sense of the presence of redemption in the creative action of God, of ordering in the redemptive action of God, of God’s graciousness in his judgment and his judgment in his grace. Further, for Niebuhr the redemptive work of God was not confined to his gracious remission of man’s personal sin, and the restoration of a

²³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 60 (emphasis Niebuhr’s).

²⁴ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 29.

²⁵ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 28-29 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 29.

new personal relation to himself. The Redeemer is present in the ordering of the world through the establishment of justice, as well as in the forgiveness of each man's personal sin. He was so present to the sons of God in Israel, as he is also to his children in the Christian Church. He is acting as Creator, Sustainer, and Judge, and Redeemer in the events of the non-Christian (in a cultural sense) parts of the world as well as in the Christian West.²⁷

Besides Gustafson's argument from revelation, further support for Niebuhr's belief in the simultaneity of creation, government, and redemption arises from his responsibility theory of ethics. Again, our discussion here anticipates later comments on Niebuhr's ethical theory.²⁸ Niebuhr conceives the structure of Christian ethics to consist of two parts: the responsible self and the God to whom it responds. He states that the fundamental question of human existence concerns the unity of this responsible self. In his words, "How is it possible to be *one* self in the multiplicity of events and of one's interpretations of them?"²⁹ The question is complicated by the fact that all human beings find themselves in a multitude of natural and social relationships. Concerning these relationships Niebuhr asks: "But what ties all these responsivities and responsibilities together and where is the responsible *self* among all these roles played by the individual being? Can it be located within the self, as though by some mighty act of self-making it

²⁷ Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 29-30. Gustafson adds that although Niebuhr did not wish to divide God into Creator, Governor, and Redeemer, yet his theological ethics did distinguish between our human responses to these three divine activities. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 167; idem, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (Spring 1988): 121; Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 86-87, 133, 193-96; and Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 87, 109.

²⁸ See p. 68-71 of this dissertation.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 121 (emphasis Niebuhr's).

brought itself into being as one 'I' among these many systems of interpretation and response?"³⁰

The answer to this rhetorical question is no. Instead, Niebuhr replies that "The self as one self among all the systematized reactions in which it engages seems to be the counterpart of a unity that lies beyond, yet expresses itself in, all the manifold systems of actions upon it. In religious language, the soul and God belong together; or otherwise stated, I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me."³¹ The unity of the self only occurs when in trusting faith "I acknowledge that whatever acts upon me, in whatever domain of being, is part of, or participates in, one ultimate action... . Or, to state the matter in another way, by that action whereby I am I in all the roles I play, in reaction to all the systems of action that impinge upon me, I am in the presence of the One beyond all the many."³² In other words: "To respond to the ultimate action in all responses to finite actions means to seek one integrity of self amidst all the integrities of scientific, political, economic, educational, and other cultural activities; it means to be one responding self amidst all the responses of the roles being played, because there is present to the self the One other beyond all the finite systems of nature and society."³³

Thus, finding the one "self" in the experience of many roles and relationships occurs as an act of faith in the One who is ultimately good. No longer do we interpret and evaluate our experience in a narrow sense as that which is good or bad for me or for

³⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122 (emphasis Niebuhr's).

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122.

³² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122-23.

³³ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 123.

any finite cause. Instead, in faith we are given confidence “in the power by which all things are and by which I am.”³⁴ Niebuhr elaborates:

...should I learn in the depths of my existence to praise the creative source, than [sic] I shall understand and see that, *whatever is, is good*, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be, good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions. And now all my relative evaluations will be subjected to the continuing and great correction. They will be made to fit into a total process producing good—not what is good for me (though my confidence accepts that as included), nor what is good for man (though that is also included), nor what is good for the development of life (though that also belongs in the picture), but what is good for being, for universal being, or for God, center and source of all existence.³⁵

In summary: “the responsible self finds its unity in its explicit responsiveness to the deed by which it is a self, one *I* among all its roles, and in its responsiveness to one action in all the actions to which it is subjected.”³⁶

According to Niebuhr, this unity of the self possesses both a subjective and objective side. Concerning the subjective element, Niebuhr states that we need to respond to the action by which our self was created. He writes: “The moral problem of the *one in the many* on its subjective side is the problem of the one self given to the I and required of it in all the pluralism of its being. That oneness, that ‘I am I,’ is given. It represents an action issuing in the self and maintaining the self. To respond to it is to

³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 124-25.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125 (emphasis Niebuhr’s). Cf. idem, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience,” *Journal of Philosophy* 42 (1945): 357, where Niebuhr asserts that humanity’s belief in the unity of God is foundational to the unity of the self and its ethical code. He writes: “The convictions that the one behind the many is God and that God is one, that the Universal is divine and that God is universal are probably more primitive than the convictions that the self ought to abide by one law, be subject to one judgment, that there is a last court from which there is no appeal, a last other from whom the self can not escape. At the least, the unity of self and the unity of the other go hand in hand and it is impossible to ascribe priority to the former.” Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 183.

respond to *my* maker. No matter how responsible I may be in my various roles as member of societies and holder of offices, I am not a whole, responsible self until I have faced up to this action, interpreted it, and given my answer.”³⁷ Concerning the other, objective element, Niebuhr states: “On its objective side the moral problem of the one in the many is the problem of discerning one action, one intention, one final context of all the actions upon me, whether these issue from natural powers or from men, from It’s or Thou’s. The self which is one in itself responds to all actions upon it as expressive of One intention or One context.”³⁸

This action of discernment and response is an act of faith. Niebuhr explains that “How and why...[all] events fit in, [the self] does not yet know. So far as it acknowledges in positive or negative faith, in trust or in distrust, the One in the many, it accepts the presence only of One action in all actions upon it.”³⁹ Once again we find that “the soul and God belong together...I am one within myself as I encounter the One in all that acts upon me.”⁴⁰ Niebuhr’s point is that the unity of the self can only be found as a *responding* self. As he explains, “I am one in my many-ness in myself and so responsible as self, as I face the One action in the actions of the many upon me.”⁴¹ This produces

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125 (emphasis Niebuhr’s).

³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125-26.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 126.

Niebuhr's maxim for responsibility ethics: "God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action."⁴²

To summarize: Niebuhr's responsibility ethics requires a unified self, a unity that occurs only as the self responds to the singular action of the One that transcends the various finite actions and contexts. Thus, the framework of Niebuhr's ethical thought implies that God's action as Creator, Governor, and Redeemer is singular.⁴³

Although God's action is a single event, Niebuhr states that its rich complexity finds three distinct interpretations among temporal creatures. Here Niebuhr's priority on faith and one's interpretive standpoint becomes evident. First, people realize that God is both the source of being and the norm for all valuing. They recognize that He is the "power by which I am and we are,"⁴⁴ "the permanent ground in things," "the unconditioned source of being and of meaning," or "that which 'stands beyond, behind and within the passing flux of immediate things.'"⁴⁵ They understand that whatever is, is

⁴²Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 126.

⁴³This framework now illumines other passages that are more ambiguous with respect to the simultaneity of creation, providence, and redemption. For instance, in the following passage where "divine action" and "universal action" are singular, it is not unreasonable to ask whether these terms are singular because Niebuhr does not wish to distinguish temporally between creation, providence, and redemption. Niebuhr writes: "If then we try to summarize the ethos of Jesus in a formula we may do so by saying that he interprets all actions upon him as signs of the divine action of creation, government, and salvation and so responds to them as to respond to divine action. He does that act which fits into the divine action and looks forward to the infinite response to his response. The Christian ethos so uniquely exemplified in Christ himself is an ethics of universal responsibility. It interprets every particular event as included in universal action" (Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 167). Cf. *ibid.*, 140-42, where Niebuhr includes creation, judgment, and redemption within the "One" divine action.

⁴⁴Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 119-20.

⁴⁵Niebuhr, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 113. Note: Niebuhr does not state whom he is citing in the final quotation. Cf. *idem*, *Faith On Earth*, 65.

good, because it comes from the hand of God.⁴⁶ To perceive this is to know that God is the Creator.

Second, people realize that not only is God the source of all being and meaning, but that his providence also sustains all being. They understand that God, not individuals, decides who lives and dies. No one can remain alive if God chooses to end his life, and no one can die if God chooses to uphold his life. Even suicide is not a final decision, for God may easily override death by continuing the individual's existence in another form or place. Niebuhr reminds his audience that just “as we did not and cannot elect ourselves into existence, so neither can we elect ourselves out of it, if the inscrutable power that cast us into being wills to keep us in being after our biological death.”⁴⁷

God's sustaining power also serves to limit his creatures. People recognize their limitations when they discern that it is futile to oppose what God wills, for God accomplishes whatever he wishes. As Niebuhr explains, God is “the structure in things...the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him.”⁴⁸ God is “compresent”

⁴⁶Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125 and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1960), 38.

⁴⁷Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 131. Cf. Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 65-66: “It is not in the control of the self to put an end to itself, as it was not in its control to begin itself. We are in the grip of power that neither asks our consent before it brings us into existence nor asks our agreement to continuing us in being beyond our physical death. Sooner or later we awake to the realization that this is the way things are.” See also Niebuhr, “The Illusions of Power,” *Christian Century Pulpit* 33 (1962): 100; *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, three lectures, delivered at Howard University (Washington: Henderson Services, 1950), 22; and *The Responsible Self*, 114-15.

⁴⁸Niebuhr, “A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God,” *Christian Century* 49 (1932): 447.

with us, the “infinitely dynamic God” who acts in everything that occurs.⁴⁹ Whatever happens, good or bad, occurs through the agency of God. Niebuhr believes that to say anything less, for instance, that God produces good but not evil, would compromise God’s sovereignty. Better to acknowledge that God is behind and within every event, even when we do not know how or why.⁵⁰ To perceive that God’s will supports and limits all beings is to recognize that God is the Sustainer.

Third, people realize that not only is God the source and sustainer of all being, but that he also demonstrates commitment and loyalty to all being. God covenants with his creation to be its source and sustainer of life, and then he faithfully keeps his promise, even when his creation is less than faithful to him. To perceive that God is trustworthy as he creates and supports the world is to recognize that he is the Redeemer.⁵¹ We will

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 12-14.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125: “The self which is one in itself responds to all actions upon it as expressive of One intention or One context. For it there is no evil in the city but the Lord has done it; no crucifixion but the One has crucified. How and why these events fit in, it does not yet know.” Cf. Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 13: “The Tower of Siloam falls and kills a lot of people (Luke 13:4)--why? Not because a mechanical fate is operating here; it does not happen without the will of God. Your hair turns gray; a sparrow is fallen from the rooftop--why? Because God is there. He is in the event.” See also Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 89; *Radical Monotheism*, 48; and *The Meaning of Revelation*, 183.

Note: Niebuhr did not always possess such a strong sense of divine sovereignty. The early, liberal Niebuhr was content to limit God’s power in order to explain the problem of evil. He said that divine omnipotence meant only that God would eventually defeat the powers of evil, not that he currently caused all events. See Niebuhr, “An Aspect of the Idea of God in Recent Thought,” *Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 48 (1920): 43-44. Later, in the 1930s, through the stimulation of crisis theology, Jonathan Edwards, and the daunting evils of his day, Niebuhr rejected liberal theology and came to hold a robust view of divine sovereignty. See Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” *Christian Century* 77 (1960): 248 and Richard R. Niebuhr, foreword to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, viii.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” 89 and *Faith On Earth*, 109-11. Note that Niebuhr is similar to Barth in identifying redemption as a characteristic of creation. Unlike the classical orthodox position, which views redemption solely as God’s response to sin, Niebuhr extends redemption until it is coterminous with creation. Redemption now merely means that God remains loyal to creation. Thus, God would be the Redeemer even if creation had never fallen into sin. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), III/1:231; *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*

discuss this later, but note here that Niebuhr understands redemption as the creation of a trustful attitude rather than atonement for sin.⁵²

Thus, creation, providence, and redemption are three aspects of God's single action directed toward earth. Every historical event finds its source, meaning, and sustenance in God and reveals that God is loyal and true. As such, it is impossible to isolate certain events as representing only God's creative, providential, or redemptive action. Instead, every event contains all three elements, for it reveals God as the source, sustainer, and faithful partner of all life.

2. *Creation, Judgment, and Redemption as a Single Act*

In a perfect world, creation, providence, and redemption would comprise God's only action toward the world.⁵³ However, because this world is fallen, Niebuhr often speaks of another divine triad: creation, judgment, and redemption. Like the previous group, this triad also comprises three ways of understanding the single divine act.⁵⁴ The new element in this triad, divine judgment, is God's response to human sinfulness. And just as creation, judgment, and redemption are the eternal, non-sequential act of God, so the fall cannot be confined to any one point in time. Niebuhr rejects the notion that there was once a golden age of perfect righteousness and then the fall came and ruined it, so that now the golden age is lost. Instead, he says that humanity has always been alienated

(Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1945), III/1:261. To be fair, Niebuhr does also speak of redemption as restoring a fallen creation. However, unlike Christian orthodoxy, Niebuhr does not restrict redemption to this meaning alone. See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 157.

⁵²See p. 109-11 of this dissertation.

⁵³This is true given Niebuhr's definition of redemption here as God expressing his loyalty and faithfulness toward creation.

⁵⁴Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 100: "history is illuminated...as the action in which we are being created, chastised, and forgiven."

from God. He writes, "This strange human race has never been reconciled to God--but now its irreconciledness is more conspicuous than ever."⁵⁵

Nevertheless, even in its alienation humanity may yet retain original righteousness. Niebuhr explains that original righteousness exists whenever the world functions as it should. He illustrates the contemporary presence of original righteousness by the partial success of capitalism and communism. While each of these systems contain problems, yet each succeeds in feeding some people and enabling them to live. To the extent that each system is able to do this, Niebuhr claims that original righteousness is present. Thus, rather than understand original righteousness and the fall as occurring in chronological sequence, Niebuhr views them as existing side by side together now. The line between them is not found in some past cataclysmic event but in the heart of each person. The fall occurs whenever people choose evil rather than good, or more precisely, distrust, disbelieve, and are disloyal to God.⁵⁶

It is noteworthy that while Niebuhr himself does not believe in the cataclysmic fall of Adam he nevertheless criticizes his brother, Reinhold, for holding the same view. Against Reinhold, Niebuhr states that it is important to understand the biblical accounts of creation and the fall as representing more than mere myths. Instead, they denote unique historical occurrences, occurrences that are so significant that they function as myths, or "serve as categories by means of which to interpret repeated events."⁵⁷ It is not clear how Niebuhr reconciles this belief that the fall is a unique, cataclysmic event with

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, "The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age," *Theology Today* 17 (1960): 308.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 78, 116-17 and "Christian Ethics," 116. This notion is also found in Niebuhr's fourth Cole Lecture. See William Stacy Johnson, "Introduction," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, xxii. Cf. Langdon Gilkey, *On Niebuhr* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001), 94, where Gilkey states that Reinhold Niebuhr held a similar view. Rather than representing a "first righteousness in the temporal sense...he explicitly identifies the original righteousness with the essential structure of human being...Niebuhr is adamant that the essential structure of human being...is not destroyed by sin."

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 99-100.

his other statements that the fall is not an isolated, past event. Perhaps he means that Gen. 3 depicts an actual event that reoccurs in human experience. However, such a position is nearly indistinguishable from his brother's view which he criticizes (i.e., Gen. 3 merely records a general pattern of human existence). Like his brother, Reinhold Niebuhr also appears inconsistent when he addresses the biblical account of Adam's fall. For instance, Reinhold complains that belief in a literal, cataclysmic fall obscures the existential import of sin upon the individual.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, he elsewhere criticizes Tillich for interpreting sin in ontological rather than historical categories.⁵⁹

How are we to understand these apparent inconsistencies? Why do the Niebuhr brothers seem to both affirm and deny a chronological distinction between the fall and creation? This ambiguity is difficult to evaluate, as evidenced by H. Richard Niebuhr's criticism of his brother and Reinhold Niebuhr's criticism of Tillich. In his recent book, *On Niebuhr*, Langdon Gilkey addresses this inconsistency in Reinhold Niebuhr, and his suggestions for resolving the conflict in Reinhold also seem to apply to H. Richard. First, Gilkey observes that Reinhold Niebuhr describes Christianity's central doctrines, such as creation, fall, atonement, and the eschaton, in paradox. This paradox is similar to Hegel's dialectic, though unlike Hegel, Reinhold does not believe that the paradox can be smoothed out by some mediating rational principle.⁶⁰ Thus, Reinhold may be content to paradoxically both affirm and deny a chronological distinction between creation and fall.

This position would be similar to the thought of Hegel. For instance, Hegel believes that the fall is coterminous with creation because to be other than God is to be

⁵⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 1:96, 267-69.

⁵⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 509.

⁶⁰ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 64-65.

alienated from him. Every individual recognizes this otherness and alienation the moment that he becomes conscious of himself as a distinct self. Since this moment is inevitable for all individuals, the fall is an ontologically necessary event. Thus, to be human is to be fallen. On the other hand, Hegel chronologically distinguishes creation and fall by asserting that individuals exist in unreflective innocence before they become consciously aware of themselves as distinct beings. Until they become aware of their otherness and alienation from God, they are not yet fallen. Furthermore, Hegel chronologically distinguishes creation and fall by asserting that the fall occurs whenever individuals act upon their alienation from God and commit sinful acts.⁶¹

However, though Reinhold may be content to follow Hegel and hold these beliefs in paradox, Gilkey observes that Reinhold actually denies a chronological distinction between creation and fall. Gilkey asserts that this would be clear except for the confusion caused by Reinhold's preference for biblical language. On the one hand, his use of terms such as "creation" and "fall" imply that they occurred in temporal sequence. On the other hand, when pressed Reinhold would admit that he does not actually believe in their temporal sequence.⁶² Gilkey records a telling conversation between Reinhold and Paul Tillich in which the latter compels Reinhold to concede as much. In Gilkey's words, "Tillich smiled, sighed, and looked at his watch: 'Tell me, Reinnie, when was it, this good creation, and how long did it last? Five minutes, an hour or two, a day? When was it? And if there is no time for your good creation, then can you speak simply of a "story"? Do you not have to speak of a "broken myth"—and are you not then in some mode of ontology, of a discussion of essential nature and its corruption?' Niebuhr knew

⁶¹ Stephen Crites, "The Gospel According to Hegel," *Journal of Religion* (1966): 251-52. Hegel did not view the fall as some isolated, cataclysmic event but rather a general truth concerning all individuals in their created state.

⁶² Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 93-94.

perfectly well that he had been bested.”⁶³ Gilkey notes that this denial of a cataclysmic fall is the standard position for neo-orthodox theologians. Although they rarely discuss it, their rejection of a cataclysmic fall is demanded by their prior commitment to the theory of evolution.⁶⁴

Applying Gilkey’s argument to H. Richard Niebuhr, it seems reasonable to assert that like his brother and other theologians of the period, Niebuhr also rejects a chronological distinction between creation and fall. At the very least, Niebuhr does not consistently make chronological distinctions between them. This absence of consistent chronological distinctions between creation and fall produces unorthodox theological consequences. For instance, unlike Augustine, who posited an entirely good creation that did not need to sin, Niebuhr’s view implies that the fall was inevitable. Rather than representing a sinful act of the will, the fall occurs from the mere fact that individuals have a will. Thus, the fall becomes an ontological rather than ethical event.⁶⁵ It occurs simply because individuals are distinct or other than God. This non-Augustinian nature of creation and fall will surface again in our critique of Niebuhr’s conversionist position.⁶⁶

Niebuhr’s view that the fall is not some past event prompts him to assert that likewise divine judgment and redemption are not merely some future threat and promise. Both judgment and redemption belong to present experience. Niebuhr warns his students that they are being judged by God now. Now they are responsible to him. Now they

⁶³ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 94.

⁶⁴ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 134-36, 233-34.

⁶⁵ Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 133.

⁶⁶ For summaries of Augustine’s view, see Katherin A. Rogers, “Adam and Eve” and “Fall” in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 6-7, 351-52.

must give account for how they use their bodies, tools, and other gifts.⁶⁷ Likewise, Niebuhr encourages his listeners that now is the time of salvation. They are not responsible for future generations, but to submit to God and work for him now, obtaining redemption in their time.⁶⁸

3. *Creation, Judgment, and Redemption as Sequential Acts*⁶⁹

Although Niebuhr describes creation, judgment, and redemption as three facets of God's single divine act, yet he also is aware that these, especially judgment and redemption, occur sequentially in time.⁷⁰ Fowler helps to explain this paradox by noting that Niebuhr possesses a dialectical understanding of redemption. On the one hand, redemption denotes God's love and faithfulness to his creation. According to this definition, since every event expresses God's loyalty and commitment to creation then every event must be redemptive. There is no temporal distinction between God's creation, judgment, and redemption. On the other hand, redemption denotes the process by which God transforms distrustful and disloyal sinners into faithful subjects. According to this definition, since redemption is a process it must occur over time, and is therefore chronologically distinct from creation and judgment.⁷¹

⁶⁷Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 121.

⁶⁸Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 22.

⁶⁹Niebuhr does not appear to concede a similar sequential order for the triad of creation, providence, and redemption.

⁷⁰Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 99-100: Niebuhr also calls creation a "once-and-for-all" historical event.

⁷¹Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 157.

Using this second definition, Niebuhr frequently declares that God must destroy this fallen world so that he can resurrect a new one in its place. Nevertheless, while conceding that this implies a sequential order, Niebuhr emphasizes the unity of this divine action by asserting that this destruction and resurrection are actually two sides of the same process. He writes:

There is a bad time coming; there is also a good time coming. The two events cannot be separated from each other. The slayer may be trusted because he is the bringer of life. The life-giving father, however, cannot be separated from the destroying judge. It is one and the same process which damns and saves--not a father who slays and a son who gives life, not a righteousness which condemns and a love which redeems--but one God with one faithful working.⁷²

Notwithstanding this disclaimer, Niebuhr does admit that divine judgment and redemption occur sequentially in time. Furthermore, besides recognizing sequential order in divine judgment and redemption, Niebuhr also identifies temporal distinctions within the act of redemption itself. Niebuhr notes that redemption revolves around two unique events: the incarnation of Christ and the eschaton. Because the church now lives between these two events, it must grapple with the now-and-the-not-yet character of the kingdom.⁷³

⁷²Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 121. Cf. *ibid.*, 122: God is the one who "destroys in order that he may deliver, and whose deliverance cannot be received without the reception of his judgment." See also Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937), 137-40: Niebuhr observes that the revivalists of the Great Awakening discovered this unity of God's activity. They recognized that the sovereign God would destroy the world in his wrath and then follow that wrath with grace and restoration.

⁷³Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 86-87 and "An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* (New York City) 14 (1963): 6. Cf. Niebuhr, "The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight," *Religion in Life* 15 (1945): 114-15: In one sense "Jesus Christ has come and all the world is different; Jesus Christ has not returned and the world is still lost in darkness...It is not true that the revolution which makes all things new has not yet taken place and that men must wait to the end of time for the realization of the promises. But neither is it true that the revolution has taken place, that mankind has been reborn and that all things have been re-established in the glory intended by the Creator."

Nevertheless, just as Niebuhr discovered unity between judgment and redemption, so he uses the united action of God to closely connect these two acts of redemption. Rather than assert that Christians must wait for Christ's second coming to receive redemption, Niebuhr claims that Christ's second coming and its redemption have already occurred. He states that Christ's first coming was his crucifixion and the second coming was his resurrection.⁷⁴ This novel understanding of Christ's two advents produces a tight unity between them, for the interval between them is quite brief. Niebuhr desires this because he wants to claim that the church now exists between Christ's second and final coming. Since the second coming has already occurred, Christ's resurrection life currently applies to the church. Christians may confidently live in the triumph of Christ's resurrection, certain that God is even now working on their behalf. Thus, although full redemption has not yet occurred, Christians may trust that it is now powerfully present among them.⁷⁵

To summarize: Niebuhr's view of revelation and his responsibility theory of ethics lead him to claim that the triad of creation, providence, and redemption, or creation, judgment, and redemption, represent merely three ways of understanding God's single act. By this Niebuhr means that in his every action upon the world God remains its source of being and value (Creator), its sustaining (Provider) and limiting power (Judge), and that he performs these functions in loyalty and faithfulness (Redeemer).

⁷⁴Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 98: "But it seems to me that the Christian reinterpretation of the 'eschata' must be distinguished from Jesus' reinterpretation, that the resurrection means that Christ has come again and come with power, that the interval between the first and second comings was very short and that the interval in which men now live is not between crucifixion and resurrection but between the resurrection of the first fruits and the final resurrection." Niebuhr criticizes his brother, Reinhold, for asserting that Christians are now waiting for Christ's second coming and its redemption.

⁷⁵Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 98-99. Niebuhr does not consistently state that Christ's second coming already occurred in the resurrection. Elsewhere he asserts that the church now lives between Christ's first and second comings. See idem, "The Hidden Church," 114.

Niebuhr clings to his intensified notion of divine unity (simultaneity of God's actions) even when he is forced to acknowledge temporal order in God's eternal activity on earth. For instance, he may concede that God's judgment precedes redemption, but these are not widely divergent activities. The former is necessary to accomplish the latter and the latter occurs immediately on the heels of the former. Likewise, while conceding the "now-and-not-yet" character of redemption, Niebuhr concludes that the "not yet" portion is neither temporally nor qualitatively distinct from the "already" aspect. He identifies the second coming with the resurrection, so that in many ways the "not yet" aspect is already here. This radical emphasis on divine unity reveals a strong theocentric component in Niebuhr, a component that will reappear throughout the remainder of his theology.

B. Axiological Status of Creation

The previous section addressed how God's act of creation is simultaneous with his other actions, such as providence, judgment, and redemption. This section examines the more important question concerning the product of this divine act. Specifically, it explores the nature of creation and its value to God. It accomplishes this by initially describing Niebuhr's foundational theory of relational value and then appropriating this theory to creation in general and humanity in particular. The section concludes with a brief analysis of Niebuhr's doctrine of God, the most important member of the divine-creature community.

1. Relational Value Theory

Niebuhr defines value in terms of relation. His relational value theory asserts that something is good or valuable inasmuch as it is beneficial for some other being and it is evil or presenting disvalue inasmuch as it is detrimental to some other being.⁷⁶ He writes:

⁷⁶Niebuhr probably learns his relational value theory from one of his heroes, Jonathan Edwards. Cf. Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Paul Ramsey and John E. Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 8:540: "a 'general' beauty is that by which

“value is present wherever one existent being with capacities and potentialities confronts another existence that limits or completes or complements it.” Value occurs “in the fittingness or unfittingness of being to being.”⁷⁷ Anything that “meets the needs,” “fits the capacity” or “corresponds to the potentialities of an existent being” is considered good for that being, while anything “which thwarts, destroys, or starves a being in its activities” is considered evil for that being.⁷⁸

Consequently, nothing is valuable in and of itself. Value always occurs in relationship, when one being is good for another.⁷⁹ Niebuhr explains:

a thing appears beautiful when viewed most perfectly, comprehensively and universally, with regard to all its tendencies, and its connections with everything it stands related to.”

⁷⁷ Cf. Edwards, “The Nature of True Virtue,” 540: “True virtue most essentially consists in benevolence to Being in general.”

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 103, also published as “The Center of Value,” in *Moral Principles of Action*, ed. R. N. Anshen (New York: Harper & Bros., 1952): 165.

⁷⁹ Relational value theory raises two troubling questions regarding the relation between God and the world. First, is God valuable in and of himself, or only because he is beneficial to creation? Second, if value is defined by what meets one's needs, then does the assertion that creation is valuable to God indicate that God needs it?

Concerning the first question, Niebuhr concedes that since all value requires a valuer whose needs are met by the valued being, then even God requires a creation to value him. God may exist independently from his creation, but he does not properly possess value unless he is fulfilling the human need for deity. Nevertheless, Niebuhr rejects any liberal notion that would reduce God to the level of human felt needs. He says that God is valuable to “human constitution and its actual need” rather than to what humans desire and think they need. God's value is not determined by felt needs but rather by the fact that he is actually what people truly need. See Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” in *The Nature of Religious Experience, Essays in Honor of D. C. Macintosh* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937), 113-14.

Furthermore, God's value to his creatures transcends all other values. His transcendent value should prevent his creatures from turning him into a means for some other end. Instead, they should pursue God for his own sake--to enjoy him in beatific vision--rather than for any happiness he can bring to them. Those who disobey and pursue God for their own sake will not find him. See Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” 103.

Considering his emphasis on divine sovereignty, it is surprising that Niebuhr does not use the doctrine of the Trinity here to retain his relational value theory without relativizing God to the creation. He could suggest that God has intrinsic value in himself because he is tri-personal. Each person has value to the others, so that God retains his value apart from creation. This seems to be a viable method to correlate divine sovereignty and relational value theory, but Niebuhr does not use it. Instead, his emphasis on the interrelationship between God and creation leads him to concede that not even God has value in himself. This move in turn appears to threaten divine sovereignty, which is Niebuhr's fundamental doctrine.

Concerning the second question, Niebuhr answers that created things are valuable to God not because he needs them but because he desires them. In this way Niebuhr escapes making God's existence dependent on creation (although the previous point makes God dependent on creation for value). See Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 112; “The Center of Value,” 174. However, in his

It (value) is not a function of being as such but of being in relation to being. It is therefore universal, co-extensive with the realm of being, and yet not identifiable with any being, even universal being. For if anything existed simply in itself and by itself, value would not be present. Value is the *good-for-ness* of being for being in their reciprocity, their animosity, and their mutual aid. Value cannot be defined or intuited in itself for it has no existence in itself; and nothing is valuable in itself, but everything has value, positive or negative, in its relations. Thus value is not a relation but arises in the relations of being to being.⁸⁰

Since value arises from relationship between beings, the highest value must arise from a relationship with the highest or most inclusive being. In this way every value judgment is also a statement on reality, or being, for people derive their values from what they believe to be the core of being.⁸¹ When people correctly lay hold of the core of being they also grasp the center of all values. Whatever is valuable to the core of being also becomes valuable to them.⁸²

Since the quest for value is a search for the core of being, the quest for value is a religious pursuit. Niebuhr states that "...every theory of value, so far as it is relational, is religious in character. Every such theory adopts as its explicit or implicit starting point some being or beings in relation to which good is judged to be good and evil evil, in relation to which also the rightness or wrongness of its relations to other beings is examined."⁸³ Whatever being one adopts as the core of being becomes his center of value or god for him. Niebuhr observes that all people are inclined to claim some god,

classroom lectures Niebuhr sometimes remarked that God does need the world. He said that "if God needs nothing then he values nothing. If God is creator, (then the) world has value for God. God seems to need (the) world as (an) artist needs creation." See Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 10 (parenthetical insertions added to fill out the terseness of the student notes).

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 107; "The Center of Value," 169.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, "Value Theory and Theology," 93.

⁸² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 32-33.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 110; "The Center of Value," 172.

not necessarily a supernatural being but at least a value center and object of devotion.⁸⁴ He says that the question of God asks “What is the cause and the reality for the sake of which this whole vast drama of cosmic evolution, of atomic and sub-atomic movement, of life's struggle and humanity's long travail, has gone on and now goes on?”⁸⁵ It is this god, or source of value and meaning, that makes life worth living. He writes:

The religious need is the need for that which makes life worth living, which bestows meaning on life by revealing itself as the final source of life's being and value. The religious need is satisfied only in so far as man is able to recognize himself as valued by something beyond himself. That has the value of deity for man which values him.⁸⁶

Niebuhr concedes that not everyone finds the core of being, the true cause for which life is worth living. Yet he maintains that their ignorance does not threaten the core's existence. The core of being remains regardless how others perceive or misperceive it. Because it does remain, every being is related to it, whether or not it is conscious of its relation. And because every being is related to this core of being, or God, every being is valuable. This fact is explored in the following section.

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 23.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, “Life is Worth Living,” *Intercollegian and Far Horizons* 57 (1939): 22. Niebuhr adds that the meaning of life is a religious question because it has to do with the god people will serve. Individuals do not ask whether there is a god but only which god is for them. Cf. Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 87 and *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1941), 178-81.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” 115. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 118: Religion is “the faith that life is worth living, or better, the reliance on certain centers of value as able to bestow significance and worth on our existence. It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of which I think we all become aware at some time or another, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning.” Such faith is universal, for “As the faith that life is worth living, as the reference of life to a source of meaning and value, it is common to all men. For no man lives without living for some purpose, for the glorification of some god, for the advancement of some cause.”

Cf. idem, “The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience,” 357, where Niebuhr adds that a notion of god is essential to the human conscience, for every conscience needs a “court of last resort,” or some ultimate authority, to function properly. This court of last resort is the self's god, or “a being on which it is absolutely dependent for its value and one whose judgment it can not deny without denying itself.”

2. *Creation's Value Through Its Relation to God*

A recurring theme in Niebuhr is his point that everyone and everything exists in relationship with everything else. The connection is easily made. Every person or thing is related to God, its creator. Since God is the creator of everything, each person or thing is related to everything else through God. God as “the Being or the Ground of Being” is the One who “unites us in universal community.”⁸⁷

This relational ontology supplies a ready vehicle for Niebuhr’s relational value system. Because everything is related to God, everything has value. Creatures are sacred simply because they are his creatures.⁸⁸ Niebuhr explains:

...every life and every being is of value and significance because it has its source and goal in God, the Lord of heaven and earth. Now all the little causes and the little lives, the existence of plants and animals, as well as of men, of enemies as well as of friends, of death as well as of life, receive a meaning which they could not have so long as they were not related to the inclusive and infinite source of being and value. Life is worth living because it participates in the grand process of cosmic redemption from death and destruction to life and glory.⁸⁹

Because God cares about everything that is related to him, everyone who cares for God should also care about everything else. Everyone should care for everything because everything is valuable to God. Niebuhr elaborates the cosmic implications of this theocentric vision:

Its religion has found holiness in man, but also in all nature and in what is beyond nature. It has believed in the salvation of men from evil, but also in the liberation of the whole groaning and travailing creation. Its science has sought to understand men, yet for it the proper study of mankind has been not only man but the infinitely great and the infinitely small in the whole realm of being. Its art has reinterpreted man to himself but has also re-created for man and reinterpreted to

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 60. Cf. Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 16: God is “the One beyond the many, in whom the many are one.”

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” 103; Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 115-16. Niebuhr finds this sacramental sense of nature in the works of Jonathan Edwards, Woolman, and even John Wesley. See *The Kingdom of God in America*, 116-17.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, “Life is Worth Living,” 22.

him natural beings and eternal forms that have become for him objects of wonder and surprise.⁹⁰

Niebuhr's close identity between being and value prompts him to boldly suggest that all creatures possess equal value. Since value depends on one's relation to being, and everything is equally related to being, then everything must possess equal value.

Niebuhr writes:

If the first requirement on every man in every action is loyalty to the Universal and Transcendent its corollary is loyalty to all other beings emanating from and proceeding toward that Beginning and End of all. A kind of *egalitarianism* must prevail therefore in the universal society, not only as among individual men, communities, and cultures but among the orders of being. Matter and spirit, mind and body, nature and supernature proceed from the one source and are bound together in *one community in which there is no high or low, no hierarchically ordered chain of being*, but in which each kind of being is entitled to reverence, understanding, and service, while it in turn is servant to the rest.⁹¹

⁹⁰Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 89. Cf. *ibid.*, 32-33.

⁹¹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 97-98, also published as "Theology--Not Queen but Servant," *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955): 4 (emphasis mine). See also *ibid.*, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 32. Cf. Ingrid Olsen-Tjensvold, "Response to Creation: Christian Environmentalism and the Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr," (Ph.D. diss., Syracuse University, 1978), 118-21.

Notwithstanding his theocentric belief that God's absolute value relativizes all other values, equalizing humans and other creatures, Niebuhr seeks to preserve a special place for humans. For instance, see Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 18: "The value of man, like the value of sparrow and flower, is his value to God; the measure of true joy in value is the joy in heaven. Because worth is worth in relation to God, therefore Jesus finds sacredness in all creation, and not in humanity alone--though his disciples are to take special comfort from the fact that they are of more value to God than are the also valued birds."

Trickett, "Toward a Christian Theology of Nature: A Study Based on the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," 155-56, attempts to resolve this discrepancy in Niebuhr between the equal value of all creation and the superior value of humanity. He explains that Niebuhr's statement against a "hierarchically ordered chain of being" should be interpreted by the rest of the sentence, which indicates that Niebuhr opposes only a hierarchy of service. Niebuhr's intention here is not to deny that people possess superior value to other creatures. He only means that every creature, regardless how high or low on the chain of being, should serve and be served by others. No creature should be considered so high that it is only served and no creature should be considered so low that it only serves. While this is a possible solution, Trickett ignores the other two modifiers which immediately precede the term "service": "reverence" and "understanding." Reverence certainly implies a hierarchy of value, not merely service. Thus, Trickett's solution is too selective to do justice to Niebuhr's thought here.

Perhaps the best solution is to recognize that Niebuhr's radical theocentricity leads him to exaggerate his position, so that he periodically claims that all creatures possess equal value. However, in more constrained moments he recognizes that since a creature's value comes from God, it is quite possible that God chooses to value some more than others, though he never ceases to value all.

Niebuhr concedes that people are higher functioning creatures than animals, yet he asserts that this is not too important. God is the primary being, and his absoluteness relativizes all else.⁹² Since value comes solely from relationship with God, people no longer need to defend their importance by arguing their superiority to other creatures. Rather, they may take solace in knowing that they are valuable to God, a value that is not disturbed in knowing that other creatures are also important to God.⁹³ Niebuhr explains:

When the creator is revealed it is no longer necessary to defend man's place by a reading of history which establishes his superiority to all other creatures. To be a man does not now mean to be a lord of the beasts but a child of God. To know the person is to lose all sense of shame because of kinship with the clod and the ape. The mind is freed to pursue its knowledge of the external world disinterestedly not by the conviction that nothing matters, that everything is impersonal and valueless, but by the faith that nothing God has made is mean or unclean.⁹⁴

With this in mind, Niebuhr cautions people against violating animals in the service of human ends. They may not freely abuse animals merely because the animals are not as rationally developed as humans. He warns that "sparrows and sheep and lilies belong within the network of moral relations when God reveals himself; now every killing is a sacrifice."⁹⁵ Moreover, Niebuhr extends the line of respect further. Because the sovereign God is lord over the entire universe, even non-living creatures must be

⁹²Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 123: Because God does not play favorites, Niebuhr states that "all the relative judgments of worth are equalized in the presence of this One... ." Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 151: it is idolatrous to assert that people possess intrinsic worth. Instead, they only possess value because they are valuable to God. However, since God is an infinite being, he bestows infinite value upon them.

⁹³The young, liberal Niebuhr did not believe this. In an essay written in 1922, Niebuhr spoke of the "absolute value of human personality." See Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem," *Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 50 (1922): 279. This differs from the later, mature Niebuhr, whose theocentrism inspires his position that only God possesses absolute value and so people are only valuable because they are related to God. See Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," 3.

⁹⁴Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 173.

⁹⁵Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 167.

treated with respect. Niebuhr writes: “The line cannot even be drawn at the boundaries of life; the culture of the earth as a garden of the Lord and reverence for the stars as creatures of his intelligence belong to the demands of the universal will.”⁹⁶

Moving beyond mere theory, Niebuhr describes a progressive, five step approach for how an individual may practically demonstrate his appreciation for all of God’s creatures. First, begin with acceptance. The individual accepts his own existence and that of others, even his enemies, because he realizes that both he and they are willed by God. Second, move beyond acceptance to affirmation. The person learns to affirm God’s creation, even his enemies, asserting that it is good for them to exist. Third, aim at understanding. The person attempts to go beyond merely valuing another being and actually tries to think God’s thoughts after him, to perceive and appreciate the goodness of the being that he has made.

Fourth, progress onward to cultivation. The individual seeks to serve God by serving and tending the created being. Since it is impossible to cultivate every good tendency in other beings, the individual must select which objects and attributes to cultivate. This may require the person to transplant and perhaps even eliminate certain things. Nevertheless, this cultivating action always strives for what is best for being in general. It does not destroy or damage another creature for one’s own sake but only when its loss will benefit being as a whole. Fifth, the final stage is mimesis. Here one imitates God’s creative actions. Although the person cannot start from nothing, yet he is able to create, and in so doing he mimics God’s activity.⁹⁷

⁹⁶Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 167.

⁹⁷Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” lecture notes compiled by Robert Yetter, Gene Canestrari, and Ed Elliott at Yale Divinity School, spring term, 1952, 109-12, in Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 178-79. See also Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” lecture notes compiled by Kenneth E. Rowe at Yale Divinity School, spring term, April 26, 1961. This was the final time Niebuhr taught his ethics course. Rowe’s notes omit the fifth step, mimesis, probably because the class period of April 26 ended while Niebuhr was on the fourth point, cultivation.

3. *Humanity's Unique Relation to God*

While humans may not be intrinsically more valuable than the rest of creation, yet Niebuhr declares that people retain a distinct advantage over other creatures. Unlike less rational creatures, humans are able to perceive and respond to their relation and subsequent value to God. Niebuhr says that this truth was understood and emphasized by Jonathan Edwards:

What Edwards knew, what he believed in his heart and with his mind, was that man was made to stand in the presence of eternal, unending absolute glory, to participate in the celebration of cosmic deliverance from everything putrid, destructive, defiling, to rejoice in the service of the stupendous artist who flung universes of stars on his canvas, sculptured the forms of angelic powers, etched with loving care miniature worlds within worlds.⁹⁸

Niebuhr believes that faith in God is universal. Even unbelievers are aware that they and their companions are dependent upon an Absolute which is the primary reality, or the cause of their existence. They realize that they did not cause themselves, that they have no choice in their existence, and that even if they commit suicide they cannot kill themselves, for the ground of their being might will them to continue living in some other form.⁹⁹ Atheism is inexcusable, for empiricism informs everyone that they are alive because of some loving and great cause.¹⁰⁰

Niebuhr contends that though people may believe in the wrong god, they cannot avoid trusting in some god as their source of value and meaning. Even raising the question about worth and values implies that the questioner believes that something is worthwhile and valuable. And whatever is worthwhile or valuable to the person becomes god for him.¹⁰¹ He explains: "It is a curious and inescapable fact about our lives, of

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," 128.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 65.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, three lectures, delivered at Howard University (Washington: Henderson Services, 1950), 20.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, "Life Is Worth Living," 4.

which I think we all become aware at some time or other, that we cannot live without a cause, without some object of devotion, some center of worth, something on which we rely for our meaning.”¹⁰² Elsewhere he adds: “Men are so created that they cannot and do not live without faith. They must trust in a god, such as their own reason, or civilization, or one of the many other idols to which they look for salvation from meaningless existence. Hence the great ethical question is always the question of faith, ‘In what does man trust?’”¹⁰³

Unfortunately, humanity’s incurably religious condition does not guarantee that it will always worship and serve the true God. Human freedom allows individuals to choose to rebel against God. Niebuhr concludes that every human action is either a vote for or against God. It is impossible to ignore God or assume a neutral position towards him. One’s actions may be either theistic or anti-theistic, but never atheistic. An individual either serves God or himself; there is no middle ground.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 118; “The Nature and Existence of God,” 15-16. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 23-25.

¹⁰³ Niebuhr, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” in *The Heritage of the Reformation*, ed. J. F. Arndt (New York: Richard R. Smith, 1950), 222-23. Following Martin Luther, Niebuhr observes that to have faith is to believe in a god, for to express faith is to trust some absolute value, or “a being on whom the self feels wholly dependent for any worth as well as any existence it possesses.” See Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 24. Cf. idem, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 222. Niebuhr elaborates in *The Meaning of Revelation*, 119: “Now to have faith and to have a god is one and the same thing, as it is one and the same thing to have knowledge and an object of knowledge. When we believe that life is worth living by the same act we refer to some being which makes our life worth living. We never merely believe that life is worth living, but always think of it as made worth living by something on which we rely. And this being, whatever it be, is properly termed our god.”

Cf. idem, “Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2 (1974): 153—“The love of God and of neighbor in God are not foreign to man’s nature or, better, to man in his natural situation; but in our fallen situation they are present as love of idol and love of the neighbor in relation to idols. Man does not exist without love of an objective good which is, in a momentary way, at least the object of his greatest concern. Nor does he seem to live without relation to the Ground of Being though in the fallen state this relation is one of hostility. The love of God is the restoration and perfection of a response which has always been present in misdirected or inverted form; this seems also to be true of love of the companion.”

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 223: “We can take no neutral attitude toward God. In our very acts of trust in idols we affirm our distrust of God; in our choices of good under the guidance of our loyalty to the self we reject the divine claim to our loyalty. There is no atheistic morality;

To summarize: humanity surpasses less rational creatures in its ability to perceive and freely respond to its knowledge of God. However, this freedom also presents a dangerous downside, for individuals who are free to serve God are also free to reject him. This rejection has occurred, bringing humanity and the rest of creation under the judgment of God. This rejection will be the subject of the second half of this chapter, which addresses the fall and its effects.

4. *Nature of God*

Since the created order, including humanity, only has value in its relation to God, it seems appropriate here to discuss Niebuhr's understanding of God. This section addresses Niebuhr's emphasis on divine sovereignty, his existential definitions of God, including God's personal nature, and his possible pantheism and panentheism.

Influenced by Neo-orthodoxy, the demise of liberalism, and his reading of Edwards, Niebuhr believes that the doctrine of God, particularly his sovereignty, must be the starting point of religion. Reflecting upon several decades of personal scholarship, a mature Niebuhr notes that God's sovereignty marked his theological work from the 1930s on.¹⁰⁵ Articles from this period support his claim. For instance, already in 1929 Niebuhr was predicting "a new age of faith" wherein God rather than man would be the primary focus of theology.¹⁰⁶ By 1931 he was describing the "great disillusionment" that had descended upon western civilization, forcing theology to jettison liberalism's humanistic optimism for a radically theocentric focus.¹⁰⁷ His son, Richard R. Niebuhr, testifies that

it is either theistic or anti-theistic. If we do not trust God we distrust him, however much we may seek to hide this fact from ourselves by pretending to ignore him."

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," *Christian Century* 77 (1960): 248.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, "From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God," *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 57 (1929): 401-2.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," *The Keryx* 22 (May 1931): 12 and idem, "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 103, 112, 113. Richard R. Niebuhr relates that in 1931, besides experiencing the throes of the Great

Niebuhr retained this emphasis throughout his life. He claims that his father's first article of faith was neither original sin nor the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. Rather, he began his theology with the glory of God, a starting point he learned from Edwards.¹⁰⁸

While Niebuhr's emphasis on divine sovereignty accompanies and determines everything that he writes, the doctrine is most visible in his theocentric ethics.¹⁰⁹ There he says that ethics must focus on God and his saving grace rather than the fact that sinners are unable to rescue themselves from moral and spiritual death. While both are true, a theological ethics that emphasizes human inability will only produce despair while one that focuses on God will produce hope in and glory to God. Consequently, Niebuhr chooses to center his ethics on God and his redemptive activity rather than on people and their sin.¹¹⁰ Niebuhr's strong theocentricity does raise some questions for his ethics, questions which will be addressed in chapter three.

Although not as influential as divine sovereignty, other important elements of Niebuhr's doctrine of God include his existential descriptions of God. Niebuhr uses two main sets of descriptors, one borrowed from Paul Tillich and another learned from Alfred

Depression, his father had just returned from a year in Germany where he had spoken with professors and witnessed the turbulence there, including a few Hitler rallies. These events assured him that the present age was a period of disillusionment. See Richard R. Niebuhr, foreword to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, xxvii.

¹⁰⁸Richard R. Niebuhr, foreword to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, ix-x.

Niebuhr's lecture notes confirm this claim. He remarks that though sin is a reality "we cannot base a Christian ethics on it." Instead, one must begin with the grace that reveals sin. See Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 52.

¹⁰⁹Cf. James Gustafson, *Ethics From a Theocentric Perspective*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 88-113. Rather than construct an ethical theory according to what is good for people, theocentric ethics builds its morality on the will of God and what is good for all of God's creation, including non-rational species. Gustafson defines theocentric ethics on page 113: "we are to conduct life so as to relate to all things in a manner appropriate to their relations to God." Cf. Douglas Ottati "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theocentric Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning," *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 11 (1988): 269, 271, 276-77.

¹¹⁰Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 221-22.

North Whitehead.¹¹¹ First, Niebuhr describes God in various Tillichian categories as “being itself, the constitution of things, the One beyond all the many, the ground of my being and of all being, the ground of its ‘that-ness’ and its ‘so-ness,’”¹¹² “the Source and Center of all being, the Determiner of destiny, the Universal One”¹¹³ “the Ultimate Environment, the Absolute Source of my being...the Transcendent,” the “Circumambient,”¹¹⁴ that “on which we are utterly dependent for our being and our meaning,”¹¹⁵ the “ultimate source” or “the heart and center” of the universe.¹¹⁶

Niebuhr follows Tillich in his description of God because he thinks that identifying God with the ground of being protects his greatness. In his favorable though not uncritical review of volume one of Tillich’s *Systematic Theology*, Niebuhr declares that Tillich honors divine transcendence by asserting that God is the power or ground of being rather than something that actually exists. He writes: “Tillich’s God is not a being which exists or about whom the question can be significantly raised whether he exists. For Tillich is speaking of Being, of the Ground of being, of the Power of being. He is speaking of the ‘I am that I am,’ of the God of Augustine and Luther and Edwards.”¹¹⁷

¹¹¹David C. Grant helpfully divides Niebuhr’s metaphors for God along three lines rather than the two of this dissertation. He claims that Niebuhr alternately defined God as the transcendent Absolute, the encompassing Universal, and the infinite One. These three descriptions appear to belong beneath this dissertation’s Tillichian category, leaving Whitehead’s descriptors unaddressed. See David C. Grant, *God the Center of Value*, 54-59.

¹¹²Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 248.

¹¹³Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), 36.

¹¹⁴Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 61, 84.

¹¹⁵Niebuhr, “What Then Must We Do?” *Christian Century Pulpit* 5 (1934): 146-47.

¹¹⁶Niebuhr, “Science and Religion,” *Yale Divinity News* (January, 1960): 9.

¹¹⁷Niebuhr, review of *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, by Paul Tillich, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 7 (1951): 45-49. Cf. Niebuhr, review of *The Protestant Era*, by Paul Tillich, *Religion in Life* 18 (1949): 291--here Niebuhr appreciates Tillich for his emphasis on the power of the Unconditioned and humanity’s response to it. He says that Tillich’s philosophy is very religious because it focuses on humanity’s ultimate concern, which is precisely the urge of Niebuhr.

Second, Niebuhr borrows a phrase from Whitehead's book, *Religion in the Making*. There Whitehead described what he understood to be three stages of religious development. He said that religion "is the transition from God the void to God the enemy, and from God the enemy to God the companion."¹¹⁸ Fowler suggests that this single sentence encapsulates what Niebuhr wishes to express concerning the religious significance of his world's experience of religious disillusionment. As such, it became the most quoted non-biblical line in Niebuhr's writings, supplying the foundation for his phenomenology of faith.¹¹⁹

By God the void, Niebuhr meant that God is unknowable.¹²⁰ God is simply "the 'void' out of which everything comes and to which everything returns..."¹²¹ Niebuhr appreciated the input of Neo-orthodoxy here, for it contributed to humanity's sense of God the void by demonstrating that God lies beyond what the human mind can grasp.¹²² Nevertheless, Niebuhr believed that religious people must move beyond the mere transcendence of God to asserting truth about him. Unfortunately, the initial truth which people discover is quite unpleasant, for they realize that God is their enemy. As individuals recognize their sin and failures, they learn that their failures are not merely

¹¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: MacMillan Co., 1926), 16-17.

¹¹⁹ Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 59. Examples of its use in Niebuhr's writings include "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 112-13, 116 and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 123-24.

¹²⁰ The unknowability of God possesses important ramifications for Niebuhr's theology of revelation. He follows the lead of Kant and Schleiermacher in asserting that people cannot penetrate the noumenal realm to know God in himself. Nevertheless, people are able to gather in communities where they reflect on their experience of God. Thus, rather than God connecting with people, revelation is merely people discussing their experience of God from the particular vantage point of their religion. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 8: "Theology needed to confess its limitations; it could not describe God as he is in himself but only God in human experience; yet it was able to work within those limits with an effectiveness greater if anything than it had possessed before." See also *ibid.*, 16, 20, 22, 138.

¹²¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 122; "The Nature and Existence of God," 45.

¹²² Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 60-61.

inconsequential accidents but that they are an affront to the perfect God. As such, their sin brings down the wrath of God, who is the slayer of all imperfect and rebellious actions.¹²³

But Niebuhr is not content to rest with God the enemy. He says that true believers must go further and learn to know God as their companion. They must realize that God is “compresent” with them--that “the infinitely dynamic God...is here in my presence.” Niebuhr continues: “He is here, and we are present to him; and tomorrow we will be with him, wherever we are, in life or in death. This is therefore the moment of obedience. Time is shorter than you think, for you have God--for God has you.”¹²⁴ Thus, believers must traverse the path of knowing God to be the void, their enemy, and finally their companion. The final stage brings knowledge of salvation, though it is impossible to achieve without first passing through the initial two steps.

Throughout his existential description of God, Niebuhr seeks to highlight God's radically personal nature. This focus on divine personality explains why Niebuhr appreciates how Whitehead described God in such personal terms as “enemy” and “companion.” It also prompts Niebuhr to criticize Tillich's categories as too impersonal. In his review of Tillich's *The Protestant Era*, Niebuhr said that while he appreciates Tillich's emphasis on divine transcendence, his transcendent Unconditioned is too impersonal. Such “depersonalized and abstract” constructs can not aid the church, for the

¹²³ Niebuhr, “What Then Must We Do?” 147. Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 114: “When we have faced the fact that meaninglessness is intolerable only because there is a prior meaning, and that relativity is insufficient only because there is an absolute, that our whole disappointment has been possible only because faith is more fundamental than disappointment--or when, at all events, we have cause to regard our disappointment in the light of a possible eternal meaning, an ultimate, last fact, we cannot deal with failure any longer as an inconsequential thing in an inconsequential universe. Our pettiness, our meanness, our futility, *face the enemy, the judgment*. Our social system, its war, its poverty, all its brutal carelessness of life and finer values, no longer appears as a betrayal of our hopes but as our betrayal of God. It is not we then who have been betrayed but we who have betrayed” (emphasis mine).

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 14.

church knows that it enjoys a personal relationship with God.¹²⁵ Elsewhere, Niebuhr writes that one should not interpret Tillich's "Ground of Existence" to mean some abstract "absolute Power." Instead, "He is absolute Person."¹²⁶

This personal emphasis often reappears throughout Niebuhr's theology.¹²⁷ For instance, when addressing the doctrine of revelation, Niebuhr asserts that God's revelation is primarily personal rather than propositional.¹²⁸ Revelation is the "self-disclosure of a self to another self."¹²⁹ Revelation is not the communication of concepts

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, review of *The Protestant Era*, 292. Cf. Hans Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Bros., 1957), 82. Frei explains why Niebuhr could not agree with Tillich's statement that God is some impersonal ground of being. Because God is known only in relationship, and there he is known as person, Niebuhr believes that it is impossible to know God except as person. So theologians cannot abstract as Tillich does, positing some impersonal essence beyond what God has revealed himself to be--a person in relationship with us.

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 103. Cf. *ibid.*, 104, where Richard R. Niebuhr claims that his father is disagreeing here with Tillich and Schleiermacher in his insistence that one can use personal terms to describe the ground of being. This comment addresses criticism raised by such scholars as Douglas Ottati, who blames Niebuhr for mixing personal and impersonal images of God. Ottati observes that Niebuhr sometimes uses such impersonal categories to describe God as "universal being," "the ontological law," "the nature of things," and "this way things are." On the other hand, Niebuhr wants to depict God as an infinite person who responds to human actions. See Douglas F. Ottati, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Theocentric Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning," 273-74 and Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 168-69.

¹²⁷ Jerry Irish wonders if Niebuhr's emphasis on divine sovereignty allows him to coherently discuss the personal nature of God. On the one hand, Niebuhr defines a person as a self existing in social relation, an I-Thou relation in which both parties influence the others. I change by my interaction with the other self just as the other is conditioned by his knowledge of me. On the other hand, Niebuhr depicts God as so transcendent and absolute that he remains unconditioned even in his relationship with me. I am conditioned by God and yet he is not conditioned by me. So in what sense then is God involved in a genuine relationship with me? See Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 104.

¹²⁸ Conservative scholars criticize Niebuhr for giving too little weight to the rational, propositional content of revelation. See Ernest Johannes Beker, "The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 15 (December 1960): 126 and Gordon R. Lewis, "The Niebuhr's Relativism, Relationalism, Contextualization, and Revelation," in *Challenges to Inerrancy*, eds. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 153.

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, "Science and Religion," 21.

or feelings, but is the communication of a person, someone who knows us, and whose presence and knowledge of us transforms our lives.¹³⁰

Not only revelation, but also doctrine itself always and only appears in personal form. To explain what he means, Niebuhr contrasts theology with metaphysics. The latter addresses abstract knowledge of God, while the former discusses God as he is related to people. While metaphysics studies “the ultimate ground of being in relation to all being simply considered as being,” theology examines God “as our creator and the creator of our world, as our ruler and the ruler of our world, as our savior and the savior of our values.”¹³¹ Theology never abstracts its knowledge of God from its relation to man. It is always personal. This sense that God should always be discussed concretely, in relationship, induced Niebuhr to continually shun abstract, metaphysical language about God.¹³²

For example, Niebuhr asserts that divine sovereignty is a vital and fecund doctrine to an Edwards who is aware both of his “infinite dependence on the Being of beings” and his “struggle to respond to the divine initiative.” However, “When God’s sovereignty has become a law and the living relation a mechanical one, the dialogue between God and man is dissolved into a statement of incompatible doctrines.”¹³³ Losing sight of

¹³⁰Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 152-53. Niebuhr’s focus on the personal nature of revelation is characteristic of his twentieth century contemporaries, such as Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Smith (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958); Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1946), 9-12, 23-25, 48 and *Truth As Encounter* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1963), 18-30, 100-7, 130-32; Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1:136-39, *Kirchliche Dogmatics*, I/1:141-44. See also Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 14-18, 89-90, 93, 122, 248-49, and *The Christian Faith*, eds. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark), 50, 592; *Der christliche Glaube* (Berlin: Otto Hendel Verlag, n.d.), 1:54-55, 2:272.

¹³¹Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 10-11.

¹³²Frei, “The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 71, 84; Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 77.

¹³³Niebuhr, “Institutionalization and Secularization of the Kingdom,” in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russel E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 239.

humanity's personal relationship to God and falling into metaphysical speculation, theologians oscillate between the two extremes of divine determinism and radical human freedom. What made sense in a living dialogue between God and people becomes either fatalism or libertarianism in the now "petrified product."¹³⁴

Finally, besides discussing Niebuhr's emphasis on divine sovereignty, existential definitions of God, and God's personal nature, we must briefly examine popular charges that Niebuhr's theology caters to pantheism and/or panentheism. Niebuhr's terms for God certainly hint in this direction. God is "Circumambient," the "Ultimate Environment," "being itself," "the constitution of things," "the ground of my being and of all being," and "the 'void' out of which everything comes and to which everything returns... ." ¹³⁵ These could certainly be construed in pantheistic or even panentheistic fashion. ¹³⁶

The hints become stronger when Niebuhr describes humanity's relationship to God. For instance, the specter of pantheism appears when Niebuhr declares that loyalty to God involves "loyalty to being, to all that is God, and he is all in all."¹³⁷ Panentheism seems imminent when he maintains that God's love, the self's love, and the neighbor's love are interdependent. He writes: "God's love of self and neighbor, neighbor's love of God and self, self's love of God and neighbor are so closely interrelated that none of the

¹³⁴ Niebuhr, "Institutionalization and Secularization of the Kingdom," 240.

¹³⁵ See p. 50-51 of this dissertation.

¹³⁶ Though their definitions are debated (as demonstrated by the various views presented on the following page), I use pantheism to mean that God is identical with the entirety of the universe and panentheism to mean that God is a consciousness that transcends the entirety of the universe as its highest point of unity so that all things are imbued with his being. See Peter A. Angeles, *Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981), 111.

¹³⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 109.

relations exists without the others.”¹³⁸ It is one thing to claim that God loves the neighbor through me; quite another to assert that God does not love my neighbor except through me. Such statements could permit one to read pantheism or panentheism out of Niebuhr.

C. David Grant suggests that Niebuhr’s metaphor for God as the universal which encompasses all finite beings has definite pantheistic tendencies. This metaphor implies that God is the substance or essence of all things, which is definitely one way to understand pantheism.¹³⁹ Godsey adds that Niebuhr’s description of God as being itself also has pantheistic overtones. He wishes that Niebuhr had used “Creator” instead, for this would clearly distinguish God from his creation and readily fits his notion that God is personal.¹⁴⁰ Sherry aims for what he considers to be a more precise definition. He states that Niebuhr is certainly not pantheistic, though he may be a panentheist.¹⁴¹ Kliever counters that Niebuhr preferred to speak of God as the principle of being rather than mere “Being” in order to avoid such pantheistic confusion between God and creation.¹⁴² Unfortunately, as the above descriptors of God indicate, Niebuhr did not always follow his own advice here.

In the end, it seems that Niebuhr’s aversion to metaphysical speculation prevents him from clearly stating his position here. As Sherry indicates: “It should be stressed, though, that nowhere (as far as I can determine) does Niebuhr himself use the term ‘panentheism’ to characterize his own position. Nor, given his aversion to metaphysical

¹³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1956), 34.

¹³⁹ Grant, *God the Center of Value*, 56.

¹⁴⁰ John D. Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1970), 100.

¹⁴¹ Sherry, “Shaped By Christ,” 127.

¹⁴² Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 133-34. Cf. Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 33.

speculation, should we expect him to.”¹⁴³ Ironically, perhaps it is precisely his aversion to ontological categories that land him so close to these deviant forms of theism. If he had been more consciously involved with these philosophical categories then he may have been more alert to avoid these mistakes.

II. Fall

The first half of this chapter examined Niebuhr’s claim that God’s act of creation is a single function that is simultaneous with his acts of providence, judgment, and redemption. It then considered Niebuhr’s understanding of creation and its triadic relationship to God and other creatures. It explored Niebuhr’s relational ontology and value system which states that every creature is valuable and interdependent with the rest of creation because of creation’s relation to God. Finally, section one concluded by analyzing how Niebuhr viewed God, the most important participant in the triadic relationship.

The second half now addresses Niebuhr’s understanding of what has gone wrong with this good creation. It surveys the importance of sin in Niebuhr’s theology, his interpretation of Genesis three, and concludes with his views on the definition, demonstration, and the consequences of sin.

A. Importance of the Fall

Contrary to some interpreters, the fall holds a large and important place in Niebuhr’s theology.¹⁴⁴ Although he does not give the fall precedence over God and grace

¹⁴³ Sherry, “Shaped by Christ,” 127.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Mathonnet-Vander Well’s claim that Niebuhr lacks an awareness of sin seems difficult to substantiate. It should become obvious from our discussion here of Niebuhr’s theology of the fall that he possessed a healthy, full-blooded sense of human depravity. It would be difficult to find a more weighty sense of sin than is present in Niebuhr’s theology. See Stephen James Mathonnet-Vander Well, “Theocentric and Christocentric Reformed Ethics: Neo-Calvinist and Postliberal Perspectives” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1997), 45.

in his theology, Niebuhr claims that the doctrine of sin is essential to Christian theology, as fundamental to it as class conflict is to Marxism. He asserts that one can not abandon this doctrine without perverting the rest of Christianity, for "...the conviction that man is bad is one of the fundamental principles of the Christian interpretation of life."¹⁴⁵

Elsewhere Niebuhr claims that the notion of sin is the most fundamental part of one's theology, for it determines how the theologian interprets everything else. He writes: "The first question one must ask about every theologian before one can understand him is this, What does he mean by sin? Only then is it possible to understand his interpretation of Christ and God and salvation."¹⁴⁶

Niebuhr himself subscribes to a strong sense of human depravity. He rejects those softer views which suggest that depravity resides in institutions, certain individuals or social classes, or is merely a form of immaturity that society will eventually outgrow.¹⁴⁷ Instead, Niebuhr agrees with Calvinists who claim that human depravity is a universal and total corruption.¹⁴⁸ He does not mean that every person is as corrupt as they could be, but that their entire person, their "reason, conscience, instinct, passion,

¹⁴⁵ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," *Journal of Religion* 15 (1935): 272.

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr, "The Relativities of Religion," *Christianity Century* 45 (1928): 1457. Note that this reintroduces the previously discussed problem concerning the appropriate entry point into Niebuhr's theology. While this dissertation chose to enter Niebuhr's theology at the point of creation, here Niebuhr implies that sin is the proper place to begin.

¹⁴⁷ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 273.

¹⁴⁸ Like any Reformed theologian, Niebuhr observes that his discovery of divine sovereignty in the 1930s led him to also believe in "human lostness, sinfulness, and idolatrousness." See Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 248.

personal and social affections” is damaged.¹⁴⁹ He affirms that “there is no area of our existence in which sin does not seem to prevail.”¹⁵⁰

Moreover, Niebuhr believes that the rest of modern society agrees with him. He claims that the liberal optimistic portrait of man has been destroyed. Modern society no longer believes that people are good. It now recognizes that “man in essence is not the Godlike being in whom liberals and romanticists trusted, but... ‘man is a ratlike savage, suffering from demoniacal possession.’ Or... he is a parasite infesting the epidermis of a midge among the planets.”¹⁵¹

In a penetrating lecture written to defend Jonathan Edwards, Niebuhr relishes the irony that while modern people dislike Edwards’ statements on human depravity, yet their own novels, historical, scientific, and psychological studies depict a deeper depravity than even Edwards had claimed. Edwards found man wanting in comparison to God. Disliking that comparison, modern society compares man only to other men. But even this lower standard reveals that man is evil. Thus, modern society actually has a lower view of man than Edwards, for it finds him unable to satisfy even a lower standard of righteousness.¹⁵²

The preceding paragraphs prove that Niebuhr, like any Reformed theologian, takes seriously the effects of sin upon the human race. But how does he believe sin came into the world? What does he make of the biblical story in Genesis chapter three?

¹⁴⁹ Niebuhr, “The Idea of Original Sin in American Culture,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 182.

¹⁵⁰ Niebuhr, “The Disorder of Man in the Church of God,” in *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, The Amsterdam Assembly Series, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Bros., 1949), 80-81.

¹⁵¹ Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 106.

¹⁵² Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” 127-28.

B. Historicity of Genesis Chapter Three

1. Niebuhr's Perspective on Scripture

Before addressing Gen. 3 in particular, it is helpful to understand Niebuhr's perspective on the Bible in general. First, Niebuhr thinks that biblical doctrine is more important than a literal interpretation of its historical accounts. It is better to believe the doctrines presented in the Bible than to believe that its recorded history occurred just as it says. He suggests that conservative theology wisely focuses on the former, emphasizing doctrines such as human sinfulness and divine atonement. Conversely, fundamentalism is foolishly concerned for the latter, even willing to fight for "Biblical inerrancy and miraculous supernaturalism."¹⁵³ Such concerns produce needless clashes between church tradition and science without contributing anything significant to church doctrine.¹⁵⁴

Second, Niebuhr does not believe that the Bible is inspired, at least as inspiration is defined by the Princeton tradition. B. B. Warfield, a representative of that tradition, defines inspiration as "that extraordinary, supernatural influence (or, passively, the result of it,) exerted by the Holy Ghost on the writers of our Sacred Books, by which their words were rendered also the words of God, and, therefore, perfectly infallible."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Niebuhr, "Fundamentalism," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), 6:527. Although Niebuhr does not charge fundamentalism with foolishness in this encyclopedia essay, other essays demonstrate that this was his opinion of it. For instance, Niebuhr once observed that fundamentalism was a dead religion, having lost its "vitality and meaningfulness." See idem, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," *The Keryx* 22 (May 1931): 12. Elsewhere he accuses fundamentalism of foolishly emphasizing the literal symbols of Christianity (e.g., Christ, Bible, cross, virgin birth) rather than what they mean. See idem, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (Spring 1988): 124.

¹⁵⁴ Niebuhr, "Dogma," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 5:191. Niebuhr also gave much credence to higher criticism, conceding that it "has made impossible the acceptance of the authorship traditionally associated with many books..." See idem, "Higher Criticism," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 7:348.

¹⁵⁵ Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1948), 420. See also A. A. Hodge and B. B. Warfield, *Inspiration* (Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1881; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 17-18; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 1:153-68; and "The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy," in *Inerrancy*, ed. Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 495-96.

Niebuhr replies that Scripture can not be inspired in this manner, for God only inspires people, not things.¹⁵⁶

Third, and a related point, Niebuhr agrees with Neo-orthodox theologians that the Bible is not the Word of God, though if God chooses to speak through it, it may become his Word. The revelation of the living God must not be confined to anything static, such as “a book, a creed, or a set of doctrines.”¹⁵⁷ Instead, God must be free to speak a fresh word in every moment. He will not be limited to repeating what is already stated in Scripture.¹⁵⁸

Niebuhr claims that the church erred when it identified revelation with Scripture.¹⁵⁹ This identification then induced the church to regard Scripture as some miraculous book, the product of divine inspiration and wholly inerrant. Once the church believed that the Bible was inerrant, it was compelled to subscribe to all of its miracles, such as the sun standing still, Christ’s virgin birth, water turned to wine, and fulfilled prophecy.¹⁶⁰ Niebuhr suggests that this was a foolish move, for the Scriptures are merely

¹⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “Inspiration,” in *An Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Vergilius Ferm (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1945), 374. Cf. *The Meaning of Revelation*, 174-75: Niebuhr asserts that Christians trust God himself, not some book which they presume was written by God.

¹⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 41.

¹⁵⁸ Cf. Gordon Lewis, “The Niebuhr’s Relativism, Relationalism, Contextualization, and Revelation,” 151: Lewis agrees that Niebuhr’s view of revelation is characteristic of Neo-orthodoxy.

¹⁵⁹ This is a typical Barthian notion. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, 109-20; *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I/1:112-24.

¹⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 75: “Much so-called orthodoxy identified revelation with Scriptures and regarded the latter as wholly miraculous, the product of an inspiration which suspended the ordinary processes of human thought and guaranteed inerrancy. But to validate the Scriptural miracle another needed to be inserted into history since that which stands completely alone is an impenetrable mystery, no matter how much astonishment it calls forth. So miraculous Scriptures were related to miracles in the realm of nature, to a sun that stood still, a virgin-born child, to water turned by a word into wine. Furthermore the psychological miracle of prophecy as a supernatural foretelling of events, as though by second-sight, was introduced to validate the wonder of the Bible.”

a fallible, human book, reflecting the cultural context of its authors. While they may have believed in miracles, modern people are no longer able to do so.¹⁶¹

Fourth, although he does not follow the Princetonian notion of inspiration, Niebuhr still believes that the Bible serves as an authority for the church. The Bible is essential for helping the church to understand the mind of Jesus Christ, who is its final authority. The Bible enables the church to test the spirits to know which are from Christ.¹⁶² It is “the indispensable handbook, the indispensable companion, the interpreting community of faith at my side in all my encounters with God, with Christ, with my neighbors.”¹⁶³ The Scriptures are an essential “dictionary” to interpret what God is saying and doing in the church's public and private lives. Nevertheless, the church must remember that the Scriptures are only a dictionary. It must not preclude God from speaking through other sources.¹⁶⁴

For instance, Niebuhr claims that the authoritative dictionary, or canon, may vary between individuals and groups. Even a single individual may change his opinion on what is canonical for him. At any given moment, some books more than others will help an individual or group interpret God in their existence. Whatever books enable one to do this may serve as his canon.¹⁶⁵ Niebuhr concedes that not all of these books need belong to the biblical canon. For example, the Westminster Confession, Luther's Catechism, the

¹⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 49-50. Cf. idem, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 221.

¹⁶² Niebuhr, “The Norm of the Church,” *Journal of Religious Thought* 4 (1946): 11.

¹⁶³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 115. Cf. Gustafson, preface to *The Responsible Self*, 23, which claims that Scripture possesses an “educational authority” for Niebuhr. It acts like a teacher, drawing the church to a fuller knowledge of God's actions upon people and of their relation and responsibility before him.

¹⁶⁴ Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 250.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 47-52: Niebuhr's view of Scripture is consistent with what Lindbeck calls a “cultural-linguistic” model, or “postliberal” theology.

Book of Common Prayer, Augustine's *Confessions*, the Heidelberg Catechism, or Pascal's *Pensees* help some people understand their encounters with God better than biblical books such as Leviticus or Jude.¹⁶⁶

Fifth, and what may be deduced from the preceding points, Niebuhr gives much weight to present experience. First, he believes that experience is more reliable than Scripture itself. For instance, he thinks that it is dangerous to adhere to the biblical notion of a Trinitarian God when modern people only sense the Father and Son. Those who do so foolishly make "the past encounters of other members of the community" their norm for belief rather than "our encounter with the Ground of Being and with the Christ of our personal history."¹⁶⁷ Second, not only is experience superior to Scripture, but it also supplies the criteria for interpreting Scripture. For example, Niebuhr observes that a "contemporary reading and interpretation of the Christian revelation" leads theology to emphasize the social nature of sin and salvation.¹⁶⁸ While this differs from the gospel preached by prior eras of the church, it is appropriate for contemporary Christians, whose social needs inspire a social reading of Scripture.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 115-16.

¹⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 107.

¹⁶⁸ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 13.

¹⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, x-xi, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," in *The Gospel, the Church and the World*, ed. K. S. Latourette (New York: Harper & Bros., 1946), 112-13, and "The Attack upon the Social Gospel," *Religion in Life* 5 (1936): 177-78. Cf. Niebuhr, "The Relativities of Religion," *Christianity Century* 45 (1928): 1457: "The salvation that is required is salvation from the body of that death, a forgiveness that will bring the communion of man with man under the fatherhood of God. This is the need that determines the selection of the gospel of the kingdom. It is not quite the same as the need of first century Rome, not quite the same as the need of sixteenth century Germany, not quite the same as the need of eighteenth century England. It is, indeed, an aspect of the universal human need; it also is the need of sinful, mortal men. But these sinful, mortal men contend with new types of sin and with new forms of morality. And they sin more in the lump; they die more in the gross. They find in the gospel of the kingdom a gospel which speaks to their needs; have they not as much right to their selection as Augustine and Calvin and Luther and Wesley had to theirs?"

2. Niebuhr's Perspective on Gen. 3

With these five general principles in mind, one is now able to understand how Niebuhr interprets the fall in Genesis chapter three. As we saw earlier, Niebuhr chides his brother, Reinhold, for reading Gen. 3 as an unhistorical story that merely depicts a pattern of human experience.¹⁷⁰ Instead, Niebuhr says that the fall, like other important events, such as creation, eschaton, and even Jesus Christ, is a unique event that actually occurs in history. Moreover, it is such an important event that it assumes suprahistorical significance. It becomes a myth, a story whose symbols supply categories which are able to interpret other historical events. Specifically, the story in Gen. 3 illumines the universally fallen condition of humanity.¹⁷¹

Nevertheless, although Niebuhr believes that Genesis rightly records that something happened, he does not believe that the event should be interpreted literally. For instance, similar to Bultmann, Niebuhr does not think that modern people can easily believe in the biblical world of demons, principalities, and powers. Moderns use more enlightened symbols and parables to depict what those in the Bible meant by devils. Thus, he does not believe that Satan actually entered a serpent in order to tempt Adam and Eve.¹⁷²

Furthermore, Niebuhr jettisons more than the supernatural elements in the story. He disagrees with one of its foundational points. He asserts that the entire notion of a

¹⁷⁰ See p. 31-32 of this dissertation. Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 99-100: Niebuhr dislikes his brother's use of the term "myth." Reinhold declares that Gen. 3 is mythical because it is merely a story that depicts a pattern of human existence. H. Richard Niebuhr agrees that Gen. 3 is mythical, but he redefines myth in order to ground it in history. He declares that a myth is a story that depicts a "once-and-for-all event" which then becomes a pattern by which we can interpret human existence.

¹⁷¹ Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 99-100.

¹⁷² Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 9-10 and *Christ and Culture*, 235. Diefenthaler records a 1927 address by Niebuhr in which he denounces belief in biblical literalism and the personal devil such a reading produced. See Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 35. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), 14-21.

serpent introducing sin into the world suggests a “foreign agent theory” for the problem of evil. Such a theory teaches that some external enemy has entered society and caused its problems. Consequently, society is only able to fix its problems if it can identify the enemy and the bullet that will kill him. Unfortunately, this has proved impossible. Various groups have sought to identify the enemy, naming it war, alcohol, slavery, or unchastity. These have all proved to be incomplete solutions, for eliminating them has not eliminated evil from society. Moreover, these evils have become so enmeshed in society that it is quite difficult to dispatch them without also eliminating some friends in the process.¹⁷³

Consequently, Niebuhr prefers what he calls an “environmental or ecological theory” of evil.¹⁷⁴ This theory proposes that most of society’s problems arise from its environment. Niebuhr is not simply repeating the generic Pelagian mantra. Instead, he alleges that the environment becomes corrupt because individuals make it so. Corrupt individuals create a corrupt environment, which in turn reflexes back and corrupts them. He writes: the moral being “corrupts his spiritual environment, his ethos, his culture, his religion, and is in turn corrupted by it.”¹⁷⁵

Niebuhr’s emphasis on individual responsibility contributes to his decision to downplay the significance of a unique, cataclysmic fall. Rather than claim that people are saddled with the sin and guilt passed down from Adam, their representative, Niebuhr suggests that “every man is his own Adam.” Every individual is guilty of committing Adam’s sin, so that no one can claim immunity from divine justice. Similar to Barth, Niebuhr states that the importance of the “saga” of Adam lies not in its historical

¹⁷³ Niebuhr, “The Ethical Crisis,” *Universitas* 2 (1964): 44-46.

¹⁷⁴ Niebuhr, “The Ethical Crisis,” 46.

¹⁷⁵ Niebuhr, “The Ethical Crisis,” 47.

particulars but rather in its revelation of the universal human condition. Moreover, in a typical Niebuhrian twist, he asserts that while each individual falls, no one falls by himself. Every person is inter-related with every other person so that the decision of one affects the others and the decision of the others affects the one. So everyone distrusts and fears God, though not as an isolated individual, but only in relation to all other individual selves.¹⁷⁶

To summarize: Niebuhr's emphasis on individual responsibility for sin is an important factor in his rejection of a literal interpretation of Genesis three. He thinks that the Genesis account contains "myth and allegory" which obscures the genuine meaning of original sin.¹⁷⁷ So while he welcomes the scriptural insight that original sin exists, he will probe the nature of that sin by reinterpreting Genesis three according to his own experience and theological reflection.

C. Definition of Sin

1. Theories of the Fall

Niebuhr's theological reflection produces a novel and insightful way to understand the fall. Niebuhr says that most people interpret the fall in purely legal terms. They think that they are suffering because of some sin or disobedience that they or their ancestors committed in the past. Salvation means being justified, acquitted before God's universal court despite their guilt. So long as they repent and claim the substitutionary atonement of another, the Christ, they are redeemed. These people are never free from the law, for their redemption requires them to obey a new, higher law, a law which is now inscribed upon their heart.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 78-79. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:508; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/1:566.

¹⁷⁷ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 12.

¹⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 128-130.

While conceding that this legal understanding of sin has helped many, Niebuhr observes that it contains numerous paradoxes. These include the relation between law and gospel, or how the law pertains to the requirement to fully love God and neighbor with the “spontaneity, the unrequired character, of genuine love.” How can the redeemed freely love and obey God, if their obedience is something that God commands? Other dilemmas exist within the various theories of the atonement, which Niebuhr passes over for now. Niebuhr concludes that while the legal motif contributes something important to an understanding of the fall, it does not adequately portray the entire picture.¹⁷⁹

Besides the legal theme, Niebuhr claims that another accurate, though partial interpretation of the fall is the teleological view. This position asserts that sin is more vice, or “missing the mark” than lawbreaking. Sin occurs when people direct their drives or wills in ways not proper to them. Rather than submit to God’s intentions for them, they seek to act as their own gods and direct their own lives. But since they are not God, this rebellious action only produces loss and confusion. Lacking the transcendence required to unify their desires, people experience internal conflict from their numerous loves, each “tending toward separate ends, unordered in a complete life directed toward a single goal, unformed in accordance with a unifying image.”¹⁸⁰

While the teleological view contributes much to a full-orbed understanding of the fall, Niebuhr says that it remains too dependent upon the law motif to represent a sufficient position in its own right. For instance, the teleological view’s insistence that obedience is the first step toward the goal of life, the beatific vision, is borrowed from the legal motif. Furthermore, the teleological position is too anthropocentric, emphasizing the human pursuit of God rather than beginning with God’s initiative and humanity’s

¹⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 130-31.

¹⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 131-32.

response to him. It also is not clear if people should be concerned about their own subjective perfection or God, the object of their desire.¹⁸¹

These weaknesses in the legal and teleological motifs persuade Niebuhr to cast about for a new way to portray the fall. He locates the solution in what he labels “response-analysis,” or responsibility theory. This theory suggests that people exist in community with each other but primarily with God. As such, their task is to analyze what God is doing in the world and respond appropriately. The fall occurs when people either misread God or though rightly interpreting his action, they choose to respond inappropriately anyway.¹⁸²

For instance, Niebuhr thinks that most often people fail to respond appropriately to God because they are too concerned about responding well to other people. They try too hard to impress other people, caring more about how others see them than how God perceives them. Or they may separate the world into good and bad people, choosing to act kindly toward those who they consider good, or beneficial, and meanly towards those who are their enemies. In both cases they fail to recognize that behind both good and bad people stands the united intention of God. Unable or unwilling to see God, they fail to respond appropriately to him.¹⁸³

Properly used, Niebuhr states that his responsibility theory involves four steps. First, there is response. People respond to society and nature as these structures act upon them. People ask the question, “what shall I do?” Second, the need to respond prompts interpretation. People ask “what is going on?” or “what is being done to me?” How they interpret what is occurring determines how they choose to respond. Third, the impact of

¹⁸¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 134-35.

¹⁸² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 56-57, 61-65, 137-45.

¹⁸³ Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” 52-53.

the future implies accountability. People must look ahead and envision how society or nature will respond to their response. Knowing that others will respond to their actions limits their freedom, for they will not act in ways that will bring destructive responses upon them. These responses to their responses keep them accountable to others. No one responds in a vacuum. Fourth, the ongoing nature of actions and responses produces social solidarity. Actions and reactions belong to a continuing discourse in society with others. People cannot act responsibly by themselves, but only from within a context in which their actions generate responses and vice versa. Consequently, responsibility theory produces a continuity of self and of the community to which the self belongs. Niebuhr summarizes these four elements: responsible action is “the idea of an agent’s action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action and with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this is in a continuing community of agents.”¹⁸⁴

While conceding that the teleological and legal models remain worthwhile and should not be entirely displaced, Niebuhr contends that his responsibility theory is superior. First, it more adequately conforms to biblical ethics than either of them. Unlike them, responsibility theory does not omit or wrench from its context whatever biblical content does not fit its system. Furthermore, Niebuhr suggests that responsibility theory is better able to illumine certain aspects of biblical ethics. For example, besieged by Assyria, Isaiah does not direct Israel’s attention to the Mosaic law or some goal, but rather to “the intentions of God present in hiddenness in the actions of Israel’s enemies.” Isaiah wants Israel to perceive and understand God’s action in everything that happens to them and then to make a fitting reply. The same paradigm occurs in the New Testament, where Jesus reveals that God is not merely a law giver but is rather the One who accomplishes great and small deeds, “the creator of sparrows and clother of lilies, the

¹⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 61-65.

ultimate giver of blindness and of sight.” His rule “is hidden in the manifold activities of plural agencies but is yet in a way visible to those who know how to interpret the signs of the times.”¹⁸⁵

Second, Niebuhr prefers his responsibility theory to the others because it better accounts for the social nature of the world. The teleological and legal models imply that people relate primarily to rational ideas or the moral law, respectively. Neither properly addresses what modern people recognize--that they primarily relate to other people, other knowers and responders in society. They realize that this social environment actually defines the individual self, for the self exists only in its relation to other selves.¹⁸⁶ While they may be able to distinguish between the “I” and the rest of the group, they can not make this distinction absolute, for the “I” is integrally related to the others.¹⁸⁷

Third, Niebuhr thinks that his response-analysis theory is superior because it is large enough to encapsulate the other two theories. Both legal and teleological views can be interpreted in response terms. For instance, the law motif presents one item that demands human response: people must correctly respond to God’s law in obedience. However, the law motif is incomplete, for the law is only one divine action. God acts in many other ways, such as gospel, which also requires an appropriate human response.

¹⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 65-67.

¹⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 69-71. Ibid., 72-74: Niebuhr adds that this social awareness has been fostered by various disciplines, such as social psychology, sociology, cultural anthropology, moral philosophy, and by the work of Martin Buber.

¹⁸⁷ Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” 99. This emphasis on social solidarity enables Niebuhr to speak of collective guilt. Each individual belongs to a community, a “moral-we” in which “members not only recognize a common duty” but also “are bound to each other as moral persons.” For example, all citizens pledge an oath of allegiance to their country. So even if they dissent from their government’s actions, they remain responsible inasmuch as they continue their citizenship. Moreover, a nation’s life is continuous, spanning generations. Thus, present individuals bear responsibility for what their ancestors may have done. See “Christian Ethics,” 104-5.

Cf. Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 158: taken to its broadest extreme, collective guilt extends to every individual. Because every individual is a member of the world community he is responsible for what happens there. So Niebuhr concludes: “The crucifixions of the innocent which are taking place in our time leave all nations and religions without excuse before God.”

The same holds true for the teleological position. While it presents a valuable way to respond to God, i.e., aiming at a worthwhile final goal, yet there are other ways of responding (e.g., the obedience of the law motif). Thus, far from eliminating the legal and teleological views, Niebuhr bestows fuller meaning upon them. Obeying God's law and pursuing godly ends are important because they are avenues by which people appropriately respond to God's actions in the world. To fail here is to participate in the fall, which is sin.¹⁸⁸

2. *Sin Is a Religious Category*

Given Niebuhr's understanding of the fall in terms of response-analysis to God, it is no surprise that he defines sin as primarily a religious action. He concedes that sin contains a moral element, but adds that morality does not drive to the heart of what constitutes sin. Those who restrict sin to merely moral categories forget that sin is primarily an offense against God. Niebuhr argues his point by observing that all moral judgments are based on some presupposed standard, a standard which is more foundational than morality itself. And since this standard itself arises from religion, then religion must be the foundational element in deciphering sin.¹⁸⁹

All people have a religious problem, for they suffer from what Niebuhr calls a poor relation to their ultimate environment. They recognize that "there is a deep maladjustment, deep lack of faith, distrust, disloyalty on our part toward our ultimate environment. ...The maladjustment is one of alienation and it is also one of corruption."¹⁹⁰ Humanity's chief problem is how to once again become friends with

¹⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 136: Niebuhr also thinks that response-analysis theory corrects the anthropocentrism of the teleological position, for it states that all human making is merely a response to prior divine action. The end for which people work is not something that they achieve but something that comes to them.

¹⁸⁹ Niebuhr, "Man the Sinner," 273-74.

¹⁹⁰ Niebuhr, "The Ethical Crisis" 48.

God.¹⁹¹ Thinking that God is the void or at best their enemy, people seek to look out for themselves, distrusting and becoming disloyal to God.¹⁹²

Niebuhr admits that he cannot tell which sin came first, distrust or disloyalty. Because all reality is interrelated, the effects of sin reach into all the corners of the cosmos. This makes it difficult to separate one element from another and say that this is the fall, the very first sin. Instead, the fall is “a complex interpersonal event in which the whole structure of faith is involved.” How can theologians ferret out the first sin from this holistic event? How can they decide if the first sin was disloyalty or distrust, and toward God or companions?¹⁹³ Although Niebuhr humbly acknowledges that he cannot ascertain whether distrust or disloyalty came first, certain passages in his writings indicate that he considered distrust logically to precede disloyalty.¹⁹⁴ This chapter will follow this order, examining the sin of distrust and subsequently pursuing its implications for disloyalty.

3. *Sin Is Distrust of God*

Niebuhr alleges that an individual’s belief in God is molded by his society. To the extent that his society has a good relation with God, the believer sees God as the faithful One who can be trusted. To the extent that his society lives in broken

¹⁹¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 44.

¹⁹² Niebuhr, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 112-13.

¹⁹³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 78-79: Niebuhr notes that this human faithlessness can not destroy humanity’s entire relation with God, for distrust assumes the presence of a prior trust. The notion of creation logically precedes the notion of the fall. In Niebuhr’s words, the fall “must rather mean that an ambivalence has entered into our personal relations which poisons and corrupts them.”

¹⁹⁴ Niebuhr, “Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love,” *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 2 (1974): 153, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 19, *The Responsible Self*, 106-7, and *Faith On Earth*, 84.

relationship with God, the individual expects “that God before men will let me down; he will be far off; he will demonstrate his unconcern; he is impersonal.”¹⁹⁵

Niebuhr believes that the latter is the case to some extent in all societies and among all individuals. People universally express disappointment, distrust, and disbelief in the universal cause. This is “one of the most distinct characteristics of mankind, and even the Christian man has a deep atheism. He believes that there is a God, but that he is against us; he believes that the ruler of this world is not good.”¹⁹⁶ People sense that this being should be loyal to them but that he is not.¹⁹⁷ They sense that God is their enemy, that he will someday destroy them because they are not united in their loyalty and service to him.¹⁹⁸ They do not perceive that God the enemy is also their companion. As Niebuhr expresses it, “In sin man lives before God--unknown as God, unknown as good, unrecognized as lovable and loving.”¹⁹⁹ To make matters worse, this despondency only intensifies with population growth. As the world grows larger, “the deeper is the suspicion and distrust of the source whence mankind came and of the end toward which it moves.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁵ Niebuhr, “A Theologian’s Approach to History: History’s Role in Theology,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 81.

¹⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 20.

¹⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 67.

¹⁹⁸ Niebuhr, “The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age,” 308-9, and *The Responsible Self*, 140. Cf. idem, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 114, where Niebuhr says that God is the enemy because people have sinned against him. He writes: “Our pettiness, our meanness, our futility, face the enemy, the judgment. Our social system, its war, its poverty, all its brutal carelessness of life and finer values, no longer appears as a betrayal of our hopes but as our betrayal of God. *It is not we then who have been betrayed but we who have betrayed*” (emphasis mine).

¹⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 142.

²⁰⁰ Niebuhr, “The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age,” *Theology Today* 17 (1960): 308.

Niebuhr makes this same point in his review of Tillich's *Systematic Theology*, where he criticizes Tillich's diagnosis of the human problem. He asserts that Tillich misunderstands the human predicament as the relationship between the self and the world or between being and non-being. Niebuhr says that this position forgets that humanity's true problem is its relation to God, and that this relationship is marked not by being and non-being but by being and value (i.e., people wonder if the ground of being is good). He writes: "The problem of ultimate concern to many men does not seem stateable simply in terms of being but only of being and value; they know of the ground of being, but *what they do not know is the goodness of that ground*. The revelation with which they therefore begin is not the revelation of God as infinite being in the finite, but of his goodness in evil."²⁰¹

Niebuhr claims that the chief human problem is how to love this God who is the enemy. He explains:

It is the problem of reconciliation to the One from whom death proceeds as well as life, who makes demands too hard to bear, who sets us in the world where our beloved neighbors are the objects of seeming animosity, who appears as God of wrath as well as God of love. It is the problem that arises in its acutest form when life itself becomes a problem, when the goodness of existence is questionable, as it has been for most men at most times; when the ancient and universal suspicion arises that he is happiest who was never born and he next fortunate who died young.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Niebuhr, review of *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, by Paul Tillich, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 7 (1951): 49 (emphasis mine). Here Niebuhr asserts against Tillich that people do know that God exists. Their problem is merely that they do not know whether this God is good. However, a younger Niebuhr had agreed with Tillich that humanity's problem may lay deeper--people may not know that God exists. For instance, Niebuhr said that the mechanistic age has produced a world that trusts its own organizational structures for survival rather than God. Such a world believes that it must rely on its own reason rather than a God who is accomplishing his will through nature and history. Niebuhr concluded that this is a "religion of suspicion rather than of trust; its confidence in man's ability to master his fate is not so great as its assurance that there is no God who will work out humanity's salvation." See idem, "Faith, Works and Social Salvation," *Religion in Life* 1 (1932): 427.

²⁰² Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* 36-37. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 26.

Rather than love this One who is their enemy, most people become hostile, separated, and isolated from this universal cause. They alternate between anger towards this cause, fear of what it will do to them, and simply trying to push it out of their minds so it will not bother them.²⁰³ Usually they choose the latter course. Some people may attempt to appease God, to buy him off with gifts. A few might summon the courage to resist and fight him. But most people find it easier to ignore God and his threatening presence, focusing instead on their more routine, ordinary encounters with finite sources. They attempt to forget their predicament by losing themselves in preoccupation with the small issues of their finite world. While existentialists may object to this denial of self-actualization, its less demanding nature makes it popular with the majority.²⁰⁴

Either way, human distrust of God inevitably breeds disloyalty. Distrust of God produces fear of death. People are afraid of dying, not just physically but also spiritually (i.e., to live in meaningless, insignificant ways). In desperation they will do almost anything to protect themselves. Placing their own survival above obedience to God, they live in disloyalty to the One who created them.²⁰⁵ In this manner initial distrust in the goodness of God leads to the further sin of disloyalty to his cause.

4. *Sin Is Disloyalty to God*

Niebuhr states that disloyalty to God occurs whenever people substitute false deities for the one true God. He explains that people do not merely choose between the true God or none at all. Unable to live without some ultimate loyalty, those who are

²⁰³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 68.

²⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 115-16, 141.

²⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 19, *The Responsible Self*, 106-7, and *Faith On Earth*, 84. Cf. idem, "Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love," 153, for another explanation of how distrust breeds disloyalty: "Similarly, man being not merely gregarious but personally communal does not live without relations of fidelity and trust, though in a world of many betrayals, trust turns partly into mistrust, and loyalty to partial causes leads to betrayal of other causes."

disloyal to God are inevitably loyal to some lesser god. Such lesser loyalties constitute rebellion, for the idolater is waging war against God. This highlights the depravity of the human heart, for “those to whom God is wholly loyal and who are by nature wholly dependent upon him are in active rebellion against him.”²⁰⁶

Niebuhr explains that this disloyalty to God most often appears as some form of anthropocentrism. Anthropocentrism occurs whenever “man puts himself into the center, constructs an anthropocentric universe and makes confidence in his own value rather than faith in God his beginning... .”²⁰⁷ This is a form of idolatry, for “finite and relative things or powers are regarded as ends-in-themselves.” Idolatry exists whenever any finite thing, such as man, civilization, art, nation, or even life is valued for its own sake rather than for God’s.²⁰⁸

A characteristic feature of anthropocentric individuals and institutions is that they care only about themselves rather than others.²⁰⁹ Their egoism knows no bounds, for they will even seek to use God for their own benefit rather than exist for his. Niebuhr

²⁰⁶ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 277. Niebuhr explains: “Sin is the failure to worship God as God. Yet it is more than the absence of loyalty to God. It is not possible for men to be simply disloyal; they are always loyal to something. Disloyalty implies a false loyalty and disloyalty to God always includes loyalty to something that is not God but which claims deity. Sin therefore is not merely a deprivation, not merely the absence of loyalty; it is wrong direction, false worship. Furthermore, loyalty to a false God implies rebellion against God. It is impossible that it should be otherwise, unless God were something less than the Creator and the essence of Being. To make a god of the self, or of the class, or of the nation, or of the phallus, or of mankind, is to organize life around one of these centers and to draw it away from its true center; hence, in a unified world, it is to wage war against God.”

²⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 31-32. Cf. idem, “The Ethical Crisis,” 48-49: human rebellion against our ultimate environment leads us to “continually build for ourselves false universes and false environments in which we multiply our rebellions.” Niebuhr began to recognize the dangers of anthropocentrism as early as 1919. See “From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God,” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 57 (1929): 401—“pride and human self-sufficiency are the arch-enemies of faith.”

²⁰⁸ Niebuhr, “Toward the Independence of the Church,” in *The Church Against the World*, co-authored by Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis P. Miller (Chicago: Willett, Clark & Co., 1935), 125.

²⁰⁹ Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Social Problem,” *Magazin für Evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 50 (1922): 280. Cf. idem, “Christian Ethics,” 58, 117.

finds an example of such anthropocentrism in the modern church. He reproaches it for losing the holy and big God that Edwards knew. The modern church possesses a small god, a god who is only useful for solving personal problems and assuring believers that they are loved. Since god exists for their pleasure, they easily eliminate his holiness or wrath, producing a god who makes them comfortable. Such egoism is not worthy of the name Christian.²¹⁰

However, even conservative, committed Christians may fall into forms of anthropocentrism, indulging in what Niebuhr calls “utilitarian Christianity.” Utilitarian Christianity occurs whenever Christians invite people to join the church for what they will receive in return. For example, Niebuhr alleges that the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America made this mistake when they promised that Christianity enables people to obtain peace, abundance, human dignity, and freedom from war. Niebuhr warns that that the Christian faith may not deliver the grand promises that these Christians are making for it. One need only survey the biblical narrative to realize that those who follow God do not always receive in this life what the Federal Council of Churches call “fullness of life.”²¹¹

Furthermore, not only may the church be unable to deliver on its promise of peace and abundance, it is wrong to use these criteria as evaluators of the church’s effectiveness. Niebuhr states that the church becomes anthropocentric when it seeks to prove its value by how useful it is to culture. This anthropocentrism is compounded

²¹⁰ Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” 132. Niebuhr continues: “Edwards used to say that the trouble with men was not that they had no ideas of God, but that they had little ideas of God. We might add that they are ideas about little Gods.” Cf. idem, *The Responsible Self*, 172: egoism is unchristian because “it seeks only its own happiness and interprets whatever happens to it as action of a God whose only concern is just with this lonely self, a God who is the counterpart of individuality, not the Lord of being.”

²¹¹ Niebuhr, “Utilitarian Christianity,” *Christianity and Crisis* 6, no. 12 (July 8, 1946): 3-5.

when the church then evaluates its usefulness to culture by the culture's own standards. Such a church has lost its distinctive voice and is content to merely parrot its culture.²¹²

Niebuhr fears that American Christians are more susceptible than most to utilitarian Christianity, for their pragmatic activism often incites the American church to settle for any means that will produce its desired end. He contends that their insatiable "interest in measurable activity and in tangible results threatens to betray us into an anthropocentric, this-worldly, planetary provincialism which forgets that man may also be a citizen of heaven and that apart from his urge to identify himself with some transcendent meaning his being and even his ethical and social interests lose all ultimate significance."²¹³ Niebuhr fears that many people turn to Christianity simply because they think it will enable them to preserve the American way of life. In this way Christianity becomes utilitarian, useful for preserving the good life.²¹⁴

Finally, Niebuhr finds anthropocentrism in theologies that begin with human questions and needs rather than God. In a thinly veiled swipe at Tillich's method of correlation, Niebuhr states that any purported Christian theology that does not begin with God the Father of Jesus Christ is not true theology. A theology that begins with a more limited field, such as religion, morality, humanity, or civilization, and then moves to God as the answer to these questions, is a distorted and false theology. This is so because in

²¹² Niebuhr, "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," *Christendom* 1 (1935): 138-39. Cf. idem, "Towards a New Other-Worldliness," *Theology Today* 1 (1944): 86: Christians must not seek God's kingdom for how it can contribute to this world, but rather for its sake alone. If they seek the kingdom of God first then everything else will be added, but if they seek the kingdom for this world then they will lose both.

²¹³ Niebuhr, "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?" *Christian Century* 47 (1930): 914.

²¹⁴ Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 215. Niebuhr thinks that liberalism incorporated such anthropocentric elements into its social gospel. In this way it reduced Jesus to some humanist and moral idealist and claimed that God need not exist so long as belief in him encouraged people to lead good lives. See idem, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (Spring 1988): 119.

this case God becomes merely an instrumental value to help people attain their wishes rather than the God to whom they must submit in obedience.²¹⁵

To summarize: Niebuhr believes that sin is primarily religious rather than merely moral, for it occurs when people respond inappropriately to God's actions in the world. These inappropriate responses assume two basic forms: distrust that God is good and disloyalty to his person and will. Although he is not sure, Niebuhr tentatively implies that distrust precedes disloyalty. It seems that people become disloyal to God, looking out for themselves rather than God's interests, when they no longer believe that God loves them.

D. Demonstration of Sin

The previous section discussed Niebuhr's definition of sin as distrust and disloyalty to God. This section examines how such distrust and disloyalty appear in daily life. Niebuhr claims that humanity's distrust and disloyalty to God manifest themselves in the manner in which people relate to God and to others. With respect to God, depraved humanity acquires the sinful patterns of henotheism and polytheism. With respect to others, humanity engages in conflict which severs community among God's creatures. This section follows this order, henotheism, polytheism, and interpersonal conflict, as it examines Niebuhr's understanding of the demonstration of sin.

1. Henotheism

As mentioned earlier, Niebuhr defines a god as a value center or cause in which people express faith.²¹⁶ Such gods need not be supernatural beings. So long as they provide value and a final cause for life, they perform the function of deity.²¹⁷ Niebuhr

²¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 36.

²¹⁶ See p. 40-41 of this dissertation.

²¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 23.

agrees with Tillich that people are continually tempted to substitute some finite part of their existence for the one true God. How easily they absolutize some finite form, make believing that it is unconditioned rather than the One who alone is the Unconditioned.²¹⁸

Niebuhr says that such illicit substitution occurs in two forms: henotheism and polytheism. Both are instances of idolatry, for each forsakes the one true God for one or more of the finite gods below. A central difference between them is the number of gods that they serve. A henotheist selects one finite reference point as his object of devotion while a polytheist hedges his bets by serving more than one.²¹⁹ Henotheism inexorably produces polytheism, for people who reject the one true God are rarely satisfied with only a single substitute. After examining Niebuhr's definition and examples of henotheism, this section will add Niebuhr's special observations regarding polytheism, or the inherent problems that arise when people worship more than one god.

Henotheism is the more important term to Niebuhr, for it conveys the fundamental aspect of bad faith (polytheism is essentially two or more henotheisms). In his seminal work, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr claims that henotheism is the chief threat to monotheism. He defines henotheism as "that social faith which makes a finite society, whether cultural or religious, the object of trust as well as of loyalty."²²⁰ Niebuhr argues here that people achieve value and worth through participation in social community. This community supplies an actuality that transcends the individual, for it is larger than the individual and continues to exist after he is gone. In this way the community offers a transcendent point by which the individual can attain significance. It becomes his sole source for value, cause for living, and criteria for all

²¹⁸ Niebuhr, review of *The Protestant Era*, by Paul Tillich, 291.

²¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 24.

²²⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 11. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, xii.

that is good. The individual deems important whatever his community considers important, he considers his life worthwhile if he is able to enhance the community, and he determines what is good by analyzing what is beneficial for his community.

Since one's significance lies in his community, it is best for the individual to join the largest, most inclusive community possible. Larger communities tend to have bigger, more significant causes for their members to pursue. They also endure the longest, for they have fewer enemies, or individuals outside their society. Participation in a universal society is optimal, for such a society would pursue the broadest causes and have no individuals outside its borders. Fortunately, this universal society does exist in the community that is formed by God's relation to his creatures. Individuals who consciously act so as to participate in this universal community are properly called monotheists.²²¹

Niebuhr gives few specifics concerning the concrete character of this universal society. He seems to distinguish between nominal members, which include all creatures, and loyal participants, which include only those faithful to God and others. Niebuhr does not limit the loyal participants to the universal church, for he asserts that adherents of non-Christian religions may also be strong monotheists.²²² Besides this, Niebuhr does not comment on any concrete organizational pattern for this universal society. He apparently assumes that loyal participants will easily locate and cooperate with others who share their allegiance to the universal community.

Despite the importance of participation in the universal community, Niebuhr laments that people usually select a smaller, closed society as their ultimate cause for life. They may choose something as small as a family or tribe or something as large as civilization or humanity. Either way they commit the sin of henotheism, for the

²²¹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 60, 124-25, and *The Responsible Self*, 144.

²²²Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 124-25; "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 249; "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 96; and *The Responsible Self*, 144.

community to which they commit is less expansive than the ultimate community that exists between God and his creation.²²³

a. Secular Examples of Henotheism

Niebuhr believes that virtually any finite entity, while good in itself, is a candidate to become an idolatrous, finite god for someone. For example, sinful people are prone to transform such goods as humanity, nation, wealth, and industry into the henotheistic gods of humanism, nationalism, capitalism, and industrialism. Niebuhr explains: “Humanity, nation, wealth, industry--these are all but finite entities, neither good nor bad in themselves; in their rightful place they become ministers to the best; regarded and treated as self-sufficient and self-justifying they become destructive to self and others. In the modern world they have become ends-in-themselves.”²²⁴

In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr fingers politics and science as two especially strong henotheistic temptations in the western world. He devotes one chapter to each as he explains how people may detect and combat the henotheism present there. Regarding politics, Niebuhr observes that nations often expect ultimate loyalty from their citizens. They fear competition from higher loyalties, for citizens who possess loyalties that transcend the state may not remain faithful when these loyalties conflict.²²⁵

²²³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 25. Cf. idem, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 120-21: Niebuhr admits that the broadest forms of henotheism are the most difficult to detect. For example, the church sounds pious when it seeks to serve humanity in general. However, even this group is less expansive than the broadness that monotheism requires, for it excludes non-human elements of creation.

²²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 127. Niebuhr does not consistently debunk the “isms” of humanism, nationalism, capitalism, and industrialism as henotheistic evils. For instance, elsewhere Niebuhr claims that nationalism is neither good nor bad in itself, so that it may be used either by monotheists to good ends or henotheists to idolatrous ends. See idem, “Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity,” *World Tomorrow* 16 (1933): 470. Also, the earlier, liberal Niebuhr posited a non-committal view of industrialism, claiming that it is not responsible for the decline of religion. See idem, “Christianity and the Industrial Classes,” *Theological Magazine of the Evangelical Synod of North America* 57 (1929): 16. On the other hand, Niebuhr lambastes both capitalism and communism, asserting that each tends to produce a secular society. See Niebuhr, “The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist,” *Christian Century* 47 (1930): 1306-7.

²²⁵ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 67.

This is why many states consider Christians to be dangerous to society. Because Christians pledge ultimate loyalty to God and his sovereignty, they challenge any government that elevates itself as the final end of life and demands unqualified obedience.²²⁶

Besides nationalism, Niebuhr also believes that specific political systems, such as democracy and socialism, are prime candidates for henotheism. Governments employ these theories because they believe that their countries benefit from them. The danger comes when people mistake the means for the end, and venerate these theories in themselves rather than concentrate on the higher good they produce. For example, Niebuhr rebukes the Report of the President's Commission on Higher Education that proclaims, "We educate for democracy." Niebuhr argues that the report mistakes democracy as an end in itself. It forgets that democracy is only a means to a higher goal, such as helping the world.²²⁷

Niebuhr suspects that this temptation is especially prevalent in Christian America, for Americans easily confuse Christian freedom with democratic freedom. Niebuhr admits that Protestantism's concern for earthly duties reinforced the rise of democracy in America. The pursuit of the kingdom of God led Protestant America to form a democracy, for democratic freedom is the most God-honoring form of government on earth.²²⁸ Nevertheless, Niebuhr warns against the henotheistic temptation to value God

²²⁶ Niebuhr, "The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 3 (Winter 1995): 4 and "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 148-49, 158. Cf. idem, "Nationalism, Socialism and Christianity," 470: Niebuhr correctly observes that this "bad form of nationalism" is occurring in Nazi Germany.

²²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 8.

²²⁸ Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 149-50. Niebuhr says that democracy is the best form of government because it limits the power of government or any specific group, thereby allowing God's sovereignty to reign unopposed. Cf. idem, "The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty," 4: there is a tendency today to "make a religion out of democracy."

because he supports democracy. Such a utilitarian notion of God mistakes the end of life for one of its means.²²⁹ Furthermore, Niebuhr reminds Christians that God does not need democracy in order for his kingdom to succeed. Democracy is not a perfect form of government, and God is not put out anytime a democracy is overthrown. Niebuhr writes: “If democracy fails, God does not cease to rule but even that fall is evidence of his justice and goodness, for this kind of government is also of sin as well as of grace.”²³⁰

Regarding science, Niebuhr warns that it presents at least three henotheistic temptations. First, the dazzling success of modern science encourages many people to elevate it into divine status, substituting loyalty to God with loyalty to science. Second, modern science itself often serves other finite gods, such as an individual nation or community. For instance, scientists secretly work on bombs in order to help their nations defeat others. This effort employs science in a henotheistic quest for self-survival and dominance. Third, science also may value itself as its own end. This occurs when science sets itself up as dominant, using people and other creatures as guinea pigs in its quest for truth. Thus, creatures become important only insofar as they are useful to science, rather than science being useful to serve them, or better yet, the One.²³¹

b. Religious Examples of Henotheism

While henotheism is prevalent in the above mentioned secular spheres, it is particularly disturbing when it occurs in the religious realm. Within Christianity, Niebuhr alleges that four dominant henotheistic perversions exist today. Denominations, churches, the Bible, and Jesus Christ are necessary elements of the Christian faith.

²²⁹ Niebuhr, “The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States,” in *The Shaping of American Religion*, eds. James Ward Smith and A Leland Jamison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 70-71.

²³⁰ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 144-45, 148.

²³¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 79-82.

However, each of these proximate goods is susceptible to becoming an idolatrous end in itself, an ultimate value that usurps the place of God. Such distortions assume the form of denominationalism, ecclesiasticism, biblicism, and Christism.²³² This section will address these types in the order given, beginning with denominationalism and concluding with Christism.

First, Niebuhr finds denominationalism especially troubling because it strikes against the heart of what the church is supposed to be. The church exists within a world which struggles to achieve synthesis, to integrate various nations and classes “into a harmonious, interacting society, serving one common end in diverse manners.” The world finds this task exasperating because its members lack a unifying world view, a “supreme value” to which they can subordinate their interests for the sake of the whole. Niebuhr contends such a unifying value can be found only in religion. However, when western civilization looks to its religious sources for help, it finds a church that is itself splintered into various denominational factions, factions which prevent the church from credibly supplying the unifying value which it should possess. So rather than solve the problem, the church actually contributes to its intensity.²³³

²³² Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 46.

²³³ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 267-68. Cf. idem, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 180 and “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” 107. This is a common lament from Niebuhr. Elsewhere he complains: “The churches seeking to preach a gospel which recognized no differences of race or economic status have reproduced within themselves those same cleavages which they purport to overcome, and they continue to support through their own organization the caste system which their pulpits attack. Are not the churches the church’s worst enemy?” See idem, “What Holds Churches Together?” *Christian Century* 43 (1926): 348. Again: “Meanwhile the dilemma of the church remains this: how can it preach effectively the doctrine of brotherhood between classes, nations and races until it practices that doctrine itself, but--and here is the most baffling aspect of our problem--how can it practice that doctrine until brotherhood between classes, nations and races has been established?” See idem, “Churches That Might Unite,” *Christian Century* 56 (1929): 261. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 57: Niebuhr does not think that denominationalism began with the western church. He finds signs of it in the Old Testament, proving that even Israel was tempted to believe that God was God of and for the Jews only. Niebuhr cites the Song of Deborah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Psalms, and other prophets who celebrated what he calls a tribal deity rather than the universal One for all people.

Niebuhr believes that this divisive denominationalism results from the church compromising with its culture. Rather than influence the world for good, the church has become vulnerable to the world's divisions, separating itself along the world's national, racial, and social lines.²³⁴ Niebuhr observes that most denominations arise from sociological rather than theological reasons.²³⁵ Specifically, economic factors play the largest role. A quick survey of denominations reveals that those belonging to the lower classes markedly differ from those of the middle class. For instance, lower class churches of the "disinherited" tend toward spontaneity, emotionalism, millennialism, and apocalypticism, while middle class churches possess a high level of individual self-consciousness and activist attitude toward life.²³⁶ Niebuhr adds that America has only aggravated the sociological splintering of denominations through its antagonism between whites and Negroes and through its geographical separation between the frontier west and the mercantile east.²³⁷

The result of this denominational divisiveness is the inability of various segments of the Christian church to understand each other. Each segment of the church becomes self-centered, viewing the world only through the lens of its own perspective. It disregards any part that does not fit with its own self-centered image. This produces its inability to understand "what other parts mean with their theologies, rituals, orders and systems of ethics." Worse, these miscommunicating segments of the church use their

²³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 3-6, 264-65. Cf. idem, "The Disorder of Man in the Church of God," in *Man's Disorder and God's Design*, The Amsterdam Assembly Series (New York: Harper & Bros., 1949), 1:84. Here Niebuhr observes that the church is commanded to make disciples in the world while remaining unspotted by it. He says that the church typically fails on both counts, for it often either itself becomes a disciple of the world or it so withdraws itself that it has no relation to the world.

²³⁵ Niebuhr, "Churches That Might Unite," 259.

²³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 26, 30-31, 80-81.

²³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 136.

separate centers and histories to wage war against the others, each seeking to demonstrate that it is superior.²³⁸

The solution for denominational divisiveness may assume one of three forms, only two of which are beneficial. First, Niebuhr says that political power could force religious unity. While this has been the only source of unity so far in church history, it is fortunately impossible in our century. Second, and the Christian ideal, is the hope that denominations might unite around the persuasion of a thoroughly Christian ethics, an ethics that calls Christians to unite with others from different socio-economic classes out of loyalty to Christ. Niebuhr dreams: “The hope of gathering into one church in common loyalty to a common Master, a common doctrine and a common ethics the rich and the poor, the black and yellow and white, the educated and the naive remains the great ideal which alone can represent the true character of Christianity.” Niebuhr concedes that this ideal has only ever succeeded in small groups, among a minority of strong Christians. And he fears that any attempt at such a group today would merely form another sect, a small group which loves each other, though leaving the problem of Christian unity unsolved for most Christians.²³⁹

Finally, Niebuhr thinks that the attraction of social affinity might bring similar groups together. While this will never produce a genuine Christian unity, it may at least unite groups who already have much in common. For example, this attraction has united

²³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 118-19. Cf. idem, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 3, where Niebuhr contends that America’s founding fathers recognized this inherent danger within denominations. Wondering “whether any religious organization enjoying monopoly could possibly remain pure,” they limited each church from gaining too much power. They accomplished this by fostering ecclesiastical pluralism, figuring that a plethora of denominations would provide checks and balances against any of them individually.

²³⁹ Niebuhr, “Churches That Might Unite,” 260. Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 119-20: Niebuhr asserts that each denomination is related to every other denomination in Christ. Focusing on him should make each church aware of its union with the others, culminating in each church claiming the history of the others as its own. For instance, Catholics would canonize Luther and Calvin and Protestants would confess the Inquisition as their own sin.

various German and Scandinavian Lutheran churches as well as some churches from the north and south. Niebuhr optimistically hopes that this method of social attraction may in three hundred years reduce the two hundred American denominations to around “four or five significant churches, living in happy cooperation.”²⁴⁰

It is worth noting here that Niebuhr fails to distinguish satisfactorily between the necessary character of denominations and the evil of denominationalism. He maintains that denominations and denominationalism are two separate items, but his explanations use them interchangeably, thereby blurring any noticeable distinction between them.

Some scholars, such as Diefenthaler, claim that Niebuhr always uses the term “denominations” in a pejorative sense.²⁴¹ This is not quite true, for in the passage above Niebuhr states that denominations are necessary while denominationalism is evil.²⁴²

Nevertheless, Diefenthaler rightly understands the spirit of Niebuhr. For all intents and purposes, denominations and denominationalism are the same thing to Niebuhr.

Second, besides denominationalism but related to it, religious henotheism also appears in ecclesiasticism. Ecclesiasticism occurs whenever the church attempts to usurp the role of God, inviting its members to place their trust and loyalty in itself rather than the transcendent One. It calls attention to its own holy history, rites, sacraments, and teachings rather than to God, asserting that it is the sole means to God and that its teachings are correct simply because it says so. In this way the church forgets that it is merely one community among many. It claims instead that only its interpretation of God is correct and that it holds a unique and privileged place in the community of universal

²⁴⁰ Niebuhr, “Churches That Might Unite,” 260-61.

²⁴¹ Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 19.

²⁴² See p. 84-85 of this dissertation.

being. It is a “special group, with a special god, a special destiny, and a separate existence.”²⁴³

Niebuhr finds examples of ecclesiasticism in Roman Catholicism and various missionary endeavors. First, he alleges that while the Roman Catholic Church professes allegiance to God alone, yet it has deified itself through its claim that it speaks for God and rules for him here. Such idolatry rightly provokes a response from Protestants, who protest the deification of anything human.²⁴⁴ But Protestants are not free from blame either. Niebuhr observes that missionaries from all denominations often adopt idolatrous motives when they seek to convert people to their own particular church, denomination, culture, nation, or some other religious institution, law, belief or movement rather than to God in Christ.²⁴⁵

Niebuhr contends that ecclesiasticism prompts the church to take itself too seriously, so that it expends most of its energy in self-defense. Substituting itself in the place of God, it fears that its demise would be the end of life’s meaning and value. So it naturally battles and resists other religions and denominations that may seek to overthrow it. Rather than engage in such destructive behavior, Niebuhr counsels the church to remember that it is merely the servant of God and his revelation. Both God and his revelation will survive the church’s death. Moreover, since God transcends the church,

²⁴³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 58-60. Niebuhr explains: “The God of the Christian church has become confused with a Christian God, the One beyond all the many with the collective representation of a church that is one community among many.” Cf. idem, *The Responsible Self*, 172. Cf. idem, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4, where Niebuhr calls ecclesiasticism another form of totalitarianism. He writes: “...religion ceases to be religion when it begins to reverence itself and call itself the savior of men. Totalitarianism can take on many forms; whether the being which claims absolute devotion calls itself a race, or an ideology, or a religion, or a state does not make a great deal of difference. When any relative is made absolute there is an end to the freedom of other relatives. But a Christian or an ecclesiastical totalitarianism would be totalitarianism also; the first name is relatively unimportant; it is the last name of the thing that counts.”

²⁴⁴ Niebuhr, “Issues Between Catholics and Protestants,” *Religion in Life* 23 (1954): 203.

²⁴⁵ Niebuhr, “An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,” *Occasional Bulletin from the Missionary Research Library* (New York City) 14 (1963): 3-4.

he is able to resurrect it should it die. Thus, the church that knows its place before God may confidently serve him, knowing that its fate ultimately lies with God alone.²⁴⁶

Third, besides denominationalism and ecclesiasticism, Niebuhr writes against biblicism, the peculiar temptation of Protestants. Just as Roman Catholics err when they substitute the church for the voice of God, so Protestants err when they place the Bible in God's role. Biblicism occurs whenever Protestants mistake the fallible, human authority of Scripture for the infallible voice of God, thereby detracting from the honor and authority that belongs to God alone.²⁴⁷

The church should remember that the infinite, living God who transcends the Bible still speaks fresh words of revelation today. The church must never think that the Bible is "the only word that God is speaking."²⁴⁸ Niebuhr concludes that the church should never identify its Scriptures with God, for "To give final devotion to the book is to deny the final claim of God; to look for the mighty deeds of God only in the records of the past is to deny that he is the living God; to love the book as the source of strength and of salvation is to practice an idolatry that can bring only confusion into life."²⁴⁹

Fourth, and the final major example of religious henotheism, is Christism. Christism occurs when the church substitutes Jesus Christ for God, placing its trust and

²⁴⁶Niebuhr, review of *What Is Christianity?*, by Charles Clayton Morrison, in *Journal of Religion* 21 (April, 1941): 192.

²⁴⁷Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 221 and *Faith On Earth*, 115. See p. 61-62 of this dissertation. Cf. idem, *The Responsible Self*, 46: applied to his theological work, Niebuhr claims to write "Bible-informed," though not "Bible-centered" ethics. He disagrees with those theologians who take all of their ethics from Scripture, forgetting that it is a historical book and that a new day calls for new ethical approaches. He disagrees with theologians "who deal with the Scriptures as a nonhistorical book and undertake to explain it as though they were nonhistorical men." Elsewhere, Niebuhr argues that an authentic God-centered ethics will look through the Bible to the God of the Bible rather than remain content with the Bible alone. See idem, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 221.

²⁴⁸Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 250. Cf. idem, "Christian Ethics," 41 and Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 22-24.

²⁴⁹Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 43-44.

loyalty in him rather than in the One beyond the many. The church must refrain from any “Christ-cult” or “Jesus-cult” that makes Jesus Christ “the absolute center of confidence and loyalty,” substituting “the Lordship of Christ for the Lordship of God.” While Jesus Christ is central to the Christian faith, he must always remain subordinate to and the servant of God. God alone reserves the right to be the final cause of existence. The church must never make an idol out of Christ, investing him “with such absolute significance that his relation to the One beyond himself is so slurred over that he becomes the center of value and the object of loyalty.”²⁵⁰

2. Polytheism

In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr explains how henotheism eventually produces polytheism. Henotheistic people replace God with some finite center of value. Because this source of value is finite, it must eventually fail and disappoint its adherents. When this happens, the jilted henotheists recognize the danger of placing all their eggs in one basket and seek to hedge their bets. From now on they will scatter their allegiances to several sources, taking “recourse to multiple centers of value.”²⁵¹

Something else significant has occurred. Now distributing “partial loyalties to many interests,” they are actually only loyal to themselves. They have learned the futility of drawing significance from some other finite source. Now they only care about protecting themselves. They seek to draw value and significance from a variety of sources, all with the hope of making themselves important. Their individual selves become the center of their own universe. They are anthropocentric.²⁵²

²⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 59-60. Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 40, where Niebuhr observes that Jesus himself refused to make an idol from himself by placing his will before his Father’s. Jesus refused “to claim the kingly crown” but rather humbled and emptied himself, devoting himself entirely to the Father’s will.

²⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 28.

²⁵² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 29.

Niebuhr calls this condition religious narcissism, a problem that is common among people. He contends that the self is “the most common object of devotion on which we depend for our meaning and value.” We tend to “make ourselves the most admired of all beings and seek to interpret the meaning of all experiences by reference to their meaning for the central self. The self becomes the center of value and at the same time the being which is to guarantee its own life against meaninglessness, worthlessness, and the threat of frustration.”²⁵³

Niebuhr insists that such polytheistic narcissism is common even among monotheists. For example, Christians often use the doctrines of Christianity, such as the loving Jesus, kind Father, and comforting Holy Spirit, for their own personal benefit without making any commitments of loyalty in return. Such anthropocentrism is equivalent to polytheism, for it makes the individual the end in himself and various sources of value important only insofar as they contribute to him.²⁵⁴

Anthropocentric polytheism cannot satisfy for two reasons, one residing in the self and the other with the finite sources of value. First, the self soon realizes that it does not comprise an adequate center of value, for much of its satisfaction comes from external sources. The self begins to live for these external things (e.g., home, sex, money, nation), which in turn supply meaning and value. So the self finds itself interdependent among a network of causes, unable then to declare itself the center of value.²⁵⁵

Moreover, besides losing its own claim to value, the self also loses its centeredness. The pull from these various sources of value divides the self into numerous

²⁵³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 119.

²⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 30.

²⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 120.

directions so that it forfeits its unifying center. In this way the self loses its singular integrity which is necessary for it to exist as a self.²⁵⁶ The self longs for synthesis, to unite all of its finite gods together. However, each one demands absolute allegiance, so that service to one excludes service to others. For example, if the individual pursues art for art's sake, then "art will be the enemy of morality and truth." If he pursues his own country's good then he must ultimately oppose the others. Niebuhr concludes that the individual must resort to "successive polygamy." He explains: "The best we can achieve in this realm is a sort of compromise among many absolute claims. We remain beings, therefore, with many faiths held in succession. We practice a kind of successive polygamy, being married now to this and now to that object of devotion."²⁵⁷ Thus, lacking both value and a center in itself, the self relinquishes any claim to being its own center of value.

Second, the self discovers that these finite sources of value are unable to deliver the meaning and value that it craves. Each may provide meaning in life for a time, but none can supply continuous, universal value. Finite sources can only supply finite value. Furthermore, each center of value will eventually die, leaving those who trusted in it without hope. Niebuhr calls this the "twilight of the gods." It is the realization that all finite causes, such as social movements, ideals, empires, and cities will eventually pass and be replaced with others. He elaborates: "At the end nothing is left to defend us

²⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 137. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 140, where Niebuhr says that this situation is desperate, for the disunity of the self prompts God to destroy and annihilate the individual. God the creator becomes its destroyer.

²⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 121. Cf. idem, "Christian Ethics," 98: in these lectures Niebuhr suggests that the solution to this polytheistic division of the self is to remember that all of life is united in God. Rather than divide his activities into various spheres, the individual should ponder how "all of life is responsible to God." He should remember that "everything is under Divine Command" and that "if we do not respond to Him we are acting polytheistically." Niebuhr mentions sleep to illustrate his point. He says: "We go to sleep. But the amount of sleep and the way in which I go to sleep is a moral decision. How do I awake? In response to God?"

against the void of meaninglessness.” “...All our causes, all our ideas, all the beings on which we relied to save us from worthlessness are doomed to pass.”²⁵⁸

3. *Conflict with Others*

The sins of henotheism and polytheism pertain directly to the sinner’s relationship with God. However, Niebuhr rightly notes that sin does not stop there, for the sin which damages one’s vertical relation with God also adversely affects one’s horizontal relations with others. This consequence is not surprising, given Niebuhr’s emphasis on community. Because God and his creation exist in seamless community, any disruption of one’s relation with God simultaneously tears the fabric of the created community.

For instance, henotheism by its very nature breeds conflict. People who worship different gods inevitably fight each other. And while larger gods are superior to smaller deities, the larger gods cause the most devastating conflicts. For instance, a national or class god is greater than the self, yet these superior gods merely “transfer the conflict to a broader stage and become greater demons.”²⁵⁹ People who are committed to a finite god will go to war to protect him from other finite challengers.

Furthermore, henotheism eventually leads to polytheism, which is marked by self-love. Individuals now love themselves rather than their neighbors. Knowing that they will eventually die, their subsequent fear and insecurity urges them to gain recognition

²⁵⁸ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 121-22. Cf. idem, “Life is Worth Living,” 4: Niebuhr observes that children are natural polytheists, seeking meaning in many and varied objects of devotion. As they grow they have opportunities to serve causes and projects that are greater and more enduring than themselves, and so they think that they have found meaning. However, this faith is shattered when some of these causes, objects, and people die. Then the youth realizes that his finite values were not enough. This shattering forces the individual to see through his numerous idols and realize that “all the objects of devotion--home, country, and great causes--are insufficient of and in themselves, while beyond them, in the very nature of things, in the source and end of the whole cosmic process, there is the validation of life’s enterprise.”

²⁵⁹ Niebuhr, “Man the Sinner,” 278-79: Niebuhr asserts that “idolatry leads inevitably to polytheism and polytheism is conflict.”

and self-assurance and inhibits them from sacrificing themselves for others.²⁶⁰ They turn to “the ethos of defense, to the ethics of survival.”²⁶¹ These individuals perceive that every person, especially God, is a threat to their existence and well-being, and they are prepared to do whatever it takes to protect and promote themselves.²⁶² Their distrust of God prompts people to cheat, deceive and distrust others. Because they are not confident that Being will maintain them, they attempt to maintain themselves. Anxious that Being will not come through for them, they take matters into their own hands, striving to make their own way by deceiving others. These deceptions induce others to respond with their own deceptions, and soon the entire web of interpersonal relations is full of distrust and deceit.²⁶³

Consequently, Niebuhr’s discussion of humanity’s broken relationship with God requires him to discuss the social side of sin. And since modernity’s most serious sin is its failure toward God, Niebuhr argues that its greatest sins are social. He means this in

²⁶⁰ Niebuhr, “An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,” 3.

²⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 107.

²⁶² Niebuhr, “The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards,” 126: Niebuhr cites Edwards to support his understanding of this selfish side of people. He writes: “To Edwards the desire of man to be great in himself, and to be honored for his eminence, to stand out in comparison with his fellows, to be more loved than his companions--even by God--this is man's pettiness, his perversity, his pustulant sickness, as he might have said.”

Even the young, liberal Niebuhr recognized this selfish side of sin. In an essay written in 1922, Niebuhr suggested that the world’s two greatest evils were rampant individualism (rather than service) and the suppression of individual personality. These actually reinforce the other, for those who excessively express their individualism suppress the personality of others to do so. Niebuhr found evidence of rampant individualism in the rising divorce rate and industry’s exploitation of workers. Regarding the latter, the rise of private property permitted a few wealthy individuals to concentrate property into their own hands and dominate their poor laborers. This suppression of laborers was aided by the creation of the machine, for those who owned the machine gained much power for themselves. Niebuhr concluded that sin is hereby embedded in the structure of society (e.g., aided by private property and machines). This fact means that the gospel will not succeed by converting only a few individuals. Instead, it must convert entire social groups to recognize the supremacy of personality and pledge themselves to resist those who seek to suppress it. See idem, “Christianity and the Social Problem,” *Magazin für evangelische Theologie und Kirche* 50 (1922): 278-291.

²⁶³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 84.

two ways. First, sin occurs most prominently among groups rather than individuals. Modern people “sin more in the lump; they die more in the gross.”²⁶⁴ Modern sin occurs on a grand scale. The oppressors and the oppressed are groups, whole classes of people rather than lone individuals. Niebuhr elaborates:

...it seems evident that in our time the doom and the salvation, the creation, sin and redemption with which men are concerned are social rather than individual in character. ...The emancipated individuals of our day are the societies, the races and classes which have made themselves laws to themselves; which commit crimes against other classes, races and nations and believe they will go unpunished; which suffer injustice and suppression as groups...²⁶⁵

Second, modernity’s besetting sin is selfishness, a sin that carries social implications. While previous eras might focus on the sin of concupiscence or secularism, the modern church must preach against selfishness and its subsequent social ills. Niebuhr comments: “sin appears today more under the form of selfishness than of sensuality. To be sure, men continue to be aware of guilt and concupiscence, of secularism and vice, but the deep division of their souls appears less as the conflict of the flesh with the spirit and more as the warfare of their selfish with their social purposes.”²⁶⁶

E. Consequences of Sin

Niebuhr observes that humanity’s sin towards God and others culminates in despair and destruction. First, individuals fall into despair as they realize that their finite gods have failed to deliver the promised happiness. They recognize that there is “no meaning, purpose or hope in this human existence” or in their desire for fleeting, momentary pleasures and possessions.²⁶⁷ Their “lives are threatened with emptiness.”

²⁶⁴ Niebuhr, “The Relativities of Religion,” 1457.

²⁶⁵ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 178.

²⁶⁶ Niebuhr, “The Relativities of Religion,” 1457.

²⁶⁷ Niebuhr, “The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age,” 308.

Their great crusades and institutions have not prevented economic and political failures. What hope is left that the world might “be saved from utter futility?”²⁶⁸

Furthermore, people sense that the world has never been reconciled to God or to each other, and that now this unreconciledness is more distant than ever.²⁶⁹ They do not see an end to the ceaseless fighting. In Niebuhr’s words, they feel damned “to a hell of dissatisfaction, inner conflict, war and barbarism as lurid as any nether region which the imagination of the past conceived.”²⁷⁰ So people give up. They do nothing to help the situation because they believe that nothing can be done. This leads to nihilism, the belief that there is nothing worthwhile, “nothing worth doing.” This is utter despair.²⁷¹

Sadly, Niebuhr thinks that Christians are also susceptible to this despair. He observes that many parishioners are biblically and theologically illiterate, not knowing even the basics of the Christian worldview. And what they do know only elicits a half-hearted assent from them. Thus, while their relationship with God should yield meaning and purpose in life, their lack of knowledge and whole-hearted, robust faith produces Laodicean believers who are “unalert, unawakened Christians who do not know that they are living in despair.”²⁷² Their position is most hopeless, for they are in despair and do not even know it.

Second, sin also brings destruction. Destruction comes from two sources: the true God and the false gods. The true God responds to human sin as the Enemy, the

²⁶⁸ Niebuhr, “What Then Must We Do?”, 146.

²⁶⁹ Niebuhr, “The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age,” 308.

²⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 127.

²⁷¹ Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” 53.

²⁷² Niebuhr, “Who Are the Unbelievers and What Do They Believe?” in *The Christian Hope and the Task of the Church: Six Ecumenical Surveys and the Report of the Assembly*, section 2 (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), 36.

Destroyer. He must destroy what is sinful, for sin cuts against the grain of the universe.²⁷³ Destruction is also inherent in the nature of the false gods. Niebuhr states that destruction occurs whenever a relative object is exalted into an absolute, for the relative is unable to support those who trust in it.²⁷⁴ For example, Niebuhr observes that nations absolutize a relative when they claim absolute sovereignty for themselves. Such nations always end up going to war, bringing catastrophe upon themselves and also numerous innocents who get in the way.²⁷⁵ In his day, such innocents included the continued “agony of China,” the “crucifixion of the Jews,” and to a lesser extent, the “millions of unemployed” who had suffered during the Great Depression.²⁷⁶

Finally, Niebuhr contends that finite gods not only destroy other beings, but they also destroy themselves. This occurs because no finite object is able to stand on its own. When it is elevated to deity status it necessarily collapses beneath its own weight. Niebuhr concludes that “none is absolute save God and that the absolutizing of anything finite is ruinous to the finite itself.”²⁷⁷ He gives several examples:

Whatever dangers threaten from without, it is safe to prophesy that if religious liberty is ever lost in America it will be lost to some movement that makes religious liberty its war cry, and that if totalitarianism is ever established here it will be established in the name of democracy. So in foreign lands self-determination of peoples has been outraged by those who fight in its name, tyranny has been established by those who manage to get a ninety-eight percent majority at their “democratic” polls, and Christianity has been enslaved by those who claim to act in the name of “positive Christianity.”²⁷⁸

²⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 166.

²⁷⁴ Niebuhr, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4.

²⁷⁵ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 148-49, 158.

²⁷⁶ Niebuhr, “Tired Christians,” *Yale Divinity News* (March 1939): 3.

²⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 113.

²⁷⁸ Niebuhr, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4.

Niebuhr concludes that it is best to use religious liberty, democracy, and Christianity to serve God rather than elevate them as ends in themselves. Such elevation always brings destruction, destruction for the god itself and its followers.

CHAPTER THREE

REDEMPTION

Chapter 2 examined Niebuhr's understanding of creation and fall. There we observed that, like many twentieth century theologians, Niebuhr tends to conflate these two states. Nevertheless, although he does not possess an Augustinian view of the separation between creation and fall, Niebuhr does make logical distinctions between them. Whether or not it ever existed this way in time and space, creation is a logically possible world in which each creature properly responds to God and to other creatures. The more developed creatures do not abuse their lower counterparts, for they know that each creature, whether living or inanimate, is valuable to God, its creator.

Unfortunately, humanity spoils this pristine community by its distrust and disloyalty toward God. Lacking confidence that God is on their side, individuals begin to fend for themselves in this world. They become defensive, striving for dominance in a world where only the fittest survive. They attempt to replace belief in the true God with various henotheisms and polytheisms, but they ultimately despair of escaping the divine destruction that must certainly accompany their rebellion.

This chapter presents Niebuhr's perspective on God's answer to this fall: the divine act of redemption. It will draw out Niebuhr's theology of redemption from the entirety of his corpus, relying heavily on his seminal works, *The Meaning of Revelation*, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, *The Responsible Self*, and *Faith On Earth*. In so doing, it will examine in order the following facets of Niebuhr's understanding of redemption: its definition, method, agents, and extent.

I. Definition of Redemption

Niebuhr defines redemption as the act of reconciliation whereby God restores the community between himself and his creatures and then among the creatures themselves. As such, redemption occurs in a double movement, a movement that recapitulates the double movement that occurred in the fall. Just as sin originated in humanity's relationship with God and then spread to infect his relationship with other creatures, so redemption begins by restoring humanity's relationship with God and then moves to reconcile humanity with the rest of creation.

Consequently, the initial step concerns reconciliation between the creature, or individual person, and his God. Here God re-establishes friendship with the individual, freeing the person from his false gods and enabling him to trust and be loyal to God again. Niebuhr writes: Jesus "redeems us by reconciling us to God, by winning us out of our distrust and fear of the Holy One, by drawing us away from our despairing trust in idols and in self."¹ Such reconciliation to God "is reconciliation to life itself; love to the Creator is love of being, rejoicing in existence, in its source, totality and particularity."²

Once the individual has become reconciled to God, he is then able to take the second step, which is reconciliation with the rest of creation. Niebuhr suggests that those who are genuinely reconciled to God will seek reconciliation with other creatures, for they will take God's cause as their own. As the principle of being, God's cause, or his purpose for existence, is to ground, sustain, and unify the realm of being. Consequently, those who pursue God's cause must also cultivate restored relationships with others.³

¹Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 223. Cf. idem, *The Responsible Self*, 44.

²Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 37. Cf. idem, review of *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, by Paul Tillich, 45. Niebuhr appreciates Tillich's understanding of salvation, for it is "less as forgiveness of sin and as redemption from death than as participation in the *New Being*, in which the disruption, conflict, self-destruction, meaninglessness and despair of human life is overcome."

³Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 33. Cf. idem, *The Responsible Self*, 177-78: Christians confess that "we were blind in our distrust of being, now we begin to see; we were aliens and alienated in a strange, empty world, now we begin sometimes to feel at home; we were in love with

Niebuhr elaborates on this double movement: “Faith as loyalty moves from the creation to God who is creation’s cause, since it is there to glorify him, and it moves from God to his cause, which is the creation that he loves and redeems.”⁴

Thus, redemption is definable in terms of one’s relation to God and to others. First, redemption means that the individual is able to trust God for a victorious final outcome to life. In this case, “Redemption means the substitution of the assurance of eternal life for the certainty of death--whether this be realized as the certainty of personal death, or the end of our religion or the decay of our civilization.” Second, regarding others, “Redemption means the release and redirection of the vast resources of love which the Creator has put into his creature and which sinfulness thwarts and inhibits by creating internal conflict between many loves and by twisting love back upon the self.”⁵

Because God and his creatures share a common fellowship, genuine communion requires communion with both God and the rest of creation. One cannot claim to possess communion with God if his relations with fellow creatures is broken, and vice versa.⁶ Niebuhr concludes that the church’s most important task is to foster this full, double-sided communion, to encourage an “increase among men of the love of God and neighbor.”⁷

In doing so, the church follows its head, Jesus Christ, who models the path of reconciliation. As we shall see when we discuss the work of Christ, Niebuhr believes

ourselves and all our little cities, now we are falling in love, we think, with being itself, with the city of God, the universal community of which God is the source and governor.”

⁴Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 109. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 28-29.

⁵Niebuhr, “An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,” 5.

⁶Niebuhr, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 16: True community requires communion with God, “the common cause, the common source, the common and overarching reality on which we all depend,” and communion with men. “We seek community with the One beyond the many as we seek our oneness with each other in church and world.”

⁷Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 31.

that Christ accomplishes redemption by revealing an example of fellowship with God and others for his disciples to follow. As such, he subscribes to an example theory of the atonement, a theory typified in the writings of Abelard and Schleiermacher.⁸

II. Method of Redemption: Radical Monotheism

The previous section described Niebuhr's definition of redemption and how it must recapitulate the fall's double movement between God and creation. But Niebuhr is not content to merely encourage redemption's double movement. He goes further and explains how it is possible. The fall occurs because humanity severs its relationship with God, replacing it with various henotheisms and polytheisms. God responds by revealing his sovereign goodness. This goodness in turn leads people toward radical monotheism, replacing their fear and rebellion toward God with trust and loyalty.

Radical monotheism consists of "radical faith in the One God." Such radical faith is quite rare, and Niebuhr thinks that it is "very questionable" whether anyone has ever possessed it.⁹ Numerous monotheistic religions exist, such as Judaism and Christianity, but their adherents lack the whole-hearted trust and loyalty required to be considered *radical* monotheists.¹⁰ The rarity of radical monotheism leads Niebuhr to suggest that its existence is the central mystery of life. How is radical, theocentric faith possible?¹¹

⁸See p. 167-69 of this dissertation.

⁹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 31. I assume that Niebuhr excludes Jesus Christ from this generalization. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 253 and *Radical Monotheism*, 41: radical monotheism is "the concrete expression in a total human life of radical trust in the One and of universal loyalty to the realm of being."

¹⁰Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 49-50.

¹¹Niebuhr, "Science and Religion," 21: "Now this is the fundamental mystery of life to us in a way--that we have somehow been endowed with the ability to conceive faith in the central principle of being itself and say to it 'God.' This is the mystery, and the wonder with which we are concerned."

Note: Niebuhr's theocentric radical monotheism is deeply influenced by Edwards and Tillich. Niebuhr admires Edwards' commitment to the glory of God, and wishes that he and his contemporaries would be so committed. Niebuhr laments that his age has lost sight of God's glory, which is why Edwards' theology seems so anachronistic. See idem, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," 126.

Niebuhr defines radical faith as that which replaces distrust and disloyalty to God with the certainty that God is good and sovereign and the faithfulness that responds to God alone and serves him above all others. Such radical commitment to God simultaneously secularizes and sanctifies creation, relativizing its value even while elevating its importance. This section will follow this outline, examining radical monotheism's trust and loyalty to God and then how this prompts believers to serve God in the world.

A. Radical Monotheism's Trust In God

Radical monotheism's trust in God requires full involvement from one's head and heart. Regarding the mind, Niebuhr asserts that those radical monotheists who fully trust God do so because they believe that he is both sovereign and good. He explains: radical monotheism "is the conviction that there is an ultimate word, a Word of God, that there is a universal Sovereignty, or, better, that the Universal Power is good... ." ¹²

Niebuhr's theocentricity leads him to easily accept God's sovereignty. Recognizing that people will only trust God if they believe that he is strong enough to support them, Niebuhr gives full sway to divine sovereignty, teaching that God is actively involved in every event, even those which appear to be evil. God intends every historical event; nothing occurs without his direct consent. To claim otherwise would detract from his sovereignty, for then something would happen that lies outside his will. ¹³

Likewise, Niebuhr appreciates Tillich's emphasis on the power of the Unconditioned and humanity's response to it. He thinks that this focus on one's Ultimate Concern makes Tillich's philosophy very religious, which is also the passion of Niebuhr. See idem, review of *The Protestant Era*, 291 and "The Religious Situation," 84.

¹² Niebuhr, "Theology--Not Queen but Servant," *Journal of Religion* 35 (1955): 2.

¹³ See p. 48-49 of this dissertation. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 13: Niebuhr takes solace in his belief that God is the active agent within each moment. He states that believers should not worry about clothes, food, or shelter, not because these things are unimportant but because the God who is present in each moment has these things beneath his control. Cf. idem, "Faith, Works and Social Salvation," *Religion in Life* 1 (1932): 429 and "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 118.

While belief in divine sovereignty comes easily to Niebuhr, he struggles with the other side. His robust view of divine sovereignty threatens to overwhelm his belief in the goodness of God. Niebuhr asserts that this is why radical monotheism is a miracle. It takes an act of God to enable individuals to perceive that God, the enemy of their henotheistic and polytheistic causes, the destroyer of all their gods, is actually good and worthy of their trust. Niebuhr does not explain precisely how this miracle of radical monotheism occurs. While he states that “it is a gift from God,” he does not elaborate on how God accomplishes this.¹⁴ At best, he implies that God somehow mediates this grace through human reason and the community of faith. He observes that radical monotheism is not achieved apart from the struggle of reason, “the experience of frustration,” a spiritual intuition, and at least for Christians, the “concrete meeting with other men who have received this faith, and the concrete meeting with Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

While it is not appropriate to build a case on silence, it is striking that here Niebuhr is silent about the work of the Holy Spirit. For instance, classic Reformed theology affirms the role of the believing community in the divine purpose of bringing humans to an awareness of God. This is evident in its doctrine of the covenant and its commitment to infant baptism. However, it also explicitly affirms an *immediate* work of God the Holy Spirit in regenerating lost sinners. As Louis Berkhof states: “Regeneration consists in the implanting of the *principle* of the new spiritual life in man, in a radical change of the governing disposition of the soul, which, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, gives birth to a life that moves in a Godward direction.”¹⁶ This explicit reference to the immediate work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration contrasts sharply with Niebuhr’s

¹⁴Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 126.

¹⁵Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 124.

¹⁶Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1932; repr., 1996), 468 (emphasis is Berkhof’s).

silence on the subject and leads us to wonder: what redemptive role does the Holy Spirit play within Niebuhr's theology?

Notwithstanding his silence on precisely how radical monotheism occurs, Niebuhr does give much attention to defining what the concept means. Borrowing a page from Whitehead, Niebuhr states that radical monotheists are those who are able to progress beyond God the void to God the enemy and then finally to conclude that God is their companion. Thus, they realize that the God they feared is actually their friend. He writes: "When we say that we conceive faith in the great void and the great enemy we mean that we have learned to count on it as friend. We have learned to rely on it as a cause to which we may devote our lives, as that which will make all our lives and the lives of all things valuable even though it bring them to death."¹⁷ Niebuhr states that this is the heart of the gospel. The church proclaims in ways suited to its culture that "the center and heart of all things, the first and last Being, is utter goodness, complete love."¹⁸

Niebuhr presents two arguments for his belief that the sovereign God remains "utter goodness, complete love." First, he relegates the question to divine mystery. While he admits that many events appear to be evil, he asserts that God causes such apparent evils in order to accomplish an ultimate good known only by him. Niebuhr finds such faith exemplified in biblical believers, for whom "No plague, no drought, no invasion, no sparrow's fall occurred apart from the faithful will of the One. Confidence in cosmic faithfulness held to the assurance that there was one self-consistent intention in

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 124. Cf. *ibid.*, 38, 122-26.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 127. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 119-21, where he observes that not everyone believes the church. Niebuhr agrees with Kierkegaard that the decision to rely upon God is an individual decision. Each person must decide for himself how good he believes God to be. Only those who believe that God is good, meaning that he is on their side, neither antagonistic nor indifferent, will choose to rely upon him.

apparent evil as well as in apparent good though how it was present often remained unfathomed.”¹⁹

Elsewhere he cites Isaiah 10, stating that though Israel could not understand why God would use wicked Assyria to punish them, yet they should have believed that Assyria “had no power beyond that which the Almighty granted it for his own purposes...that in due time the Almighty would accomplish all his work for good, and then reduce the enemy to his proper size, perhaps to that of a woodshed ax or a pruning saw.”²⁰ Niebuhr sees parallels in his day in the cold war between Russia and America. He states that Americans should trust the power and goodness of God rather than fret about their own security. God will ultimately do whatever he wants, and nothing people do can alter his plan. So it is futile to “frighten one another with visions of the extinction of human life, as though we could thwart the Almighty in his purposes if it is his intention to let us die despite our desire to live or to keep us alive despite our desire to die.”²¹

But Niebuhr is not content to leave the argument with the mystery of God. He attempts to probe deeper, using a two-step argument to demonstrate how sovereignty and goodness are ultimately reconciled in God. First, he claims that God is concerned about the good for all being rather than one individual’s private good. So long as individuals judge events from their relative perspective, they will think that some events are bad and others are good. However, when they step back and look at the big picture they will recognize that what may seem adverse to them is actually good for the whole. And since it is good for the whole, those individuals with radical faith will rejoice, notwithstanding its implications for them personally. Niebuhr explains:

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 47.

²⁰ Niebuhr, “The Illusions of Power,” *Christian Century Pulpit* 33 (1962): 103.

²¹ Niebuhr, “The Illusions of Power,” 100.

...whatever is, is good, affirmed by the power of being, supported by it, intended to be, good in relation to the ultimate center, no matter how unrighteous it is in relation to finite companions. And now all my relative evaluations will be subjected to the continuing and great correction. They will be made to fit into a total process producing good--not what is good for me (though my confidence accepts that as included), nor what is good for man (though that is also included), nor what is good for the development of life (though that also belongs in the picture), but what is good²² for being, for universal being, or for God, center and source of all existence.

Second, Niebuhr does not believe that the goodness of the whole necessarily overrides what is good for the individual. While an individual must subordinate his personal happiness for the good of the whole, knowing that God is concerned for being in general, yet he must also believe that God is on his side, that he has the individual's best interests at heart. How can Niebuhr have it both ways? He does so through his belief in the resurrection. Although the individual may sacrifice his own personal good for the good of the whole in this life, perhaps even to the point of death, yet God's resurrection power will reach him even there, supplying the individual with happiness in a new life. Niebuhr states:

For salvation now appears to us as deliverance from that deep distrust of the One in all the many that causes us to interpret everything that happens to us as issuing ultimately from animosity or as happening in the realm of destruction. Redemption appears as the liberty to interpret in trust all that happens as contained within an intention and a total activity that includes death within the domain of life, that destroys only to re-establish and renew.²³

²²Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 125. The line "whatever is, is good" appears often in Niebuhr's works. For instance, see idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 37, 112, 126 and *Christ and Culture*, 197. The line is a variation of Alexander Pope's statement that "whatever is, is right." See Alexander Pope, *The Poems of Alexander Pope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951), vol. 3/1, *An Essay On Man*, 51, 166. Although the phrase comes from Pope, Niebuhr explains that his use of the term "good" is an important change from Pope's use of the term "right." In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 38, Niebuhr writes: "To say that this faith acknowledges whatever is to be good is not to say, of course, that for it whatever is, is right. In their relations to each other and to their principle these many beings in the realm of being are often wrong and grievously so. They are enemies to each other as often as friends; but even enemies are entitled to loyalty as fellow citizens of the realm of being."

²³Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 142. Cf. idem, "Utilitarian Christianity," 5: "no evil can befall a good man'--or a good nation--'in life or in death.'"

The resurrection guarantees the ultimate prosperity of the individual. In this way it also enables the whole of being to prosper, for the whole benefits as its individual components receive good.

Thus, belief in the resurrection becomes the cardinal object of the radical monotheist's trust. His faith culminates here, for the resurrection implies that God is both sovereign and good. Only a sovereign God is able to accomplish a resurrection and only a good God can be trusted to want to perform one. So those who hope in the resurrection from the dead have taken a huge, initial step down the road toward radical monotheism. Belief in the resurrection is an essential step in the process of redemption. Niebuhr explains: "Redemption means the substitution of the assurance of eternal life for the certainty of death--whether this be realized as the certainty of personal death, or the end of our religion or the decay of our civilization."²⁴ Those who believe in the resurrection possess a confident, trustful attitude toward life, for they realize that they live in a world of eternal life rather than eternal death.²⁵

It is noteworthy that Niebuhr here defines redemption as assurance rather than forgiveness of sin. In Niebuhr's mind there appears to be no difference between them. Since humanity's primary sin is fear and distrust of God, then the forgiveness and correction of that sin would be the assurance that God is sovereign and good. This understanding of redemption raises important questions from the side of Christian orthodoxy. For instance, how seriously does Niebuhr take the notion of divine wrath? He does indirectly pay tribute to the reality of divine wrath in his famous critique of Protestant liberalism. There he states that liberalism believes that "A God without wrath

²⁴Niebuhr, "An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," 5.

²⁵Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 107 and *Christ and Culture*, 112. Note: notwithstanding the importance that Niebuhr places on the resurrection, he does not believe that Jesus physically arose from the dead. See p. 166-67 of this dissertation.

brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”²⁶ However, it is not clear here whether Niebuhr is lamenting liberalism’s loss of a genuinely wrathful God or merely its loss of the *perception* that God is wrathful. Against this ambiguity, Christian orthodoxy clearly teaches that God *is* deservedly and righteously wrathful toward sinful humanity. Rather than imply that humanity’s primary sin is *thinking* that God is their enemy, orthodoxy states that humanity’s primary sin is an act of disobedience. This disobedience in turn prompts God to judge them. Thus, orthodoxy claims that people do not mistakenly think that God is their enemy. God actually is their enemy, and for good reason.²⁷

Because Niebuhr apparently believes that people only think that God is their enemy, when in fact he is not, his understanding of the atonement concerns only humanity’s attitude toward God. It does not concern God’s attitude toward humanity, for they never were in trouble with God. Instead, the mere act of thinking that they are in conflict with God causes people to become alienated from God in their minds. However, the moment they realize that God has always been for them, their cognitive awareness catches up with what has always been true and they become reconciled to God. Thus, the

²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 193.

²⁷ For the orthodox position concerning the need for God’s wrath to be propitiated, see Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” II.6-7, 18, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 319-21, 348. Although Niebuhr is not clear concerning the reality of God’s wrath, he does rightly note that God’s love is the proper ground of redemption. This comports well with orthodoxy, which asserts that it was God’s love that prompted him to provide a propitiation for his wrath by becoming incarnate and paying the debt of human sin with his sacrifice (see Augustine, *On the Gospel of St. John*, cx.6, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff [Edinburgh and Grand Rapids: T. & T. Clark and Eerdmans, 1991], VII, 411: “Accordingly, in a wonderful and divine manner, even when he hated us, he loved us; for he hated us, in so far as we were not what He Himself had made; and because our own iniquity had not in every part consumed His work, He knew at once both how, in each one of us, to hate what we had done, and to love what He had done”—also quoted by Calvin in his *Institutes* II.16.4).

atonement is reduced to awareness. The gospel announces to people the good news that they have always been loved and supported by God.²⁸

So far this section has addressed the mental aspect of radical monotheism's trust in God: that one must believe that God is both sovereign and good. Now we move to the affective side. In order to count as radical monotheism, Niebuhr claims that one's trust in God must transcend mental assent to involve his entire person. He warns against substituting faith in the living God with faith in beliefs about God, or mere head knowledge. Such mental assent is not genuine faith, but is rather a cheap substitution which easily becomes a new legalism and idolatry when people begin to worship their beliefs about God rather than God himself. Niebuhr writes:

When statements about faith are substituted for faith in God, only perverted forms of Evangelical ethics can result, for then belief is substituted for trust and loyalty. When that takes place, as has often occurred and will often occur, our real trust is directed not toward God but toward a system of truths on which we depend for salvation from sin and death. A new idol has then taken the place of the old and a new legalism supplanted the old system of demands.²⁹

Niebuhr counters mere head knowledge with an appeal to the emotional, trusting side of faith. He contends that emotion played an integral role in the Reformers' description of faith. He says that they "knew that faith in God was fundamentally an affair of the personally trusting heart, much more than of the idea-and theory-accepting mind, that justification was an experience of trust by fearsome, guilt-ridden selves before it was a doctrine to be believed."³⁰ Niebuhr claims that if he were starting his theological

²⁸ Cf. Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," *Theology Today* 4 (1948): 514, where he states that the atonement "is independent of our view of it." This does not contradict our analysis, for in context Niebuhr means here that the nature of the atonement, which is the awareness that God can be trusted, remains true despite the fact that some may misunderstand it. Note: Niebuhr's understanding of the atonement is similar to Barth, who argues that only humanity, not God, needs reconciled. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 74; *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/1, 79.

²⁹ Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 223.

³⁰ Niebuhr, "The Cole Lectures: 'Next Steps in Theology,'" in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 42-43. Cf. *idem*, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 116: Niebuhr says that

career over he would follow Edwards' lead and focus much more on the emotions. He would begin with the hypothesis that, contrary to popular belief, emotions "put us into touch with what is reliable, firm, real, enduring in ways that are inaccessible to the conceptual and spectator reason."³¹ Thus, Niebuhr thinks that emotions are necessary for connecting with God, and no one can claim to possess genuine faith who does not cultivate his affective side.

B. Radical Monotheism's Loyalty To God

The radical monotheist's trust in the sovereign goodness of God, supported by his faith in the resurrection, liberates the believer to respond in faithfulness to God. The believer no longer worries about protecting his own interests because he knows that the benevolent, sovereign God will always protect his interests for him. Certain that God will always be loyal to him, the believer responds in loyalty to God.³² This loyalty manifests itself in two ways: it primarily responds to God rather than others and in its response, it performs acts of faithful service toward God.

First, Niebuhr combines his responsibility theory and belief in divine sovereignty to argue that believers who are loyal to God will recognize and respond to the sovereign

Protestants consider faith to be not merely intellectual assent but rather "a personal, practical trusting in, reliance on, counting upon something."

³¹ Niebuhr, "The Cole Lectures: 'Next Steps in Theology,'" 48. Niebuhr adds that emotions precede the intellect when one perceives an object. Just as a child trusts his parents before he is able to identify them as his parents, so our emotional relationship to God, whether love or hate, precedes any articulation concerning who he is.

³² Niebuhr, *Church Against the World*, 149-50, excerpts also published as "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," *Christendom* 1 (1935): 142: Niebuhr applies this principle to the church, writing that the church will only free itself from its cultural entanglements when it realizes "the self-evident truth that it and all life are dependent upon God, that loyalty to him is the condition of life, and that to him belong the kingdom and the power and the glory." Cf. *idem*, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 37: Niebuhr states that those who love God possess the "conviction that there is faithfulness at the heart of things." This conviction enables them to remain sacrificially loyal to God, affirming that the universe possesses unity and faithfulness, despite appearances to the contrary. They retain "loyalty to the idea of God when the actuality of God is mystery" and a "devoted will to maintain a universal community at whatever cost to the self."

God who is actively involved in every historical event. Rather than allow other, finite subjects to distract their attention, radical monotheists remember that divine agency is behind every act of finite subjects. So instead of responding to individuals as individuals, the believer responds to the God who is acting within the individuals. Niebuhr explains that “radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes a response in loyalty and confidence to the One who is present in all such events.”³³

Niebuhr suggests that to respond to the individuals rather than God would be irresponsible. He explains that just as words make sense only in sentences, so finite actions only possess meaning in context. Since the ultimate context is God, then his presence supplies ultimate meaning to events. Thus, to ignore God’s activity within events must lead one to misinterpret their ultimate meaning. Niebuhr argues that this is irresponsible behavior for those who know better.³⁴

Niebuhr contends that such a single-minded response to God furnishes two benefits: it unifies both the world and the self. It unifies the world because the individual is now responding to the One who transcends the world rather than to any number of

³³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 48. Cf. *idem*, *The Responsible Self*, 121-23. *Ibid.*, 169, illustrates this principle with Joseph’s response to his brothers and Isaiah’s response to the Assyrian invasion. First, Joseph responded to God acting behind his brothers’ betrayal rather than to them. He said that what they meant for evil God intended for good. Niebuhr writes: “Here the clear distinction is made between the particular intentions that guide a finite action and the divine intention that uses or lies behind such actions. So Joseph can and does forgive, responding to the infinite in his reaction to the finite.” Second, Isaiah recognized that Assyria’s invasion was more than merely one ungodly nation attacking another. God was behind their invasion, for he wanted to use them to chasten Israel. So Isaiah called Israel to first respond to God’s intention, reforming their nation to comply with his holy standards. Only then could they respond to Assyria’s intention, arming themselves in self-defense. Cf. *idem*, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 145-47, where Niebuhr lists a contemporary example. He says that Christians who are focused on God are able to see his intentions behind their government. Even when the government is corrupt, they are able to respond primarily to God who is acting within their poor government.

³⁴ Niebuhr, “Christian Ethics,” 55: “Infinite action expresses itself in all of these finite actions. If we respond to a word and not the sentence, it is irresponsible.”

various agents within the world itself.³⁵ This unity abolishes any secular/sacred dichotomy among finite things. Now every sphere of life is important, because it is there that an individual responds to God. To leave out one domain, regardless how seemingly small and insignificant, is to lack radical faith. Niebuhr writes concerning this faith: “It is either revealed to and incarnate in the total human life or it does not exist. If it is present it manifests itself in religion as well as elsewhere.”³⁶

Niebuhr also argues that a single-minded response to God unifies the self. This occurs because a self is always defined in relationship. A self that has more than one relationship must divide itself into more than one part in order to relate properly to the others in those relationships. For instance, Niebuhr contends that those who divide the world into natural and supernatural elements necessarily divide themselves in two, creating a self which responds to the natural and a self which responds to the supernatural. Conversely, those with a holistic world view are able to incorporate every aspect of life into an inclusive, single relationship. Because they possess only one primary relationship, or relate to the world in only one way, they enjoy a unified and integrated self. Niebuhr adds that since God alone provides the ultimate environment in which such a single relationship is possible, only those who respond to God's singular action possess unified, integrated selves. He writes: “Thus the responsible self finds its unity in its explicit responsiveness to the deed by which it is a self, one *I* among all its roles, and in its responsiveness to one action in all the actions to which it is subjected.”³⁷

Second, not only does the loyalty of radical monotheism demand that one respond primarily to God rather than other finite agents, but it also requires that one's response to

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 32. Radical monotheism acquires its values from and responds to “the principle of being itself.” It does not reference anything in this creation but “to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist.”

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 48.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122-25 (emphasis is Niebuhr's).

God be loyal. Loyalty transpires when individuals relinquish their henotheistic and polytheistic gods and choose instead to “turn toward the infinite end of life...to loyalty to the supreme reality and only good, on which the goodness of all finite things depends.”³⁸ Niebuhr encourages Christians to find their sole value and significance in God. Rather than use God for their own advantage, they must foster a “disinterested theology,” learning to value themselves solely for their usefulness to God. Niebuhr invokes a faith “which finds in God the source and center of all value, which values personal existence only because it makes the enjoyment of God possible, and hopes for immortality only because it hopes for the vision of God... .”³⁹ Such radical faith resists a utilitarian view of God. It gladly suffers its own loss if it is necessary to promote the interests of God.⁴⁰

And what are the interests of God? Niebuhr states that “God’s universal cause,” or central aim, is “Being’s loyalty to all beings.”⁴¹ Since God’s cause is the affirmation of creation, the individual who is loyal to God and his cause will also loyally serve creation. In this way the double movement of radical monotheism is complete. The individual begins in trust and loyalty to God, and this loyalty returns him to creation, though now as God’s redemptive agent rather than destructive sinner.

C. Radical Monotheism’s Service To Creation

Niebuhr claims that the faith of radical monotheism conveys two contrasting albeit complementary attitudes toward creation. First, radical monotheism secularizes creation. Because it recognizes that God alone is truly holy, radical monotheism realizes

³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 67.

³⁹ Niebuhr, “Value Theory and Theology,” 103.

⁴⁰ Cf. Niebuhr, “Towards a New Other-Worldliness,” *Theology Today* 1 (1944): 86 and “Utilitarian Christianity,” 3: Niebuhr adds that those who do seek God and his kingdom for God’s sake alone will find that they receive this world back also (cf. Matt. 10:39, Mark 8:35). Conversely, those who seek this world for its own sake will lose both it and God.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 44.

that everything else in the world becomes less so. It does not give unusual attention to “special places, times, persons, or communities,” for it knows that no feast days or temples may uniquely draw one to God.⁴² Radical monotheism refuses to separate church from world, sacred priesthood from secular laity, salvation history from the ordinary course of events, or human value from the import of animal and nonliving being. It fears elevating any part of creation above any other, for this only encourages worshipping that elevated component rather than God alone. Radical monotheism adamantly insists that “nothing--whatever emotion man experiences--is deserving of the unqualified reverence which is due only to the One.”⁴³ While Niebuhr’s intention is admirable here, he may overstate the secularizing implication of divine holiness. Is it true that there is no difference in value between the church and world, clergy and laity, salvation history and the ordinary course of events, and between humanity and inanimate objects? Does Niebuhr’s concept of universality preclude him from making important and necessary distinctions?

Second, and what amounts to a different side of the same coin, Niebuhr states that radical monotheism sanctifies creation. While negatively radical monotheism recognizes that nothing finite possesses any intrinsic value in comparison to God, yet positively it asserts that everything finite possesses rich value because it is related to God. Every time, place, person, and community belong to the One, and this relationship makes them holy and significant.⁴⁴ Niebuhr succinctly states the paradox between secularizing and sanctifying creation: “Radical monotheism dethrones all absolutes short of the principle of being itself. At the same time it reverences every relative existent. Its two great mottoes are: ‘I am the Lord thy God; thou shalt have no other gods before me;’ and

⁴²Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 52.

⁴³Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 53.

⁴⁴Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 52-53.

‘Whatever is, is good.’”⁴⁵ Believers deny all things because of God and yet they love and serve all things because of God.⁴⁶

Niebuhr asserts that both secularizing and sanctifying creation lead people to devotedly serve the creation. First, regarding secularization, Niebuhr claims that it is secularization’s detached view of creation that enables it to serve this world. He states that secularization promotes a “sort of disinterestedness which is able to deal with the questions of politics and economics objectively and helpfully just because it does not take them too seriously, just because it has gained a certain distance from them.” Freed from the need to succeed in this life, secularized people enjoy the liberty of taking risks and thinking “new thoughts,” thoughts which promise to answer the crises of the present time better than those which arise from people who have a vested interest in this world.⁴⁷

Not only does secularization produce a helpful disinterestedness, but it also prompts people to live unselfishly. Because they belong to the relativized, secular world, individuals recognize that their personal and communal belongings do not possess ultimate value. As such, they are willing to serve creation, sacrificing themselves for the good of the whole and being itself, which is God. This is an important theme in Niebuhr’s corpus. He repeatedly reminds his audience that radical monotheists sacrificially give their lives for others because they believe in the living God and the superiority of his kingdom. Confident that God is omnipotent and good, they entrust their individual success to him rather than expend much energy on their own causes.⁴⁸ Should God choose not to vindicate their efforts, they humbly accept his decision,

⁴⁵Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 37.

⁴⁶Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 123.

⁴⁷Niebuhr, “Utilitarian Christianity,” 5.

⁴⁸Niebuhr, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4: “...all limitation of the power of the self and of one’s group is feasible only where there is a deep faith in the justice of a universal and omnipotent God.”

knowing that their programs are insignificant in comparison to his kingdom. This awareness liberates them to serve others rather than vigorously defend themselves, their faith, their churches, or their forms of government.⁴⁹

Second, besides secularization, care for the world is also created through its sanctification. This most obviously happens as radical monotheists recognize that every part of the now sacred world must be valuable. Nothing is considered “too low to be worthy of a loving curiosity. All knowledge becomes reverent and all being is open to inquiry.” Believers understand that “Whatever is, is now known to be good, to have value, though its value be still hidden to us. The moral consequence of faith in God is the universal love of all being in him.”⁵⁰

Niebuhr emphasizes that this high value in creation is universal. It extends to all people, whether friend or foe. From the perspective of an individual’s small society, any person who threatens that society is an enemy and must be opposed. However, when an individual views the enemy through the lens of the universal society, in light of the One, then he realizes that the enemy is actually his companion, a fellow servant of the One. So

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 156-57 and *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 21. Cf. idem, “The Alliance Between Labor and Religion,” 200-1. See also idem, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4 and “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 228: conversely, Christians who do not realize this profound freedom in Christ continue to live too defensively, protecting themselves and their culture. Their self defense leads them to exalt themselves, and so they fall into the idolatry of making a new absolute out of their own relativity. Niebuhr contends that such idolaters need to recover genuine religious liberty. He notes that the first part of religious liberty is self-restraint, or recognizing the limitations that are placed upon oneself. Each citizen must limit himself and his efforts to make himself dominant. He should not only tolerate those who disagree with him, but should also extend to them the right to believe that very thing which he opposes. See idem, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4: “Religious liberty can be maintained in the long run only by its practice and not by its defense. The first part of the practice of religious liberty lies in self-restraint, in the acceptance of the limitations placed upon us. Religious liberty in America is not just a right, it is a duty--a duty of citizens to limit themselves in their efforts to make themselves dominant, a duty to extend to others not toleration simply or consideration, but the right to believe and say the very thing against which we vehemently protest.”

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 125-26. Niebuhr adds that this universal love of being remains the unachieved goal for radical monotheism. He writes: “But this is its requirement: that all beings, not only our friends but also our enemies, not only men but also animals and the inanimate, be met with reverence, for all are friends in the friendship of the one to whom we are reconciled in faith” (126).

Niebuhr counsels believers to see life “*sub specie aeternitatis*.” The long view of eternity makes every relationship a good, a friendship to be fostered.⁵¹

Beyond people, Niebuhr declares that this universal valuation extends also to animals and even to inanimate objects. Even ideal beings are included. Everything that stands in relation to God is valuable, and so everything in the world, even those objects that only exist in the mind, are valuable. Radical monotheism must include “the realm of being in its wholeness.” Nothing may be left out.⁵² Douglas Ottati illustrates the breadth of Niebuhr’s system by comparing his commitment to being with Albert Schweitzer’s “reverence for life” as a principle of morality. Schweitzer says that life is the center of value. Whatever lives is good and should be served. While this is a fairly broad approach, it is not universal enough for Niebuhr, for it fails to include members who are not alive (e.g., deceased people, inorganic beings).⁵³

While Niebuhr’s emphasis on the importance of all being is to be appreciated, the ambiguity of his statements does raise questions concerning the relative importance of beings. For instance, he states that loyalty to God means “loyalty to all his creatures, respect for man, but not only for man; reverence for ‘life,’ but not only life, loyalty to being, to all that is God, and he is all in all.”⁵⁴ Again, he writes: “When I respond to the One creative power, I place my companions, human and subhuman and superhuman, in the one universal society which has its center neither in me nor in any finite cause but in the Transcendent One.”⁵⁵ Does Niebuhr mean here that human, subhuman, and

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 123-24.

⁵² Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 37. See p. 42-45 of this dissertation.

⁵³ Ottati, “H. Richard Niebuhr’s Theocentric Vision of Ultimate Reality and Meaning,” 271.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 109.

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 123-24.

superhuman beings possess equal value? The universal sweep of his thinking appears to preclude his ability to distinguish between relative values.⁵⁶

Besides fostering involvement in the world through its tenet that everything is valuable, the sanctification of life also encourages activity in the world by insisting that believers are responsible to God for all these valuable things. Niebuhr argues that who one is responsible to determines what one is responsible for. For example, an individual who is responsible to a nation is responsible for more things than a person who is only responsible to a company board. The latter is only responsible to produce a profit, while the former is responsible to live well in every area of life that pertains to the nation. Since people are responsible to God, and God is king over everything, then people must be responsible to God for everything.⁵⁷

Stated another way, those who express faith and love in God must commit themselves to God's cause. Since God's cause is the affirmation of the entire creation, they must exercise the same love and faithfulness toward his creation as they do toward God himself. Niebuhr writes: "In love the reference is to God as the self's good, fulfilling all its need, and to all creaturely beings which are good for God, whether or not their goodness for the self has become evident. In faith the reference is to God as the faithful One, who keeps his promises, and to his creatures to whom he has made his promises and to whom the self is united in covenant."⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See p. 43-45 of this dissertation.

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 114-17. Niebuhr did not emphasize this holistic world view until he discovered theocentrism in the 1930s. The young Niebuhr believed that service triumphed over selfishness, but he only defined this in human, social categories. He did not yet extend the believer's responsibility to include all of creation. See idem, "Christianity and the Social Problem," 281. Compare this with the more mature Niebuhr, who boasted that Christianity possesses a universal reconciliation, or the "reconciliation to life and to all the members of the community of life." See idem, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 6. Note that this statement is still less inclusive than Niebuhr's more bold statements in which he declares that radical monotheism fosters commitment to every object, even that which is not alive.

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, "Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love," 155.

Niebuhr contends that this universal responsibility is not some extraordinary, heroic task, but is rather the basic law of life. Individualism leads only to destruction, while those who live for God and others discover ultimate satisfaction in life. Niebuhr lists practical ways people can serve creation. First, they should return to their vocations, though now performing their work in faithfulness and repentance, from a motive of service rather than selfishness.⁵⁹ Second, they should seek to contribute to society through education, social welfare, evangelism, and even political action.⁶⁰ All of this social activity should be encouraged by the church, for more than others, its members realize that redemption is cosmic, “reconciling men to each other and to their world.”⁶¹ The church itself must demonstrate this universal redemption by ministering to all classes of society, not restricting its efforts to just the middle or even the lower classes. Because it is loyal to Christ, genuine Christianity seeks to reach everyone, especially those who are the very least.⁶²

III. Agents of Redemption

The first two sections of this chapter examined Niebuhr’s definition and method of redemption. We observed that Niebuhr envisions redemption broadly to be the reconciliation between creation and its God, a redemption that also reconciles creatures with each other. This reconciliation is accomplished through the double movement of radical monotheism. An individual who possesses the bold faith of radical monotheism

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, “What Then Must We Do?”, 147.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 154-55. Niebuhr argues that genuine faith in God demands such social activity, for “when people do not take such active interest in the affairs of a community, it is evident that they have little actual relation to the God whom Jesus loved and obeyed. They may be Christian in some other sense--lovers of perfection, spiritually minded--but the rule of the Father is not actual for them.”

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 44.

⁶² Niebuhr, “The Disorder of Man in the Church of God,” 85 and *Faith On Earth*, 109.

initially learns to trust and be faithful to God. This trust and loyalty then returns the person to the creation where he serves his fellow companions in being from devotion to God.

The present section contributes to an understanding of Niebuhr's perspective on redemption by studying directly the various agents involved in this process of reconciliation. Specifically, it examines God as the primary agent (and his relation to human involvement), Jesus Christ as God's primary revelation, the church as an important human agent, and even other religions as participants in the grand act of redemption. Because this dissertation focuses on "Christ the transformer of culture," this section will give more attention to Jesus Christ than to the other redemptive agents.

A. God is the Primary Agent

1. *God Accomplishes Redemption*

Niebuhr repeatedly affirms that God is the primary agent in redemption. Other agents may participate in his work, but the initiative and completion lie entirely with God. For example, he remarks that "...American Christianity and American culture cannot be understood at all save on the basis of faith in a sovereign, living, loving God. Apart from God the whole thing is meaningless and might as well not have been. Apart from God and his forgiveness nationality and even Christianity particularized in a nation become destructive rather than creative."⁶³

This theocentric perspective implies two important ramifications. First, it destroys any triumphalist notions, for believers realize that they cannot usher in the

⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xiv. Cf. idem, "Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 121-22: "Kingdom of God means that God is pre-temporal, super-temporal, and post-temporal; it means that time is bounded by eternity on every side, but it also means that eternity enters into and conditions time and calls for the response of the temporal at every moment." See also idem, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 158: "God will do his will despite us if not through us." Cf. idem, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 19; "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 117-18; "Towards a New Other-Worldliness," 87; "Faith, Works and Social Salvation," 428; and "Christian Ethics," 70.

kingdom. At best they are only tools in the hands of God, who alone is able to establish his kingdom on earth. Niebuhr explains: “We sense that great things may be in the making but also that *we cannot make them, that we are only instruments in the hands of the inscrutable power*, a means of the all pervading creative spirit, which has greater things in mind than we can have with our intentions toward our limited goods and evils, our fear of change and our defensiveness.”⁶⁴

Niebuhr illustrates this claim by pointing to the errors of the nineteenth-century Social Gospel. Forgetting that the kingdom depends on God, the social gossellers confused the kingdom with human plans and turned the gospel into a form of nationalism, capitalism or some other secularization of the kingdom. They equated the kingdom of God with the extension of humanitarian ideals and the progress of civilization, thinking that the world would progressively improve until the end. This false notion assumed that the coming kingdom was all promise and no judgment. It ignored the need for God to destroy the old and inaugurate the new. As Niebuhr famously explains, this humanistic gospel concluded that “A God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.”⁶⁵

Conversely, Niebuhr asserts that twentieth century Neo-Protestantism has learned from the social gospel’s mistakes. It recognizes the priority of God, depending on him to

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, “The Illusions of Power,” 103 (emphasis mine). Cf. idem, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 19.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 150-51, 193. Cf. idem, “Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?”, 916: Niebuhr argues that his contemporary German theologians avoid mistaking human social efforts for the kingdom of God, for they understand better than Americans how many ways evil infects human projects. He writes: the German theologians, such as Tillich and Mueller, “do not venture to identify the work of social reconstruction with the building of the kingdom of God. Our reconstructive labors, they apprehend, are too strongly conditioned by contemporary evils, purposes, and tasks and too strongly infected with the vices that cling to all human effort to allow identification with the eternal and the divine.”

move in history to accomplish salvation.⁶⁶ Niebuhr claims that here Neo-Protestantism is following the example of Jesus, who also realized that God must initiate all redemptive activity. Niebuhr states that unlike the social gospel, Jesus' thoughts "were directed not in the first instance to what man ought to do and in the second place to what aid he might receive from God in doing what he ought to do, but rather toward what God was doing and what man ought to do in the light of God's doing."⁶⁷

Second, the fact that God is the primary agent of redemption guarantees that redemption will be accomplished. Niebuhr speaks of a "divine determinism" that will inevitably accomplish its salvific plans for the world.⁶⁸ Redemption is more than possibility. It is the promise that the faithful God will certainly complete his reconciliation with his creatures and his creatures with each other.⁶⁹ This comforting assurance prompts Niebuhr to caution his listeners against crisis fatigue. Although they may be weary from the incessant evils of the twentieth century, yet they must never give up on the situation or lose their faith in God. God is present, though imperceptibly at times, and he will bring meaning and hope to the present suffering when his reconciliation is complete.⁷⁰

2. *Humanity's Active Role in Redemption*

Niebuhr's emphasis on the pre-eminence of God in the act of redemption raises questions concerning humanity's role in the process of reconciliation. Specifically, several scholars, such as Williams, Fowler, Grant, Barbour, Crouter, and Park, accuse

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," 179-81.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 118.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 154, excerpts also published as "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," 144.

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 109-11.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, "Tired Christians," 3.

Niebuhr of fatalism, or at least nearly so. If God alone will certainly redeem the world, then what role is left for humanity?⁷¹

In response, a survey of Niebuhr's writings uncovers five reasons why Niebuhr believes that his emphasis on divine sovereignty in redemption does not produce fatalism. First, Niebuhr asserts that divine sovereignty actually supports rather than detracts from human freedom. Because the individual knows that God controls the future, he is free to live for God in the present. He is also free to do actions which may on the surface seem insignificant, for he knows that the eternal God is able to take what seems momentary and insignificant and make it permanent. In this way the person can afford to be reckless with his time and energy as he serves others. Such recklessness seems foolish to the world but is actually "deeply wise in the context of faith-knowledge."⁷²

Second, Niebuhr believes that divine sovereignty interacts with human freedom in some mysterious way that does not detract from either. He insists that though God's kingdom is inevitable it will not be forced upon people. The kingdom will not come apart from "the willing, free devotion of all its members." So while people know that the kingdom is coming and that it will include them, they remain free to decide when to join.⁷³ The same inscrutable dynamic between divine sovereignty and human freedom

⁷¹ Daniel D. Williams, review of *Radical Monotheism*, by H. R. Niebuhr, *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 17 (1960): 100-101; Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 261-68; Grant, *God the Center of Value*, 124-26; John Barbour, "Niebuhr Versus Niebuhr," *Christian Century* 101 (1984): 1099; Crouter, "H. Richard Niebuhr and Stoicism," 136; and Park, "The Church as Ethical Reality," 34-35. Cf. Gustafson, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 157: although Gustafson does not mention Niebuhr by name, he claims that any ethical system that begins by asking how one should respond to what God is doing will suffer from subjectivity and determinism.

⁷² Niebuhr, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 227-28. Niebuhr declares on p. 227: "It is not a life that plans far ahead to insure the future, whether in heaven or on earth. It knows that God ties the present and the future together and that no provision for the morrow is necessary to the life which he redeems. Because the future is in the hands of Love therefore man is free to do the right thing now, that is, to love his neighbor. Because God is Lord of the present no less than of the future therefore the temporally insignificant deed may have more eternity in it than the one designed to outlast the years."

⁷³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 110.

applies to the Christian's relationship with Christ. Somehow Christ moves upon believers to do his will and yet they remain free as they do it. Niebuhr elaborates:

As we reflect upon our lives we are aware that it was his authority which brought us here. He has been and is our fate. We thought that it was in our freedom that we came to our hill in Galilee. But we see now that it was his appointment. We thought that we had chosen him; but now we understand that he has chosen us. We thought we came as volunteers. Now we know that we have been drafted. ...He has not worked in the way of compulsion. But neither has he waited on our consent.⁷⁴

Third, Niebuhr attempts to move beyond the mystery and explain how divine sovereignty and human freedom can simultaneously exist. He concedes that if God is a static God, "the predesigner, the foreordainer of all that happens," then this would produce fatalism. Each person would merely play out the roles that God has assigned to him. However, because the sovereign God is also a dynamic God who interacts with his creatures, human freedom is possible. God enters into dialogue with individuals. These individuals freely respond to the divine actions upon them and then wait for God's reaction. Niebuhr explains: "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the loving dynamic One, who does new things, whose relation to his world is more like that of father to his children than like that of the maker to his manufactures; it is more like that of the ruler to his realm than like that of the designer to his machines."⁷⁵

Fourth, Niebuhr posits what amounts to a passive decree in the divine plan. He argues that though God's intention is behind every event, yet not all events are "equally the product of divine determination." This distinction provides an important role for people. If all things came directly and in the same way from God, then ethics would reduce to "quiescent expectation."⁷⁶ However, since there is a distinction in the divine

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, "Our Reverent Doubt and the Authority of Christ," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 196.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 173.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 84.

willing, individuals must analyze events in order to correctly understand and respond to God's proper will in each situation. They may not simplistically identify every event with the will of God. They must probe deeper, in spiritual discernment asking how each event accomplishes and reveals God's will.⁷⁷

Fifth, while believers may be certain that God's kingdom will certainly come at the eschaton, they should also be concerned to hasten its coming now. Whether through the church, government, or any other sphere of life, Niebuhr encourages believers to "realize the actuality" of the kingdom by extending its claims in the world.⁷⁸ Rather than passively await the kingdom's arrival, they have the duty to penetrate the world with "the ethics of faith in God, and all that flows from this."⁷⁹ Niebuhr explains: "Whatever be the final outcome for the individual or for society--and this the religious man cannot but leave in the hands of God--the duty of dealing with the present world in the light of our highest ideals and best insights remains inescapable."⁸⁰ Rather than passively praise or blame God for whatever happens in the world, individuals must accept responsibility for what occurs in their society. They must shoulder the blame for the evil in their world, for

⁷⁷ Cf. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 164-65: God does not determine what every person must do, so that they comply against their will. Instead, God sees what people are doing or going to do and then he uses their actions to promote what he wants. Niebuhr writes concerning Jesus' response to God: "All this interpretation of every alteration as included in, or as taken up by, the action of God was neither fatalistic nor mechanical. The idea that all acts of finite agents had been predesigned, as though God were the author of a play in which each actor played a predestined role, is remote from Jesus' way of thinking. The Universal One whom he calls Father is Lord of heaven and earth. His action is more like that of the great wise leader who uses even the meanness of his subjects to promote the public welfare."

⁷⁸ Examples include Niebuhr, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 20: "realize the actuality of the church;" "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 149: "the realization of the actuality of divine rule;" and "Theology in a Time of Disillusionment," 115: "the present may realize its relation to the eternal."

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 90.

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 277.

they are responsible to criticize leaders and others who propagate such evil. Speaking out is their duty to God, who uses them to accomplish his will in the world.⁸¹

3. *Humanity's Responsive Role in Redemption*

While Niebuhr's priority on God's role in redemption does not necessarily eliminate human action, it does determine the form which that action assumes. Because God is the initiator and consummator of redemption, individuals need only respond to what God is doing in the world.⁸² This response may appear in one of two forms: waiting on God or preparing the way for his kingdom.

First, Niebuhr asserts that because God alone is ushering in the eschaton of judgment and ultimate resurrection, there is nothing people can do to initiate this kingdom event. They can only wait in hope for God to accomplish his work. Nevertheless, they remain active while they wait, for they must prepare themselves to receive the gift of the eschaton through repentance and faith.⁸³ Repentance occurs when individuals agree that their present world is corrupt and stop attempting to protect it from God's inevitable destruction. Such repentance is painful, for inviting God to bring his kingdom is similar to instructing a surgeon to cut out the cancer or a king to put down one's rebellion.⁸⁴ Faith makes such repentance possible, for it looks beyond the impending judgment to the resurrection on the other side. Thus, through the active

⁸¹Niebuhr, "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 153-54.

⁸²Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 117-18; "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," 181; "Tired Christians," 3; "Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism," 122; "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 157; "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 89; and "Christian Ethics," 50-52.

⁸³Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 123: "Man cannot achieve the Kingdom of God, but he can repent and have faith and avoid missing the great opportunity which the new beginning puts in his way."

⁸⁴Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 111.

waiting of faith and repentance individuals can prepare themselves for God's coming redemption.⁸⁵

Second, and in some tension with the first point, Niebuhr asserts that people appropriately respond to God's redemptive activity by preparing the way for its coming. Not only do they wait for the kingdom, preparing themselves to receive it, but they also actively work in society, clearing away obstacles so the kingdom will have free movement there. If they successfully remove the obstacles that prevent God from working in society, they may confidently trust divine grace to "make its own way."⁸⁶

Present obstacles include nationalism and capitalism. These limit God's activity because they are both tools of "self-interestedness." Followers of God must seek to remove these tools of selfishness through cooperation with others at a broad, international level. In this manner they will increase God's activity, for his actions are present "in co-operative life, in mutual aid, in the organic growing together of individuals and societies." Surprisingly, Niebuhr here implies that God's redemptive efforts are not an automatic process. God needs people to aid his activity by cooperating with others. Nevertheless, Niebuhr assures believers that they can trust that God is and will continue

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 122-27. Cf. idem, "Towards a New Other-Worldliness," 87; *Christ and Culture*, 236; and *The Church Against the World*, 154, excerpts also published as "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," 145. George Grima, "Christ and Conversion: H. Richard Niebuhr's Thought, 1933-1937," in *Sylloge excerptorum e dissertationibus ad gradum doctoris in Sacra Theologia vel in Iure canonico consequendum conscriptis* 1979 (Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit te Leuven, 1976; reprint, 1979), 2-3, 6, claims that Niebuhr began to emphasize waiting on God's redemptive initiative in the 1930s. As a liberal in the 1920s, Niebuhr believed that people would achieve salvation when they learned to grow beyond their selfish desires and live in community. Under the influence of crisis theology, a more mature Niebuhr realized that people must trust in divine grace and wait expectantly for God to establish his kingdom.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, "Faith, Works and Social Salvation," 429. Cf. idem, *The Church Against the World*, 154, excerpts also published as "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," 144-45: the church does not transform the world, but it prepares the way for God to transform it. The church "is a revolutionary community in a pre-revolutionary society. Its main task always remains that of understanding, proclaiming and preparing for the divine revolution in human life." Cf. idem, "The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty," 4: people must not fall into passivity, merely tolerating sin as they wait for God to usher in the kingdom. Instead, they must correct those who are sinning against others, remembering to limit themselves lest they also begin to dominate others.

to work through every natural and historic event to produce his kingdom. Although people do not know whether any specific, upcoming event will be good or bad, they may confidently believe that the final end of the world will be good, for “it is God’s end.”⁸⁷

To summarize: God is the primary agent of redemption. As such he simultaneously guarantees that full redemption will be achieved and disqualifies any attempts to establish the kingdom through human, finite efforts. This does not necessarily produce fatalism, for humanity responds to God’s in-breaking kingdom by actively waiting and preparing the way for its arrival.

B. Jesus Christ Is the Primary Christian Revelation of God

Niebuhr believes that while God may disclose his redemptive intentions through various sources, he has chosen to reveal himself and his will to Christians primarily through Jesus Christ. Jesus supplies the lens through which Christians understand what God is like.⁸⁸ In order to grasp the importance and meaning of Jesus Christ to Niebuhr’s theology, this section first examines Niebuhr’s understanding of the nature of revelation, including the role of symbols and the confessional nature of theology. This background will then enable us to evaluate Niebuhr’s Christology, which we will divide along the classical distinction between the nature and work of Christ.

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, “Faith, Works and Social Salvation,” 430. Cf. idem, “A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God,” *Christian Century* 49 (1932): 447--while people can not usher in the kingdom they are able to prevent its growth so long as they attempt to impose their “wishes upon the divine creative process.” Niebuhr explains: “Man’s task is not that of building Utopias but that of eliminating weeds and tilling the soil so that the kingdom of God can grow. His method is not one of striving for perfection or of acting perfectly, but of clearing the road by repentance and forgiveness.”

⁸⁸ Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 52 and Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 119 assert that Niebuhr does not believe that Jesus Christ himself is the revelation of God. Instead, Jesus Christ is merely the mediator of revelation, or the means by which God discloses himself to humanity. While their point is well taken, it is difficult to reconcile with Niebuhr’s explicit statements that refer to Jesus as revelation. See Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 163; *Faith On Earth*, 99; and *Meaning of Revelation*, 111-12.

1. *Revelation Appears in Symbolic Form*

a. Nature of Revelation

Niebuhr defines revelation as a divine event that enables individuals to properly understand themselves and their world. He writes: “When we speak of revelation we mean that something has happened to us in our history which conditions all our thinking and that through this happening we are enabled to apprehend what we are, what we are suffering and doing and what our potentialities are.”⁸⁹ Predictably, Niebuhr suggests that such an event occurs whenever people are prompted to radical monotheism, for only those who possess radical faith are able to correctly understand the world and their place in it.⁹⁰

Because revelation centers on radical monotheism, and radical monotheism means the ability to trust and be loyal to God, Niebuhr concludes that revelation must be personal rather than propositional. Trust and loyalty are personal qualities, qualities that propositional truth is unable to generate. Niebuhr remarks that “propositions do not in themselves establish confidence or challenge to loyalty.”⁹¹ Only personal revelatory events are able to demonstrate loyalty and disclose the cause to which others should be loyal. So Niebuhr concludes that revelation is fundamentally a personal encounter in which the divine self discloses itself as loyal and trustworthy to another self.⁹²

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 138. He adds: “What is otherwise arbitrary and dumb fact becomes related, intelligible and eloquent fact through the revelatory event. To the extent that revelation furnishes the practical reason with an adequate starting point it may be said to be validated.”

⁹⁰ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 42: revelation “specifies those events in which radical faith was elicited.” Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 182: “It is true that revelation is not the communication of new truths and the supplanting of our natural religion by a supernatural one. But it is the fulfillment and the radical reconstruction of our natural knowledge about deity through the revelation of one whom Jesus Christ called ‘Father.’”

⁹¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 42.

⁹² Niebuhr, “Science and Religion,” 21. See p. 60-61 of this dissertation.

Surpassing mere concepts or feelings, revelation communicates a person. This person is one who knows humanity, and his presence and knowledge of humanity transforms their lives. Niebuhr writes:

Revelation means the moment in our history through which we know ourselves to be known from beginning to end, in which we are apprehended by the knower; it means the self-disclosing of that eternal knower. Revelation means the moment in which we are surprised by the knowledge of someone there in the darkness and the void of human life; it means the self-disclosure of light in our darkness.⁹³

Because revelation is fundamentally personal, Niebuhr also believes that it must reoccur in the present. Followers of God must not limit themselves to the church's recollections of past revelations, for the church filters its memory of God through its own perspectives. Any knowledge of God gained in this manner is second-hand knowledge at best. Worse yet, such knowledge elevates the importance of the church to the level of God, for it is now responsible to dispense knowledge of the divine. Thus, rather than depend on the church, individuals should continually expect and wait for fresh, contemporary revelation from God.⁹⁴ While Niebuhr's protection of the believer's personal relationship with God is admirable, he appears to go too far when he disparages the church's tradition. What place is left for the once and for all character of redemptive history?

Although Niebuhr emphasizes revelation's personal character he does not eliminate its rationality. He defines revelation as the disclosure that enables individuals to correctly interpret themselves and their world. Revelation accomplishes this by providing images, symbols or imaginative patterns through which "all the occasions of personal and common life become intelligible."⁹⁵ Consequently, while Niebuhr values

⁹³Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 152-53. Cf. *ibid.*, 143-47 and *idem*, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 44-47.

⁹⁴Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 148-49.

⁹⁵Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 109. Cf. *ibid.*, 93.

the personal experience of revelation more than its rational content, yet he preserves a place for the rational contributions of revelation.⁹⁶ It is to the nature of this rationality, the symbolic form of revelation, that we now turn.

b. Nature of Symbols

Niebuhr observes that people are image-makers. They must use symbols, whether in language, religion, science, or any other discipline, to organize and interpret their world.⁹⁷ Symbols are indispensable for human existence, for “Without symbols nothing has intelligibility and form for us. Without them we grope in darkness.”⁹⁸ Scientists as well as theologians search for patterns, patterns which supply a lens through which they may interpret reality.⁹⁹ They are relentless in their pursuit. They never give up, even when the quest seems hopeless. They must believe that “there is a pattern and intelligibility in the things which are not yet intelligible,” otherwise they would not be able to live meaningfully or conduct experiments.¹⁰⁰

Niebuhr argues that these symbols or patterns arise from within a community of fellow subjects. This community furnishes the individual with the necessary symbols and pre-understandings to interpret objects in the world. Consequently, knowledge is never

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, “Institutionalization and Secularization of the Kingdom,” in *Denominationalism*, ed. Russel E. Richey (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977), 235. Niebuhr warns against giving too much attention to any symbol. He asserts that something is always lost when the church attempts to put its reality into symbols in order to communicate it to others and to a new generation. He writes: “When the great insights of a creative time are put into the symbolic form of words, formulas, and creeds, much must always be omitted. The symbol is never the reality and it is subject to progressive loss of meaning; in time it often comes to take the place of the experience to which it had originally pointed.”

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 151-54; *The Meaning of Revelation*, 108; and *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 9. Sherry, “Shaped By Christ: The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 97, aptly describes Niebuhr’s notion of symbol as a “root metaphor” or “master image.” Sherry observes that “it is formally similar to a *discrimen*, while retaining a greater ‘pictorial’ content.”

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 156-57.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, “Science and Religion,” 9 and “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 21-23.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, “The Nature and Existence of God,” *Motive 4* (1943): 15.

purely objective, but rather is always dependent upon the shared views of other subjects in the community.¹⁰¹ In order to better understand this communal nature of symbols and the knowledge which they supply, this section will briefly examine Niebuhr's creative struggle with historical relativity and objectivity, including his distinction between inner and outer history.¹⁰²

Niebuhr learned from Troeltsch to take seriously the historical nature of all subjects and their knowledge.¹⁰³ People are inescapably bound to history, so that everything they know, including their religious beliefs, is received from a particular vantage point. Niebuhr explains: "We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live."¹⁰⁴ This perspectivalism on knowledge prompts Niebuhr to concede the truth of historical relativity, that "all knowledge is conditioned by the standpoint of the knower," so that all "philosophical ideas, religious dogmas and moral imperatives are historically conditioned."¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, "A Theologian's Approach to History: History's Role in Theology," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 78-79.

¹⁰² Numerous scholars argue that this tension between historical relativism and objectivity drove Niebuhr's theological program. See Richard R. Niebuhr, foreword to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, ix; Sedgwick, "History, Faith and the Moral Life: A Study of H. Richard Niebuhr as Resource for Normative Ethics," 9; Sherry, "Shaped By Christ: The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 40; Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 75-76, 84-87; Stassen, "The Sovereignty of God in the Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr," 62; Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 59-68; Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 50-51; and Mawhinney, "H. Richard Niebuhr and Reshaping American Christianity," 159.

¹⁰³ Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 249: Niebuhr himself says that he is not sure where he learned this "conviction of the radically historical character of human existence," whether from the liberals or from his own awareness of living within time and space. However, most scholars assume that Troeltsch, the subject of Niebuhr's Ph.D. dissertation, significantly influenced him here. See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 59; Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 89-93; Sedgwick, "History, Faith and the Moral Life," 10; and Sherry, "Shaped By Christ," 40.

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 48.

¹⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 7, vii, and also 6-16. Niebuhr keeps this tenet throughout his entire theological career. It is present in one of his first essays, "An Aspect of the Idea of God in

Notwithstanding this concession to historical relativity, Niebuhr asserts that objective truth does exist. Indeed, looking back on his life's work, Niebuhr regrets that he had formerly described his position as "historical relativism." He thinks that "historical relationism" is a better term, for it accounts for the historical conditions of knowledge without connoting the absence of objective truth.¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr explains:

Relativism does not imply subjectivism and scepticism. It is not evident that the man who is forced to confess that his view of things is conditioned by the standpoint he occupies must doubt the reality of what he sees. It is not apparent that one who knows that his concepts are not universal must also doubt that they are concepts of the universal, or that one who understands how all his experience is historically mediated must believe that nothing is mediated through history.¹⁰⁷

Niebuhr asserts that while human understanding is historically relative, yet the gospel itself remains objective and external to the knower. It remains objectively true whether or not any individuals rightly perceive it. For instance, he states that the vision of catholic unity is "directed toward the revelation of God in Christ, toward the Christ who is not first of all the spirit in the Church but the Lord it encounters, toward the Word carved on tables of stones and nailed on a wooden cross, not echoed within, toward the atonement that is independent of our view of it, toward the kingdom and the law that rule and judge us from a throne that is lifted high above us."¹⁰⁸ Thus, the incompleteness and relativity of human attempts to understand the Absolute casts aspersion on these attempts

Recent Thought," 39, written in 1920, and in "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 249, written in 1960 as Niebuhr reflected on his lengthy career.

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 249.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 18-19, and also 21-22. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 14, 238-39 and "Dogma," in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, ed. Edwin R. A. Seligman (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1931), 5:190.

¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 514.

rather than on the truth of God. The problem lies with people and their inability to transcend history, not with God and his truth.¹⁰⁹

Still, it would be small consolation to know that objective truth exists if one were unable to access it. Niebuhr replies that access is possible for individuals who are able to discover truth within their historical situations. To explain this Niebuhr makes a helpful distinction between inner and outer history. He defines outer history as the impersonal recollection of a disinterested spectator. This view of history focuses on ideas, interests, and movements among things. By contrast, inner history is the personal recollection of individuals who are involved in the story. This view of history focuses on people, the subjects and their communities who possess the ideas.¹¹⁰ Niebuhr illustrates the difference between inner and outer history by an example of a blind man who regains his sight. Outer history would record his recovery from the perspective of a scientist, referring to the man's optic nerves and how the medicine worked. Inner history would record the man's autobiography. It might not even mention the scientific process, but would instead focus on his experience of darkness and his joy at gaining sight.¹¹¹

Niebuhr argues that outer history is not necessarily more accurate than inner history. Outer and inner history are simply two different ways to describe the same event: the former from the perspective of an impartial, scientific observer and the latter from the perspective of a participant in the community. Niebuhr believes that inner history is more valuable than outer history, for it communicates the significance of what

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, published as a pamphlet by the International Missionary Council as one of the primary papers for a Conference of Theological Seminaries at Drew Theological Seminary, Nov. 29-Dec. 1, 1929, 11.

¹¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59-71.

¹¹¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59-60. Niebuhr also illustrates the difference by comparing the description of the Declaration of Independence from the perspective of the objectively sterile *Cambridge Modern History* and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, which personalized the incident, calling the writers "our fathers" and explaining the personal significance of their declaration (60-61).

occurred, a significance that lies beneath the surface of what an impartial observer can describe.¹¹² Niebuhr contends that this is the Achilles heel of outer history. Its “scientific, objective, non-committed point of view” is unable to ascertain the importance of events. It can only assert that an event occurred; it cannot say whether any event is more significant than any other. So outer history offers a bland report of what happened, helpful for scientists and prosecutors who need precise details, but uninspiring to the human spirit which acquires its identity from the stories it tells. Worse yet, outer history’s inability to judge between events eliminates humanity’s use of symbols to interpret the world. If any event is as significant as any other, then people cannot claim that one event supplies an important symbol to understand the world. No important symbols would exist. There would only be a bland reporting of bare facts.¹¹³ Thus, outer history is unable to account for the possibility of revelation and redemption. Because it is abstracted from all selves, outer history cannot “invite trust in the living God.” It is impossible to move from outer history to God, or any self for that matter.¹¹⁴

Consequently, Niebuhr concludes that inner history is superior to outer history. He states that history is not about understanding mere objective events, but rather about learning the human element and response to objective events. For example, a historian is not interested in merely studying an earthquake as it happened, but he wants to delve deeper and study how people responded to the earthquake. History attempts to climb inside the skin of its predecessors in order to experience what they thought and felt.¹¹⁵

The point behind this discussion comes when Niebuhr applies his inner/outer history distinction to revelation. He claims that when the New Testament evangelists and

¹¹² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 61-62.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 55-56.

¹¹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 74.

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, “A Theologian’s Approach to History: History’s Role in Theology,” 79-80.

their successors said that revelation was linked to history they meant internal rather than external history. They did not appeal to events from the perspective of an impartial spectator, but always from “events in the lives of subjects” (i.e., subjective history). Niebuhr continues: “They did not speak of events, as impersonally apprehended, but rather of what had happened to them in their community.”¹¹⁶

Because revelation is linked to inner history, it can only be understood from within. Those on the outside cannot perceive what the individual has experienced in his own inner history. For example, while Isaiah can relate his experience of seeing the Lord, he cannot claim that the Lord was present there for all to see. Likewise, Paul can relate his experience on the Damascus Road, but he cannot claim that the Lord appears to all or just any travelers on this road. Niebuhr infers: “One must look with them and not at them to verify their visions, participate in their history rather than regard it if one would apprehend what they apprehended.”¹¹⁷

Niebuhr believes that this is precisely what Christians do in order to understand Isaiah and Paul. They appropriate the experiences of Isaiah and Paul, incorporating them into their own history. Christians do this as they participate in the Christian community, the community that interprets and appropriates the revelatory experiences of its predecessors such as Isaiah and Paul. Niebuhr states that “When we speak of revelation in the Christian church we refer to *our* history, to the history of selves or to history as it is lived and apprehended from within.”¹¹⁸

I believe that Niebuhr overstates his case here. It is true that biblical history is kerygma, written for the purpose of creating faith in believers (e.g., Jn. 20:30-31), and not some Enlightenment, neutral, positivist, “just the facts” account. Yet, in my judgment

¹¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 72. Cf. *ibid.*, 90.

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 73.

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 59-60 (emphasis is Niebuhr’s).

Niebuhr too sharply separates inner from outer history. Others, such as Langdon Gilkey, have persuasively argued that Scripture seems to anchor its redemptive events in what Niebuhr would call “outer history.” For instance, the “mighty acts of God” in Scripture, such as the Exodus, Israel’s captivity and return, the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, indicate that God supernaturally broke into humanity’s space-time continuum. Such acts are *kerygmatic* history but they are also *kerygmatic history*. They represent more than the community’s religious interpretation of some merely natural event. Indeed, Gilkey suggests that the veracity and meaningfulness of the community’s religious interpretation depend upon historical fact. From Scripture’s perspective internal history is worthless apart from external history.¹¹⁹ This is Paul’s point regarding the resurrection of Jesus in I Cor. 15:1-34, a point rightly argued by Wolfhart Pannenberg in *Jesus—God and Man*. Pannenberg asserts that the actual resurrection of Jesus is necessary to substantiate his claim to deity. Christology must be grounded in history rather than merely the kerygma of the church community.¹²⁰ It is here that Niebuhr, with his sharp separation between inner and outer history, fails to fully satisfy Scripture’s own understanding of its historical accounts.

Despite this critique, Niebuhr argues that his communal stance is unavoidable. He states that every person is shaped by the tradition which his society passes on to him. For instance, Niebuhr himself cannot escape the fact that he was born into a Christian family in western culture. This is his fate. He is unable to think about religious issues

¹¹⁹ Langdon Gilkey, “Cosmology, Ontology, and the Travail of Biblical Language,” *The Journal of Religion* 41 (1961): 194-205.

¹²⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1977), 21-30, 66-73. Niebuhr’s view coincides with Barth, who argues that I Cor. 15 does not constitute “external, objective” proof since all of the cited witnesses were biased members of the faith community. Thus, Barth implies that the resurrection belongs to inner rather than outer history. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1:334-35, IV/2:143; *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV/1, 369-70, IV/2, 160.

outside of this tradition. If he denies this tradition, then he must become a Christian atheist, which is much different from a Muslim atheist.¹²¹

This communal nature of theology simultaneously limits and empowers theological activity. First, it is limiting because individuals are restricted to operating within their own communities. They can interpret God and the world from their perspective but they cannot state general truths which apply to everyone. Furthermore, they must allow God to move in other communities just as he has moved in theirs. They can explain what revelation means for them but they cannot comment on revelation which might occur within other communities. Just as outsiders cannot understand what God is doing in their community so they cannot grasp what God is doing among the outsiders.¹²² For instance, Niebuhr warns that Christians should not make their interpretation some “universal standpoint which all men everywhere and always must occupy with us.” Instead, they must remember that their interpretation is just that, an interpretation of an ideal which they find in Christ. The Christian interpreter must avoid “regarding his relative discovery as a universal truth *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est.*”¹²³

While Niebuhr rightly notes that all knowledge is influenced by one’s perceptual set, are these communal grids as limiting as he contends? Is it true that one community is entirely unable to evaluate what another community declares about God and the world? Could not general revelation supply a basis for evaluation, thereby avoiding the relativism presented here?

¹²¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 112.

¹²² Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 34-37, 42, 58, 82-87, especially 23: “one can speak and think significantly about God only from the point of view of faith in him.” Niebuhr’s emphasis on the communal nature of knowledge is similar to what George Lindbeck calls the cultural-linguistic view of religion. See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 32-41.

¹²³ Niebuhr, “The Relativities of Religion,” 1457-58.

Second, Niebuhr contends that such limitations, though perhaps a weakness, are a necessary evil to enable theological activity. Because people are historical beings they cannot help but think in terms conditioned by their historical communities. While this is limiting, the alternative is to not think at all. Niebuhr explains: “If the historical limitations of all thought about God demand that theology begin consciously with and in an historical community, its limitations as an inquiry into the nature of the object of faith require it to begin in faith and therefore in a particular faith, since there is no other kind.”¹²⁴

Each individual has the opportunity to develop the insights of his confessional community, thereby contributing to religion as a whole. So Christians should diligently pursue their own perspective just as Muslims and Buddhists do theirs. No one should feel that his efforts are too subjective to be worthwhile, for a measure of objectivity is attained through one’s community, which checks his work, and through other communities, which though they can not perceive the full significance of his claims, yet may attest to the bare, external facts that underlie his claims.¹²⁵ Moreover, objectivity lies with the Absolute itself, which retains its absolute claims upon an individual even when they differ from those made elsewhere. The individual is entitled to believe that he has connected with the Absolute, even when his connection differs from others. Niebuhr elaborates:

To discern the relativity of our interpretation is not to rob our gospel of its power. The relative may have an absolute claim on us without having an absolute claim on all men everywhere. We not only may, but must take it to our heart as our categorical imperative, our highest and our best. And if we have been as true as we could be to the spirit of the author of our ideal and to the need of our own souls, we have a right to the faith that our point of view has not betrayed its object completely. We may be confident that what we have seen darkly is really there

¹²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 37. Cf. idem, *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 9-10.

¹²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 20-21; “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 124; and “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 515.

and that new points of view will not destroy but will fulfill the promise of our best insights and highest aspirations.¹²⁶

Finally, besides their communal nature, Niebuhr asserts that symbols are also provisional. Individuals must tentatively hold their symbols, never confusing them with reality itself but always willing to resymbolize when necessary.¹²⁷ Niebuhr asserts that such resymbolization becomes necessary when symbols lose their meaning or “symbolic vitality.” This loss occurs in one of two ways: symbols either fail to communicate between the knowing subjects and the objects of reality or they fail to communicate between the subjects themselves. First, symbols fail to connect with reality when they so merge with the realities to which they refer that they no longer raise any questions or wonder to be answered. Since communication is nothing but a process of raising questions and hearing answers, the loss of wonder terminates communication.¹²⁸

Second, symbols fail to communicate between subjects when they become so commonly accepted that no questions arise when they are used. Such symbols are tired and worn, unable to spark any new interest or wonder because both speaker and listener simply take them for granted. Niebuhr suspects that this is the case with the modern church. It has proclaimed its symbols for so long, as something to be accepted and memorized rather than explored, that perhaps the symbols are now worn out. Niebuhr explains: “The words slide from our tongues and enter our eyes without ever causing a shock, a shock of recognition of ourselves, a shock of encounter with a reality that is

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, “The Relativities of Religion,” 1458.

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 31 and “Science and Religion,” 9.

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 24. Niebuhr illustrates his point with the example of two old people that have been married so long that they have stopped talking to each other because they think that they know each other so well. The loss of wonder has stopped communication. Also, he says that this occurs with stereotypes of black people. Sometimes people only see their symbol of what it means to be black, and this general symbol swallows up the black individual so that they do not even notice him. Cf. *idem*, “The Religious Situation,” 84: citing Tillich, Niebuhr asserts that good symbols point unambiguously to the transcendent while bad or false symbols do not. These latter symbols fail because they claim absolute value for themselves or are considered to possess some intrinsic meaning.

different from all of our imaginings. They bring us no surprises, whether by joy or sudden pain, whether by discovery of the unknown or by revelation of a long-sought secret.”¹²⁹

Niebuhr recommends that the church resymbolize its images so that they may connect with contemporary people. Similar to Bultmann, Niebuhr thinks that modern needs and questions prevent the church from easily appropriating the symbols of antiquity. The gospel remains the same, but the modern world needs to hear it in fresh symbols. For example, while the Reformers appreciated justification by faith, the twentieth century learns more from the concept of the kingdom of God. As Coleridge would say, this is the part of the gospel that “finds them.”¹³⁰ Resymbolization is necessary for such worn out images as “the Word of God,” “justification by faith,” “faith,” “conversion,” “repentance,” “sin,” “grace,” “sovereignty of God,” “incarnation,” “redemption,” “atonement,” and “eternal life.”¹³¹ The church must restate the meaning behind these terms in fresh, concrete images that will connect with the unchurched. If it fails to do so it will lose this generation, and with it, the world.¹³²

While reaching the modern world is important, Niebuhr’s contextualization appears to go too far. It seems impossible to replace all of the above “worn” symbols without significantly altering the truth of the gospel. Perhaps it is Niebuhr’s emphasis on the universal truth of radical monotheism that allows him to consider all of these particular doctrines as mere symbols rather than the non-negotiable gospel truth.

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 27-28.

¹³⁰ Niebuhr, “The Relativities of Religion,” 1457.

¹³¹ Niebuhr, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 28 and “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 251.

¹³² Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Industrial Classes,” 16-17; “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 46; and “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 251.

Because they are only particulars, they are easily replaced when they fail to convey the general truth of radical monotheism.

To summarize Niebuhr's position on revelation: revelation is personal, contemporaneous, and rational. In Niebuhr's understanding of rationality, revelation is seen to supply paradigmatic symbols that organize and interpret reality. Such symbols are communal and provisional. The former indicates that symbols are attained within a community rather than by oneself in direct encounter with God. The community offers its symbols by retelling its story, or internal history. The latter indicates that symbols tend to wear out, so that reformulations are necessary to meet the evolving needs and perspective of the community. We now turn to the primary symbol of the Christian community, Jesus Christ.

2. The Primary Christian Symbol Is Jesus Christ

While Niebuhr asserts that God is continually revealing himself, he also emphasizes that God's primary revelation, at least for Christians, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ supplies the "Rosetta stone," the interpretive lens through which Christians can understand God's ongoing revelation. Niebuhr cannot imagine attempting to interpret God's revelatory activity apart from Jesus Christ. He writes:

The God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ is now trusted and known as the contemporary God, revealing himself in every event; but we do not understand how we could trace his working in these happenings if he did not make himself known to us through the memory of Jesus Christ; nor do we know how we should be able to interpret all the words we read as words of God save by the aid of this Rosetta stone.¹³³

Although Niebuhr believes that Jesus is the most distinctive Christian symbol, he does not think that Jesus alone is sufficient to understand the world (contra Barth). He writes: "The situation of Christians then seems to be this: they cannot understand

¹³³Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 154. Cf. *ibid.*, 135 and *idem*, "The Cole Lectures: 'Next Steps in Theology,'" 33.

themselves or direct their actions or give form to their conduct without the use of the symbol Jesus Christ, but with the aid of that symbol only they never succeed in understanding themselves and their values or in giving shape to their conduct.” Other necessary symbols include “pilgrimage,” “healing,” and “warfare.”¹³⁴

This section will examine Niebuhr’s understanding of Jesus Christ as the Christian community’s most important interpretive symbol. It will divide the discussion along classical lines, addressing first the nature and then the work of Christ.¹³⁵

a. Nature of Jesus Christ

The first item to note concerning Niebuhr’s understanding of the nature of Christ is that it is not too important to him. His lack of concern arises from his aversion to metaphysical language, including doctrinal statements. Niebuhr does not place much weight on the doctrines concerning Christ’s two natures, for no creed or theological

¹³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 158, 162.

¹³⁵ A related topic in Niebuhr scholarship concerns the importance of Christology to Niebuhr. Niebuhr himself explicitly opposes Christocentrism, probably at least partially in reaction to Barth, suggesting that too much emphasis on Jesus Christ detracts from the worship of God. He prefers to be theocentric rather than christocentric. See Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 31, 44-46; “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 250; “An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,” 1; Ahlstrom, “H. Richard Niebuhr’s Place in American Thought,” 215; Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 29; and Mawhinney, “H. Richard Niebuhr and Reshaping American Christianity,” 142-43.

Nevertheless, other scholars rightly note that Niebuhr reserves an important role for Jesus Christ. Although he resists venerating Jesus Christ with the same worship that he offers the Father, or the One, Niebuhr states that as God’s primary revelation, Jesus Christ is the lens through which Christians see God. Consequently, Christology remains significant to Niebuhr, for it holds the hermeneutical key for understanding God and creation. See Sherry, “Shaped By Christ: The Christo-Morphic Hermeneutical Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” vi-viii; Kliever, “Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” *Journal of Religion* 50 (1970): 33, 48 and *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 138; Grima, “Christ and Conversion: H. Richard Niebuhr’s Thought, 1933-37,” 29; Scriven, “The Transformation of Culture: Christian Social Ethics After H. Richard Niebuhr,” 282-83; Frei, “The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 66-67, 95-96; Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 64; and Edward Clinton Gardner, “Ethical Issues for the 1970’s: A Critique of Christocentric Models of Ethical Analysis,” *Religion in Life* 39 (1970): 206.

A good example of how Niebuhr attempts to balance theocentricity with Christology is found in his “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 220. Here Niebuhr states that theocentricity is the most important characteristic of evangelical ethics. Nevertheless, this theocentricity arises from a positive relationship with God, a relationship that is established “by, through, and with Jesus Christ.” Theocentric ethics orientates itself “toward the transcendent God revealing himself in mighty acts--above all in the mighty act of Jesus Christ.”

statement is able to capture the “active intelligence and will” of Christ. Like other persons, the personal Christ is living and dynamic, unable to be circumscribed by any theological terms. So rather than transform Jesus Christ into a doctrine to be memorized, the church should relish its dynamic personal relationship with its living Lord. Niebuhr warns: “When a community substitutes for the person of Christ some set of metaphysical or legal propositions, it has begun to lose its character as church and to become a dogmatic or legal society.”¹³⁶ Niebuhr concedes that looking back at the historical Jesus, he can entertain such doctrines as the “pre-existent, eternal Christ or a second person of the Trinity.” However, such doctrines are merely theoretical. They are unable to produce faith in people, for faith only comes through history, “not in doctrines about history.”¹³⁷ As Godsey explains, Niebuhr discounts the pre-existence of Christ as a hopelessly speculative, metaphysical notion. This also leads him to discard the hypostatic union, since there is no pre-incarnate deity to join with humanity in Christ.¹³⁸

So rather than master correct doctrine concerning the historical Jesus, defining his two natures and appropriate place within the Trinity, Niebuhr is much more interested in exploring the work of the present Christ. He wants to examine Christ in an “existential sense,” studying how Christ “*reconstructs* the broken interpersonal life of faith,” “making us whole in our faith relations,” through his trust and loyalty in the “Transcendent One.” Niebuhr desires to know Christ as “one who is directly present in our life in faith” rather

¹³⁶ Niebuhr, “The Norm of the Church,” 10-11. Cf. idem, “Participation in the Present Passion,” in *Collected Articles of H. Richard Niebuhr*, microform (Madison, N.J.: Drew University Library, 1975), 1, for an example of Niebuhr’s aversion to metaphysical wrangling. He states that Christians should not divide over the nature of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. Christ is present in so many different ways that it is useless to argue concerning which view is correct. For other accounts of Niebuhr’s aversion to metaphysical language, see Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 78-80 and Beker, “The Sovereignty of God in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 108.

¹³⁷ Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 249. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 14.

¹³⁸ Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 101-2.

than a person “about whom we hold certain beliefs on the authority of a church or a Scriptures which we more or less distrust... .”¹³⁹

Notwithstanding Niebuhr’s lack of concern to explicitly develop a doctrine of the nature of Christ, he drops enough hints to enable us to construct a basic framework of his position. This section, part a, examines Niebuhr’s perspective on the humanity and deity of Christ. It will accomplish the former by studying Niebuhr’s view on the relationship between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and the latter by exploring his understanding of the sonship of Christ.

Regarding Jesus’ humanity, Niebuhr firmly believes that a historical Jesus actually existed. He corrects his brother, Reinhold, for his view that myth is merely a story that depicts patterns of human existence, a story that may or may not be grounded in historical fact. Niebuhr cautions that if this is true, and Jesus Christ is considered a mythical figure, then Jesus Christ need not actually exist. He writes concerning Reinhold’s use of myth:

So far as I understand his use of this term it means that an effort must be made to state in story form what is in fact not a once-and-for-all event but a pattern in repeated events or an aspect of human existence. Creation means the ever-present limitation of the finite; fall means the ever-repeated and inevitable succumbing of the spirit to the temptation of pride; the end of history means the beyond-history reference which is necessary in every moment as reference both to the judgment and the meaning which came from beyond the finite. By the same token it would seem that Jesus Christ as revelation of God might be a mythological figure standing for suffering love in history.¹⁴⁰

Niebuhr thinks that denying the historical Jesus is a dangerous concession. In *Christ and Culture* he associates this error with the heresy of Manicheism. He asserts that the antithesist position is tempted by this danger, to permit “loss of contact with the historical

¹³⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 86-87.

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, “Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History,” 99.

Jesus Christ of history, for whom a spiritual principle is substituted.”¹⁴¹ Rather than fall into this temptation, it is much better to claim that Jesus Christ is an actual, historical person whose life is so significant that it acquires mythical status. By myth Niebuhr does not mean fiction, but rather a true story that supplies categories by which people are able to interpret the events in their world. This mythical function of Jesus is what Niebuhr calls the Christ of faith. Niebuhr explains the relationship between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history:

It remains possible that this Christ of faith is a mythological figure in the sense that he is the personification of the idea of faithfulness, of self-binding and consistent loyalty, a personification generated continuously in the minds of believers in him, a “docetic” Jesus Christ. But as acknowledged person, as individual relied upon and reliable in his freedom he is then also an historic figure, a being strange in his discarnate power to compel the faith of incarnate companions.¹⁴²

Stephen Mathonnet-Vander Well does not accept Niebuhr’s attempt to retain both the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. He remarks that Niebuhr’s description of Christ as symbol “is rather amorphous, sounding more like an interpretive tool from mythology, than an historic, concrete person.”¹⁴³ While Mathonnet-Vander Well makes a good point, a careful reading in Niebuhr would reveal that Niebuhr does not eliminate the historical Jesus. Niebuhr rightly notes that using Jesus as symbol neither obligates one to receive nor reject his historical actuality. He states:

To insist in this fashion on the symbolic function of the Christ-figure and the Christ-story does not beg the question of the historical actuality of that figure and story. For history may function as myth or as symbol when men use it (or are forced by processes in their history itself to employ it) for understanding their present and their future. ...It must suffice us to note that for Christians it is at

¹⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 81-82.

¹⁴² Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 92. Cf. idem, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of History,” 99-100.

¹⁴³ Stephen Mathonnet-Vander Well, “Theocentric and Christocentric Reformed Ethics: Neo-Calvinist and Postliberal Perspectives” (Ph.D. diss., Boston College, 1997), 44.

least as important to reject the thought that Jesus Christ is only an historical figure as it is to deny that he is only a symbol.¹⁴⁴

Although Niebuhr believes in the Jesus of history, the Christ of faith is much more important to him. Its precedence arises from its superior content and priority in the order of knowledge. First, the Christ of faith supercedes the Jesus of history by its superior content. The Jesus of history belongs to the inferior realm of outer history. He merely conveys certain historical facts for belief. The Christ of faith belongs to the superior world of inner history, for he interprets what the Jesus of history means. The Christ of faith is grounded in but also supercedes the man who lived 2,000 years ago. He is “the inner personal companion who as person is present in the memory and expectation of the believer.”¹⁴⁵ The Christ of faith is the symbol, in personal form, that enables his followers to rightly interpret the world and their roles in it. Niebuhr explains:

When we reflect on the life of faith in and with Jesus Christ as the companion of the trusting and would-be loyal self, we find that what is present is not a Jesus of history but the Christ of faith, not Jesus incarnate, but the risen Lord. The given fact is not some historical truths which the self believes on the basis of its confidence in other persons, such as apostles and gospel writers, though such truths are also believed. The given fact is Jesus Christ as the present companion of the persons who trust him and seek to be loyal to him. When we speak of faith in Jesus Christ we speak of the fact that we pray in his name to the Father, that we inquire into his mind and seek with him in interpersonal community to understand our present world, our fellowmen, our duty and our future. The beginning for us is not historical or theological and conceptual but a present personal beginning.¹⁴⁶

Second, the Christ of faith supercedes the Jesus of history in the order of knowledge. Because the Christ of faith exists in the present, believers know him first, before they learn about the Jesus of history. They begin with their current relationship with Christ and then move back into the past to discuss the historical truths about him.

¹⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 156-57.

¹⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 104.

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 87-88.

They cannot begin with the Jesus of history, for this is unknown to them except through the perspective of the Christ of faith. Niebuhr explains: “We cannot proceed from a preexistent Christ to an incarnate Christ, we can only move backward from the contemporary Christ to the historical, from the historical to the preexistent.”¹⁴⁷

Moreover, Niebuhr observes that Christians become followers of the Christ of faith through the influence of other people who now enjoy a relationship with him. They learn to be loyal to Christ when they meet others who are already loyal to him. They do not become his disciples through the influence of historians who produce “objective” facts about a historical Jesus who once lived.¹⁴⁸ Niebuhr thinks that the historical route is extremely tenuous, for the Jesus of history neither overwhelmed people with himself nor left some indelible, undeniable record of existence. As such, skepticism regarding the facts of the historical Jesus is able to flourish, making historical facts an unstable foundation for faith. Christians are better off beginning with the Christ of faith, using him to interpret the Jesus of history, than vice versa. For instance, Christians should not believe in Jesus because of the historical record found in Scripture. Instead, they should value the Scriptures because they inform them about the Christ of faith who they have already encountered in their present experience.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 88. In a footnote, Richard R. Niebuhr says that his father adopted this temporal priority from George Herbert Mead. Mead stated that any transcendent reality must exhibit itself in the present. Then from one’s present experience of the transcendent one can look back to reconstruct and give meaning to the past. As Niebuhr says his father applies it here, “the *present* Jesus Christ of faith is the companion who reconstructs the faith by which we have lived in the past.”

¹⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 89: Jesus Christ “was introduced into our personal-interpersonal existence by persons who trusted him, were loyal to him, with him were loyal to us and our companions, trusted with him in the Ground of Being and had God for a Father, by persons who were trusted by us. He was not introduced into our personal-interpersonal lives by objective historical scholars who, examining the records of the past, discovered more or less authentic documents of the life of a human subject who made certain interesting statements about God and man and the times in which he lived.”

¹⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 90-91. Niebuhr adds: “Their faith is not the belief that once upon a time Jesus Christ existed. Their faith is in Jesus Christ and they treasure the Scriptures because they tell of Christ, not vice versa.”

Here Niebuhr seems to emphasize the believer's present relationship with Christ at the expense of the apostolic testimony. Is it true that Christians can know Christ directly, apart from the historical record? Does belief in the Christ of faith precede knowledge of the Jesus of history, as Niebuhr says, or rather is faith in Christ impossible unless it is grounded in the tradition handed down by the apostles? The latter seems to be Paul's belief, who challenges Timothy to "guard the good deposit that was entrusted" to him, passing along the tradition that he heard from Paul to faithful teachers who in turn can instruct others (2 Tim. 1:14, 2:2).

To be fair, Niebuhr does value the church's tradition, for he asserts that individuals only encounter Christ in the community of faith. There the Christ of faith invisibly stands as the head, the "focusing point of a company of believers." At least initially, individuals can neither empirically nor mentally perceive the Christ of faith by themselves. Instead, they see the Christ of faith reflected in the community of those who trust and are loyal to him. Niebuhr explains:

He meets us, we meet him, not as perceived but as one to whom the eyes of others are directed, not as an idea in our minds but as a person who accompanies in unseen presence those who believe in him, who are loyal to him and who trust him. ...When we have the Scriptures in our hand we are in the presence of the company of these believers in the Christ of faith, persons of trust and loyalty. The Christ we see is the Christ reflected in their existence, the Christ who is hidden and yet pointed to in their devotion, the savior who is suggested but not revealed as they pray "Abba, our Father."¹⁵⁰

Once individuals learn from their community of faith to understand the present Christ, he "is born again" in their minds. They now begin to understand Christ directly, so that they are not restricted to knowing him from what others tell them. Nevertheless,

¹⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 91. Cf. *ibid.*, 92: Christ "is present only in reflection, in the attitudes of men who believe in him; he is the symbol of their unity; he is the dramatic representative of what they want to believe; he is the anthropomorphic image of a cause."

they never become so independent that their knowledge of Christ becomes separate from the community. From beginning to end, the knowledge of Christ remains communal.¹⁵¹

To summarize this digression into the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith: Niebuhr does believe in the humanity of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was an actual human person who lived on earth, more or less as the Scriptures report. However, Niebuhr does not believe that this historical life is as important as the personal relationship that the Christian community now enjoys with the present, personal, and spiritual Christ of faith. While Niebuhr rightly observes the communal nature of faith, he appears to reduce the Christ of faith to this communal reality. He seems to be lacking a doctrine of the Holy Spirit that can account for both the communal nature and the deity of Jesus Christ (i.e., as the instrument of both the virgin birth and the gathering of the community at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit unites Christ's deity with his communal nature). Without a developed doctrine of the Holy Spirit, in what sense is the Christ of faith divine? The Christ of faith appears to exist only as the ideal focal point of the Christian community.

Niebuhr periodically uses language which implies that Jesus Christ is divine. For instance, he states: "As the church explicates its faith it becomes aware of the fact that its loyalty is not to the Jesus of history only, nor to the risen Christ alone, but to the eternal Son of God incarnate in Jesus."¹⁵² The church responds to "God-in-Christ," recognizing

¹⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 94. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 12-13, and especially 245: "We do not confront an isolated Christ known to us apart from a company of witnesses who surround him, point to him, interpret this and that feature of his presence, explain to us the meaning of his words, direct our attention to his relations with the Father and the Spirit. Without direct confrontation there is no truth for me in all such testimony; but without companions, collaborators, teachers, corroborating witnesses, I am at the mercy of my imaginations."

Some scholars criticize Niebuhr's community-based christology. For instance, Fowler says that Niebuhr's emphasis on community opens christology to distortions from other communities who perceive Christ differently. Niebuhr could avoid this by giving more weight to the historical facticity of Jesus. See Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 245-46.

¹⁵² Niebuhr, "The Norm of the Church," 11.

that Jesus is more than merely a finite man but that an eternal reality is within him.¹⁵³ He remarks that through Jesus Christ God has revealed himself to be “both Father and Son.”¹⁵⁴ And in his sermon entitled, “The Logic of the Cross,” Niebuhr repeatedly refers to Jesus Christ as the “One,” a term that Niebuhr always reserves for God himself.¹⁵⁵

On the other hand, Niebuhr more consistently attempts to downplay the deity of Christ. Rather than begin with John’s gospel, which emphasizes the express deity of Christ, Niebuhr chooses the Synoptics, which he says treat Jesus as a man who learned to interpret God’s actions in the world.¹⁵⁶ Niebuhr prefers to define Jesus’ relationship to the Father in ethical rather than ontic terms. Jesus Christ is one nature with the Father, not in the sense that he possesses a divine nature through a virgin birth, but in the sense that he shares “one faithfulness” with him.¹⁵⁷

A consensus of scholars, such as Sherry, Irish, Kliever, and Gardner, agree that Niebuhr expresses his Christology in ethical rather than ontic terms. Typical is Sherry’s explanation of Niebuhr’s view of Christ:

¹⁵³ Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 118. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 111, where Niebuhr says that there is a surd, something not understandable by human reason, in the statement that Jesus is the Son of God. This statement at least leaves open the possibility that Jesus is more than merely a moral Son.

¹⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 101.

¹⁵⁵ Niebuhr, “The Logic of the Cross,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 203-4: “It is nonsense that we...should try to find help in *One* who forgave his enemies and readily yielded himself up to them. It is nonsense that we should accept as the Christ, as the great world statesman, the great leader of the human cause, *One* who was unable to enlist the support of his own people, who was rejected not only by his nation’s enemies but by his own kindred. ...The cross is the symbol of *One* who was forsaken by friends as well as foes” (emphasis mine).

¹⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “Is God in the War?” *Christian Century* 59 (1942): 954. Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 89: Niebuhr states that the church should not feel superior to Judaism but should remember the “limited, human character of its founder.”

¹⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 94, 100. Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 19, 27 and *The Meaning of Revelation*, 174-75: Niebuhr declares that one’s ability to trust God is much more important than whether one believes in “some miraculous virgin birth.”

To say that he is “superhuman” in his trust and loyalty to God and to all of God’s world is not to say that he is in his nature or essence more than human, only that in his faithfulness he is more than human, for his humanity is founded upon faithfulness and not faithlessness. This absolute faithfulness is, according to Niebuhr, no less miraculous than Jesus’ sonship as understood in biological, physical, or metaphysical terms.¹⁵⁸

So Niebuhr defines Christ’s sonship in moral terms. Jesus Christ is the Son of God through his display of radical monotheism--complete loyalty and trust in God and subsequent loyalty to God’s creation. Niebuhr explains: “By his trust in the Transcendent Source of Being, by his loyalty to all to whom he trusts the Father to be loyal, by his faithfulness to God he makes himself known to us as one who has the character of a Son.”¹⁵⁹ Niebuhr thinks that Jesus’ ability to express such radical faith is more important and miraculous than knowing whether or not he is divine. What Jesus does is more significant than who he is. He is great not because he is God, but because he is able to love the God who is his enemy, trusting that this enemy will turn out to be his deliverer.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Sherry, “Shaped By Christ,” 128. Cf. Irish, *The Religious Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 42-46; Kliever, “Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 45; and Gardner, “Ethical Issues for the 1970’s,” 212.

¹⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 99-100. Cf. idem, “Our Reverent Doubt and the Authority of Christ,” 194: The Sonship of Christ consists of: “the singular, the mysterious nature of his purity of purpose,” “the monolithic character of his faith,” and *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 42: “...His confidence and his fidelity are those of a son of God--the most descriptive term which Christians apply to him as they contemplate the faith of their Lord. The word of God as God’s oath of fidelity became flesh in him in this sense that he was a man who single-mindedly accepted the assurance that the Lord of heaven and earth was wholly faithful to him and to all creatures, and who in response gave wholehearted loyalty to the realm of being.”

Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, 94-95, for the double movement of Christ’s radical monotheism. First movement: “His trust is in this Lord of heaven and earth as One who has bound himself to care for the apparently most despised beings, human and animal and vegetable in his creation. He trusts in the loyalty of the Transcendent One and in his power, being certain in his mind that nothing can separate men from the love of God. He trusts God for himself, for his nation, for mankind, for animals.”

Second movement: Because Jesus completely trusts his Father he is able to be completely loyal to others. “He is without defensiveness before them for he is certain that God will defend him. He does not trust his fellowmen but he is wholly faithful to them, even or perhaps particularly when he chastises them for their disloyalty to each other and their distrust of God. He seeks and saves the lost. He spends himself for others--and always with trust in God. As person, as living in faith, this Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” See also idem, *Christ and Culture*, 16-17, 25-26.

¹⁶⁰ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 121. Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, 94, for the remarkable nature of Jesus’ faith. Niebuhr states: “It is the personal relation of a faithful, trusting,

Niebuhr taught this functional Christology to his Yale students, many of whom initiated the narrative theology school. For instance, Hans Frei, who viewed Niebuhr as his most important teacher, also defined Christ by what he did rather than by who he was.¹⁶¹ He wrote that Jesus' "specific identity was what he did and underwent..." and that "Jesus was what he did and suffered, the one whose identity was enacted in his passion and death."¹⁶² It is worth asking whether this ethical formulation of Christ's sonship is adequately faithful to the apostolic tradition found in the New Testament and codified at Nicea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon. These authoritative sources thought it worthwhile to defend the claim that Jesus Christ is metaphysically, not *merely* ethically, the divine Son of God.

Notwithstanding this problem, Niebuhr argues that Jesus' moral sonship is important because it supplies the example for his followers who also wish to become sons of God. Like Jesus, they must also learn to possess radical faith in God. To aid this process, Niebuhr specifies the content of Jesus' radical faith, how Jesus primarily responds to God in all things. Niebuhr calls this "universal responsibility," for Jesus interprets every particular event as part of a universal context, as one component of God's universal action in the world. He writes: Jesus "interprets all actions upon him as signs of the divine action of creation, government, and salvation and so responds to them

loyal soul to the source of its being which is the astonishing thing. This is a superhuman thing according to all our experience of humanity."

¹⁶¹ George Hunsinger and William C. Placher, eds., *Theology and Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 213. Hunsinger and Placher introduce Frei's essay, "H. Richard Niebuhr on History, Church, and Nation" with the statement that "Niebuhr was Frei's most important teacher, and this essay represents a lifetime of engagement with him."

¹⁶² Hans W. Frei, *The Identity of Jesus Christ* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 126, 115. To be fair, Frei does not explicitly state that Jesus is merely the ethical Son of God. However, in 173 pages on the identity of Jesus, he never states that Jesus is anything more than this. Furthermore, his summary statement on Jesus' identity declares his humanity but not his deity. He writes: "This, then, is the identity of Jesus Christ. He is the man from Nazareth who redeemed men by his helplessness, in perfect obedience enacting their good in their behalf. As that same one, he was raised from the dead and manifested to be the redeemer. As that same one, Jesus the redeemer, he cannot *not* live, and to conceive of him as not living is to misunderstand who he is" (149, emphasis is Frei's).

as to respond to divine action. He does that act which fits into the divine action and looks forward to the infinite response to his response.”¹⁶³ Elaborating further, he states:

To discern the ways of God not in supernatural but in all natural and historic events, to respond to his intention present in and beyond and through all finite intentions, that is the way of responsibility to God. It is a way of universal responsibility because there is no action in the whole extent of actuality in which the universal intention, the meaning of the One beyond the many, is not present.¹⁶⁴

Niebuhr specifies what this universal responsibility involves. First, he notes that Jesus observes God’s hand in nature and responds accordingly. For instance, rather than assign the sun and rain to blind fate, Jesus believes that they are signs of God’s “cosmic generosity.” Furthermore, he recognizes God’s “overflowing creativity” and “infinite artistry” in such lower parts of nature as birds and flowers. Niebuhr’s point is that Jesus “understands and reacts to natural events as expressive of an omnificent intention that is wholly affirmative of what it brings into being.”¹⁶⁵

Second, Jesus sees and responds to God’s intentional action upon humanity. Whether it be insignificant children or lost sinners, Jesus recognizes that they all possess meaning “from their place in that divine action, which hates nothing that it has made but wills it to be and to be whole.”¹⁶⁶ Jesus also responds to God’s involvement in human institutions, such as government. Niebuhr asserts that Jesus’ lack of concern to change the political structure of his day does not indicate that he is indifferent to government. Instead, it means that Jesus knows that God is behind the Roman government, so that he

¹⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 167.

¹⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 170. Cf. *ibid.*, 144-45.

¹⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 165-66.

¹⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 166.

responds to it as though he were responding to God. This is why he does not seek to overthrow it.¹⁶⁷

Third, Jesus responds to God in adversity. Jesus refuses to doubt that God is in control, even when events appear to be going badly for himself. Instead, he wrestles with God in the garden, pleading with him to reveal his will. Niebuhr states: “He proceeded on the assumption that there was a divine meaning in the whole sorry situation and he engaged in mental strife with God until some fragment of the divine plan was revealed.” Once Jesus learns God’s plan he then responds appropriately, adjusting his action to what God is doing “in this whole affair.”¹⁶⁸

Jesus is able to respond correctly in adversity because he looks beyond the immediate future, which may include suffering and even death, to the eschaton and its resurrection. He confidently trusts God, believing that the eschaton will reveal that God has always been both sovereign and good. He believes that the same God who now destroys him is the same God who will resurrect him in the end.¹⁶⁹ And so Jesus prepares himself to receive God’s resurrection. He practices repentance, which relinquishes any attempt to prolong the dying system of this world; faith, which confidently trusts that the resurrection will follow destruction; forgiveness, which permits God to judge and take vengeance rather than establish his own human domination over another; and the suffering of innocence for guilt, which is the only effective strategy for seeking God’s kingdom rather than personal self-interest.¹⁷⁰ In all these ways, whether in nature, humanity, or adversity, Jesus models radical faith in God. Choosing to respond to God rather than other finite agents, Jesus demonstrates his right to the moral title, Son of God.

¹⁶⁷ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 146-47.

¹⁶⁸ Niebuhr, “Tired Christians,” 3.

¹⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 166.

¹⁷⁰ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 122-23, 126-27.

To summarize: just as Niebuhr believes that Jesus is human and yet places little emphasis on it, so also he hints that Jesus is divine and yet pays scant attention to its implications. Instead, Niebuhr's interest in Jesus' actions leads him to define Jesus by what he does rather than who he is. This decision drives him to conclude that Jesus is the Son of God in an ethical rather than ontic sense. Throughout, Niebuhr prefers to discuss the work of Jesus rather than engage in metaphysical speculation about his being. To this work of Christ we now turn.

b. Work of Jesus Christ

Jesus' primary work is to supply the symbol or image through which his followers can properly interpret God, the world, and themselves. Niebuhr writes: "...in Christian life Jesus Christ is a symbolic form with the aid of which men tell each other what life and death, God and man, are *like*; but even more he is a form which they employ as an a priori, an image, a scheme or pattern in the mind which gives form and meaning to their experience."¹⁷¹

Most important is Jesus' revelation of God.¹⁷² Jesus' death and resurrection reveal that God holds both omnipotent power and infinite goodness, a revelation that leads people to entrust their lives to him.¹⁷³ They know that just as God brought a greater good out of Jesus' death, so he will overcome any evil that may befall them. Jesus' example assures them that God "absorbs and transforms a life ending in death into a higher pattern, into a life-giving process" so that "the evil and good intentions of men are transformed and death is swallowed up in victory."¹⁷⁴ Jesus reveals that God, the Great

¹⁷¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 154 (emphasis Niebuhr's). Cf. idem, *Christ and Culture*, 11.

¹⁷² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 43, 155 and *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 20.

¹⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 21 and *Faith On Earth*, 99-100. Cf. idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 166: Jesus also reveals that God is a person.

¹⁷⁴ Niebuhr, "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 89.

enemy who must destroy humanity and its finite gods, is also the companion, the redeemer who resurrects those he slays. Because grace follows judgment, Christians may confidently entrust their lives into the hands of their faithful Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Niebuhr explains: “In him (Jesus) the intention of the universe, to speak anthropomorphically, has become apparent; in his fate, even more than in his teaching, it has been made manifest that God is love. Through his life, death and resurrection it has become possible to love the ‘Enemy’ who seemed to destroy all his creatures but now is shown to be seeking their redemption.”¹⁷⁵ As noted earlier, Niebuhr seems to reduce redemption to Christ’s act of revelation. Christ discloses to us that God is good, which in turn encourages us to trust him.¹⁷⁶ However, is this a complete account of our redemption in Christ?

Besides revealing God, Jesus Christ as symbolic form also supplies a fresh and correct vision of other persons. Christians begin to see Christomorphically, to “see their companions in need in the form of Christ.” They recognize that other people are “something like Christ” and they remember that when they serve them they are actually serving Christ.¹⁷⁷ Finally, Jesus also provides the image through which individuals can understand themselves. He supplies the grid for an appropriate self-image by revealing to people their own sinfulness and inability to redeem themselves. Specifically, Jesus’

¹⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 115-16 (parenthetical insertion is mine). Cf. idem, *The Church Against the World*, 151, excerpts also published as “Toward the Emancipation of the Church,” 143; *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 20; “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 121; “Life is Worth Living,” 22; “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 144; *Faith On Earth*, 99; *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 43; *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 10; “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 118-29; *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 279; and *Christ and Culture*, 254. See also idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 185-91: Jesus reveals God’s power and goodness in surprising ways that revolutionize humanity’s preconceptions. For instance, God demonstrates his power through the weakness of the cross and his goodness there is much fuller than people had expected (e.g., God’s goodness cares for the entire creation).

¹⁷⁶ See p. 109-11 of this dissertation.

¹⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 154-55.

crucifixion reveals both humanity's sinfulness, for humanity's sins put him there, and its frailty, for if a righteous person must die, then what hope is there for them?¹⁷⁸ But the Christ symbol does not leave people in despair. Rather Jesus' confident trust in the Father indicates the promise of divine salvation. His life, especially his suffering, illustrates how people should respond to this salvation. They learn to see their own suffering through Jesus' death and resurrection, imitating his freedom from self concern because, like him they have learned to be secure in God and his redemption.¹⁷⁹ Niebuhr concludes that the symbol of Christ enables Christians to understand their entire world: God, others, and self. Christians ultimately interpret "all evaluation, action, and suffering" through Christ. Niebuhr elaborates:

It is impossible to describe with any adequacy the variety and richness of the imagery derived by Christians from the story of Jesus and employed by them not only in their descriptive language but in their apprehensions, evaluations, and decisions. From the recognition of an infant's value and destiny with the aid of images of manger and cross of Christ, to the acceptance of death as a dying with Christ, to the discovery of a quality of existence that like Christ's cannot be conquered by death, to the understanding of man's place and responsibility in the cosmos as a son of God, the symbolism of the gospel story pervades the Christian consciousness in all evaluation, action, and suffering.¹⁸⁰

While the entire life of Jesus Christ supplies a symbolic form, Niebuhr thinks that the apex of this symbol is the cross-resurrection complex. If the primary Christian symbol is Jesus Christ, then the primary symbol of Jesus Christ is the cross. Besides its primacy in Scripture, the tragedy of the twentieth century certainly prompts Niebuhr to focus on the cross and Christ's subsequent resurrection. Niebuhr believes that one can only find meaning in the present distress if he returns "to that segment of history in which sin and tragedy and the God who brings our sin to its tragic and redeeming consequences

¹⁷⁸ Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 96.

¹⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 156 and "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 225.

¹⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 156.

came to fullest appearance.”¹⁸¹ God’s response to the cross of Christ instructs contemporary individuals how to interpret present suffering and tragedy. Niebuhr believes that this contemporizing of the cross is necessary, for otherwise it remains an irrelevant “traditional formula or symbol, reminding men only of the past.”¹⁸²

Niebuhr asserts that the symbol of the cross is essential for interpreting all of life. More than any other symbol, the cross informs individuals concerning what God is doing and how they should respond to it.¹⁸³ Niebuhr gives a few examples: “disciples are corrupted by thirty pieces of silver...betrayals and denials take place in every capital...crosses are constructed not only for thieves but for the sons of God...bodies are now being broken for our sake and how for the remission of our sins the blood of innocents is being shed.”¹⁸⁴ This last statement raises questions concerning Niebuhr’s understanding of the atonement. Is it the sacrifice of others as well as or even rather than Jesus Christ that forgives sin? How would this work? Is there any special significance in the death of Christ?

Niebuhr states that the cross of Christ is important because it reveals two important truths. First, it indicates the futility of trusting any finite god, for every idol will be destroyed. The cross discloses that even the best person must die. And if the best must die, then nothing finite has any chance of survival. Since everything finite must perish, people are foolish to trust anything here for salvation. Those who do must brace themselves for God’s painful judgment, a judgment that will eradicate every treasonous idol from their lives.¹⁸⁵ Second, and a more important point, the cross reveals that God’s

¹⁸¹ Niebuhr, “What Then Must We Do?” *Christian Century Pulpit* 5 (1934): 147.

¹⁸² Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 152.

¹⁸³ Niebuhr, “The Logic of the Cross,” 206.

¹⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 124.

¹⁸⁵ Niebuhr, “Life is Worth Living,” 22: “That is one reason why Christianity has a cross at its center, for in the frustration of man’s highest aspirations and best goodness which that cross represents, animal faith in

final redemption is only accomplished through the vicarious suffering of the innocent.¹⁸⁶ This is Niebuhr's way to account for both divine sovereignty and the existence of evil. He cannot deny either, so he asserts that suffering is God's method for redeeming the world. This truth is revealed in the cross; it is not something that people would ever guess on their own.¹⁸⁷

While Niebuhr discusses this aspect of the cross in numerous places, especially his war articles,¹⁸⁸ one of his most poignant essays is his communion meditation, "Participation in the Present Passion." There Niebuhr observes that contemporary society has produced countless numbers of sufferers. He writes: "They are in refugee camps; they are tramping the roads of war-torn countries; they are seeking lost children in Asia and Europe; they are confined in neglected asylums or being cared for in well-managed institutions; they are living in anxious loneliness and in anxious sympathy."¹⁸⁹ Niebuhr interprets such suffering through the lens of the cross, asserting that "China is being crucified,"¹⁹⁰ every killing, even of animals, is a sacrifice,¹⁹¹ and that the oppression of one group by another amounts to "class crucifixion."¹⁹² It is noteworthy here that Niebuhr proposes a universal application of the cross. Unlike the limited atonement view

all the little gods who seemed to make life worth living is seemingly destroyed... ." Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, 111-12.

¹⁸⁶ Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 90.

¹⁸⁷ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 167.

¹⁸⁸ See Niebuhr, "War as Crucifixion," *Christian Century* 60 (1943): 513-515.

¹⁸⁹ Niebuhr, "Participation in the Present Passion," 2.

¹⁹⁰ Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," 380.

¹⁹¹ Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 167.

¹⁹² Richard Niebuhr, preface to *The Responsible Self*, viii.

of classical Reformed theology, Christ's death is directly applied to everyone who suffers.

Niebuhr believes that Jesus is present among those who are suffering, "lending significance and meaning, forgiving and redeeming."¹⁹³ Jesus identifies with all those who suffer, even with those who may deserve it. Niebuhr writes:

Where is Christ today? Doubtless he is seated at the right hand of God. Doubtless he is present in the starving children and men and women of the world; doubtless he is being barred from churches, schools, and places of recreation because his face is black; doubtless he is being despised and rejected of men wherever folk who think they are superior or belong to superior cultures look down upon and offend one of the little ones. He is in the child rejected by its parents; he is with the prisoner cast out by society; he is with all those who are acquainted with grief, whether men call them righteous or wicked.¹⁹⁴

Because Jesus identifies with the sufferers, those who sin against them are sinning against him.¹⁹⁵ This sin is a universal, daily occurrence. Niebuhr argues that everyone is responsible for any suffering that occurs in this world. For example, take a child that has become delinquent. How much of his sin comes from himself, his parents, his government, his fellow citizens, and even his "civilization with its tawdry appeals and its dishonest examples?" Niebuhr concludes that this youth "is being wounded in the most sacred depths of his being as a person not by himself alone but by us all." Niebuhr adds that people are unable to stop contributing to the world's suffering, for their "well-intentioned, specious goodness" causes others to suffer as much as their "ill-will."¹⁹⁶

¹⁹³ Niebuhr, "Our Reverent Doubt and the Authority of Christ," 198.

¹⁹⁴ Niebuhr, "Participation in the Present Passion," 3.

¹⁹⁵ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 98.

¹⁹⁶ Niebuhr, "Participation in the Present Passion," 2-3. Cf. idem, "Utilitarian Christianity," 5: an example of ill-will is the willingness of people to sacrifice others in war in order to escape suffering themselves and to preserve their civilization at any cost.

Since people are responsible for the suffering of others, Niebuhr infers that those who suffer are in some sense innocent. This quality of innocence means that they are able to suffer vicariously for those who are hurting them. Specifically, they are suffering in the other's place, bearing the consequences of sin so that the other may go free. Niebuhr finds this aptly illustrated in war. There "individuals die for the sake of communities" and "the little and the weak peoples...bear the burden of suffering" on behalf of the upper classes.¹⁹⁷

Niebuhr concludes that the path of redemption involves individuals identifying with or participating in the suffering of the downtrodden. Such participation reminds people that they and the sufferers are fellow members of the human family and rebukes them for their selfish egoism that caused the suffering. While Niebuhr is short on specific methods of participation, he does suggest that taking the Eucharist, which involves the participant with the suffering of Christ and by extension those who are presently suffering, is a good initial step.¹⁹⁸

Niebuhr concedes that this message of the cross is foolishness to those who think they are perishing. Fearful that they may not survive much longer, either individually or as a society, such people listen to those who can teach them how to maintain their existence. The cross is nonsense to these people, for why should those who desperately wish to survive look to the One who did not survive? Niebuhr contends that these people err because they overlook the resurrection, which changes everything.¹⁹⁹ The cross definitely declares that they are perishing, but the accompanying resurrection assures them that new life follows their destruction. Niebuhr states: "We are being saved. We

¹⁹⁷ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 166.

¹⁹⁸ Niebuhr, "Participation in the Present Passion," 3.

¹⁹⁹ Niebuhr, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Interpretation of History," 98-99: Niebuhr criticizes his brother, Reinhold, for pessimistically interpreting history only through the cross. He advises Reinhold to remember that the resurrection has already occurred and to optimistically interpret history in light of this fact.

are indeed coming through disaster, but we will not be lost. The cross does not deny the reality of death. It reinforces it. It denies its finality.”²⁰⁰ The cross and resurrection guarantee that life is God’s first and last word to his creation.²⁰¹

The truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ should lead his followers to repentance, or “to the reinterpretation of all our interpretations of life and death.”²⁰² Confident that their ultimate end is eternal life, they are able to relinquish their various attempts to preserve and defend themselves. Now they are free to lose themselves in service to others, actively participating in every means possible to replace the world’s suffering with peace and justice. Just as Jesus’ confidence in his resurrection emboldened him to identify with sinners, so those who follow his example are liberated to “aggressive suffering” with others.²⁰³

Note that once again Niebuhr identifies redemption with learning the truth about the human situation. Here repentance is primarily reinterpretation, a cognitive act whereby people better understand the world and their place in it. To be fair, Niebuhr does not think that redemption should end there. These fresh insights should stimulate individuals to re-enter the world and work for its redemption. However, while these acts of obedience are a consequence of personal redemption, they do not comprise the

²⁰⁰ Niebuhr, “The Logic of the Cross,” 201-5. Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, 100: “By his resurrection from the dead, by his establishment as ruler of life, by the power of his resurrection as Paul has it, it is established that the Transcendent One is indeed what Jesus Christ in his faithfulness and trust acknowledged him to be, and it is equally established that the faithful servant is acknowledged by Reality itself.” See also idem, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 130-31 and “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 127.

²⁰¹ Niebuhr, “The Logic of the Cross,” 206: “God’s preservation of ourselves is the first law of history” and *Faith On Earth*, 97: “...we accept him (Jesus) as God’s word to us that God is faithful and true, that he does not desire the death of the sinner, that he is leading his kingdom to victory over all evil, that we shall not die but live, that the last word to us is not death without ending, but life everlasting.”

²⁰² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 143.

²⁰³ Niebuhr, “The Alliance Between Labor and Religion,” 202. Cf. idem, “The Disorder of Man in the Church of God,” 78-79; “The Logic of the Cross,” 206; “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 158; “Christianity and the Social Problem,” 280; and *Faith On Earth*, 98.

redemption itself. People are “redeemed” the moment they embrace the truth that God has always been for them.

Since this truth springs from hope in the resurrection, a related issue concerns whether or not Niebuhr believes in a literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus. While Niebuhr’s statements are ambiguous, they hint that he denies a physical resurrection, and for theological reasons. For instance, he declares that “the resurrection is not an event in history, in the sense that it means the return of Christ to the history of mankind. Such an event would not represent a victory over the cross.”²⁰⁴ Niebuhr seems to imply that if a resurrected Jesus had recovered his physical body then he would have remained a part of this world. In this sense a physical resurrection would have merely returned Jesus to his previous condition, bound to die, rather than enabling him to conquer death. Moreover, physical existence is not real life in the deepest sense. Because real life transcends the limits of this physical existence, it is not important for Jesus to recover his physical body in order to attain the fullness of life that God offers.²⁰⁵

Nevertheless, appropriate for his preference for the Christ of faith over the Jesus of history, Niebuhr asserts that the resurrection of Christ “is one of the most patent facts in interpersonal history.”²⁰⁶ Note the communal nature of this claim. Christians cannot claim that Jesus’ physical body arose, but they do know that their community acknowledges that the living Christ is powerful among them. Christ is alive to those who encounter him in the community of his saints, regardless of the fate of the historical Jesus.²⁰⁷ A literal, bodily resurrection is a moot issue because Niebuhr’s focus is the

²⁰⁴ Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 87.

²⁰⁵ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 21. Cf. idem, “The Cole Lectures: ‘Next Steps in Theology,’” 29 and “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 122.

²⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 98.

²⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 99 and *The Responsible Self*, 143.

indestructible Christ of faith. He writes: “The question about this Christ is not ‘Did he arise from the dead?’ but ‘Did he ever die?’”²⁰⁸ It is not clear how Niebuhr reconciles this with Paul’s argument for the resurrection in I Cor. 15. Again, it is noteworthy that Niebuhr’s emphasis on the communal nature of the Christ of faith seems to overlook the role of the Holy Spirit. Does he reserve any function for the Spirit in mediating Christ to the church?

To summarize Niebuhr’s conception of the work of Jesus Christ: Jesus Christ becomes the dominant Christian symbol through his death and resurrection. While these symbolic events are connected to history (especially the cross), their real significance arises from the church’s use of the symbols themselves. The cross indicates that God will destroy all idols and that he accomplishes redemption through the vicarious suffering of the innocent. The resurrection assures that God is both sovereign and good, so that believers can trust him to resurrect them to new life after their suffering and destruction is complete.

Finally, it is important to analyze the ambiguity in Niebuhr’s conception of Christ’s redemptive work.²⁰⁹ Niebuhr concedes that how Christ redeems the world is ambiguous and lies beyond his comprehension. He writes: “I will quarrel with no one about the precise ways in which Jesus Christ reconciles men to God or challenges men to undertake with him the ministry of reconciliation. I am quite certain that reconciliation...has more aspects to it than have been dreamed of in our theologies.”²¹⁰

²⁰⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 92-93. Cf. Irish, “The Social Self and Historical Relativism,” in *Philosophy of Religion and Theology: 1975*, compiled by James W. McClendon, Jr., American Academy of Religion Annual Meeting (Missoula, MT: 1975), 194 and Kliever, “Christology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 50-51.

²⁰⁹ Hans Frei, “The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr,” in *Faith and Ethics: The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, ed. Paul Ramsey (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), 96. Frei correctly observes that Niebuhr’s description of the atonement is vague, a vagueness that Frei attributes to Niebuhr’s avoidance of metaphysical speculation.

²¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 43-44.

Niebuhr himself uses many different terms to express how Christ redeems individuals. In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* Christ is the mediator of faith.²¹¹ In the *Responsible Self* Niebuhr states that redemption is “inaugurated,” “maintained,” and “empowered” by Jesus. In some way Jesus’ passion is “God’s way of making what is impossible for men possible.”²¹² In *Faith On Earth*, Niebuhr asserts that Jesus Christ is our “primary companion in all thinking and interpretation,” the “personal companion who by his loyalty to the self and by his trust in the Transcendent One *reconstructs* the broken interpersonal life of faith.”²¹³ In his essay, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” Niebuhr writes:

...the great work of Christ for moral beings is his work as the renewer and transformer of faith. He redeems us by reconciling us to God, by winning us out of our distrust and fear of the Holy One, by drawing us away from our despairing trust in idols and in self. Faith in God is the gift of God through Jesus Christ and with that faith all things are given, including the transformation of human conduct... .²¹⁴

Although Niebuhr expresses Christ’s redemption in many ways, they all tend to reduce redemption to Christ’s act of revelation through the cross and resurrection.

²¹¹ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 57-58, 124-25.

²¹² Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 177, 163.

²¹³ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 87 (emphasis is Niebuhr’s). Cf. *ibid.*, 83: Richard R. Niebuhr states that his father wrote the following alternatives to reconstruction at the top of his manuscript, all of which he crossed out in favor of the term reconstruction. The near synonyms are “rebirth,” “regeneration,” “revival,” “resurrection,” and “renovation.” Cf. *ibid.*, 99, where H. Richard Niebuhr writes: “In our relation to this betrayed, forsaken, destroyed and powerful Jesus Christ we are *enabled to qualify* our distrust of the Ground of Being so that we pray to the mystery out of which we come and to which we return, ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ Jesus Christ, we say, reveals God” (emphasis mine). Also see *ibid.*, 110: “What Jesus Christ does in the *restoration* of faith is not only to *reconcile* us to God so that we can trust in him, but to *challenge* by his fidelity to God and to God’s cause, the creation, the response of our loyalty” (emphasis mine).

²¹⁴ Niebuhr, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 223. Cf. *ibid.*, 225: “In the contemplation of Christ the mind moved by the spirit of repentance discovers at one and the same time how bound the moral self is to itself and how great was the freedom of Jesus Christ in this respect. Then, with the repentance and faith given through him, the divine possibility appears, that man can and will be free from self-concern as Christ was free.”

Niebuhr rarely describes redemption in terms that move beyond mere revelation. Once, as a young liberal, Niebuhr asserted that Jesus mediates faith to others by himself trusting God on their behalf. This intercessory faith restores people's relationship to God whether or not they trust him.²¹⁵ Later, at the conclusion of *The Responsible Self*, a more mature Niebuhr also remarks that Jesus must do more than merely supply a symbolic form that helps people to understand their world and trust God. In some imperceptible way Jesus also accomplishes this "strange miracle" of faith within them. Jesus somehow actualizes their faith, operating within their minds so that they will respond to his revelation. He "turns their reasoning around so that they do not begin with the premise of God's indifference but of his affirmation of the creature."²¹⁶ However, Niebuhr quickly acknowledges that "Christians cannot easily say" how this redemption occurs. He simply observes that it requires a lengthy and difficult "relearning" process by which Christians begin to reinterpret their world in the light of grace. It is an uphill struggle that Christians rarely get right. Most often they rely on their old premise of distrust and fear rather than the new insight of revelation.²¹⁷

Once again, a theology of the Holy Spirit would help Niebuhr here. Orthodoxy attributes the miracle of faith to the internal work of the Spirit. The Spirit's absence here prevents Niebuhr from stating exactly how redemption occurs. He merely notes that present theories of the atonement are unsatisfactory and then falls back on his preferred theory of redemption as revelation. He states that Christ redeems humanity by revealing to them by his crucifixion and resurrection that the universal power of the world is worthy of their trust and loyalty.²¹⁸

²¹⁵ Niebuhr, "Jesus Christ Intercessor," *International Journal of Religious Education* 3 (1927): 7.

²¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 175-76.

²¹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 176.

²¹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 176-77: "How Jesus Christ in history, and the symbolic Christ within, reconciles men to God, or God to men, or accomplishes the double reconciliation of each to each,

C. The Church Advances the Kingdom of God

While God primarily redeems the world through Jesus Christ, he also calls the followers of Christ, the church, to join his mission of reconciliation.²¹⁹ Niebuhr describes the church as “a revolutionary community in a pre-revolutionary society. Its main task always remains that of understanding, proclaiming and preparing for the divine revolution in human life.”²²⁰ Unfortunately, the church has not always succeeded in its task. Its frequent support of nationalism, capitalism, and imperialism has harmed the world rather than healed it.²²¹ In an important essay entitled “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” Niebuhr calls the church back to its divine mission. Specifically, he appeals to the church to serve as apostle, pastor, and social pioneer within its suffering world.

First, the church fulfills its apostolic function as it announces the gospel to all nations in order to make them disciples of Christ. The church must apply the gospel to

Christians cannot easily say. Few of them are satisfied with the theories of the atonement current in the churches, dependent as these are on questionable images of the ultimate rightness of God, or of the sources of human estrangement. To some of us it seems that in the cross of Jesus Christ, in the death of such a man who trusts God and is responsible to him as a son, we face the great negative instance or the negation of the promise that God is love, and that unless this great negative instance—summarizing and symbolizing all the negative instances—is faced, faith in the universal power of God must rest on quicksand; in facing it, however, we have the demonstration in this very instance of a life-power that is not conquered, not destroyed.”

Niebuhr’s theory of the atonement is similar to the view of Schleiermacher, who also restricted the atonement to Christ’s revelation. In Schleiermacher’s case, Christ reveals an “absolutely powerful God-consciousness.” Those believers who follow his example join “the power of his God-consciousness” and are redeemed. See Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 56-57, 100, 385-87 and *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958): 89, 164, 241-42, 246-48.

²¹⁹ Niebuhr, “The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age,” *Theology Today* 17 (1960): 309: the church “has been called to serve in the ministry of reconciliation to all the world.”

²²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 154, excerpts also published as “Toward the Emancipation of the Church,” 144-45.

²²¹ Niebuhr, *The Church Against the World*, 6-8. Cf. idem, “Reformation: Non-Lutheran,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 13:193 and “Protestantism,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, 12:571, where Niebuhr states that the Reformation both contributed to and is the product of nationalism, capitalism, and democracy (only the latter receives general approval from Niebuhr).

both individuals and their communities, informing them that “the center and heart of all things, the first and last Being, is utter goodness, complete love.”²²² The church must tell the world that God is the “Creator who is infinite love” and that he offers a “salvation from evil that is universal, eternal, and complete.”²²³ It must preach both the bad and good news of the gospel. It declares that God will judge the world for its transgressions, yet he will ultimately save those he destroys. For instance, the church proclaims that God will condemn the Germans for their activities in World War II and the Americans for their treatment of African-Americans, yet he will ultimately save both groups.²²⁴

Elsewhere, Niebuhr asserts that the church must speak directly to society. For too long it has attempted to indirectly influence society through political and economic avenues. These half measures are not sufficient to overturn the genuine problem in society, its deep seated idolatry. Only the direct preaching of the church can successfully challenge society’s “false faith.”²²⁵ The church must preach for “a new set of morals directly in the hearts of the people.” The church is responsible “to educate, to admonish, to preach with all the power at its disposal that those only shall find their life who shall lose it, that the higher righteousness has concrete applications to the problems of the day, that Christianity demands not less but more righteousness in every specific instance... .”²²⁶ Niebuhr admits that this preaching will not usually be well received by the culture. However, God providentially brings cultures into crisis, forcing them to realize that their finite gods are broken. Such moments are golden opportunities for the church to press its

²²² Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 126-27.

²²³ Niebuhr, “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” 109.

²²⁴ Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 128. Cf. *idem*, “Christianity and the Social Problem,” 284-85: a young Niebuhr also speaks to the church’s apostolic function to preach the gospel.

²²⁵ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 179-80.

²²⁶ Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Social Problem,” 284-85.

society into the kingdom of God. They are pivotal moments for the individuals within that society, for either they repent and receive divine salvation or they refuse God and experience his judgment.²²⁷

Second, the church serves as pastor to the world as it shepherds Christ's sheep, seeks the lost, and befriends sinners and the poor. Moving beyond its apostolic role, in which it proclaims Christ, the church as pastor attempts to be Christ, sacrificing its own interests on behalf of the whole.²²⁸ For instance, Niebuhr calls the church to directly contribute to relief for the poor rather than depend on the government to help. The church's concern for individuals should lead it to confront the evils in society at large, a lesson it has learned from the social gospel. So the church as pastor engages the major social issues of its day, weighing in on the side of the disenfranchised sufferers of the world.²²⁹

Third, the church functions as social pioneer as it leads the way for society in responding to God. Niebuhr contends that the church should be the most sensitive to God, leading the way in repentance for its share in the world's suffering and forgiveness for those who have wronged it. Just as Jesus was the representative human, the one who modelled how to respond to God, so now the church follows him by acting on behalf of society. Niebuhr explains: "...the Church is that part of human society, and that element in each particular society, which moves toward God, which as the priest acting for all men worships Him, which believes and trusts in Him on behalf of all, which is first to obey Him when it becomes aware of a new aspect of His will." Because the church here

²²⁷ Niebuhr, "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 90.

²²⁸ Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem," 291.

²²⁹ Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 129-30. Cf. idem, "Christianity and the Social Problem," 285: the church should aid "in the development of communities in which the higher righteousness shall come to group expression." It should accomplish this first within its own borders, and then also in the neighborhood in which it resides.

actually reduplicates the work of Christ, Niebuhr believes that this is its highest form of social responsibility.²³⁰

D. Other Religions May Advance the Kingdom of God

While Niebuhr the Christian emphasizes the church's role in advancing the kingdom of God, he also recognizes that other religions may also participate. He warns Christians against the danger of ecclesiasticism and its need to defend the church by denigrating other religions.²³¹ Niebuhr's communal nature of theology, similar to what George Lindbeck calls the cultural-linguistic view of religion, simultaneously allows him to value his own Christian tradition while acknowledging that other religions retain the right to value theirs.²³² He states that non-Christian religions have access to God and may even develop a non-Christian form of radical monotheism.

First, Niebuhr believes that other religions connect with the same God as Christianity. The only difference is that they use different mediators. For instance, he reassures his Jewish audience that Christians and Jews share the same "Thou," the same God who created them to be selves.²³³ Elsewhere he adds Islam as a viable means of knowing God. He writes: "I cannot presume to think as a Jew or a Mohammedan would

²³⁰ Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 130-32. Cf. idem, "Christianity and the Social Problem," 280: The church must "identify itself with the world of sin and help it to work out its redemption," just as Christ identified with sinners. It must abandon any attitude of self-righteousness and whole-heartedly recognize its share for sin in the world. Its share is present, even if only because the church has failed to act as the world's conscience. See also *ibid.*, 289-90, where Niebuhr argues that the church must lead the way in labor's dispute with management.

²³¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 150; *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 46; *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 11; *The Meaning of Revelation*, viii-ix, 89; *Moral Relativism and the Christian Ethic*, 6; "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 216-18; and "Address on Dr. Martin Buber's 80th Birthday," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 134.

²³² Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 32-41.

²³³ Niebuhr, "Address on Dr. Martin Buber's 80th Birthday," 137.

think about God, though I recognize that they are thinking about the same God about whom I think.”²³⁴

Second, Niebuhr not only believes that other religions connect with God, he also thinks that they may even attain radical monotheism within their perspectives. He is not as certain about this, but he concedes that it is possible. He knows that radical monotheism comes through Jesus Christ, for that is how it came to him. However, the communal nature of his theology prevents him from saying whether or not the same miracle of faith could be achieved through other means. He writes: “I do not have the evidence which allows me to say that the miracle of faith in God is worked only by Jesus Christ and that it is never given to men outside the sphere of his working, though I may say that where I note its presence I posit the presence also of something like Jesus Christ.”²³⁵ Indeed, beyond mere possibility, Niebuhr admits that radical monotheism may be “more adequately expressed in other apparently nonreligious or non-Christian movements” than in some henotheistic Christian forms.²³⁶ He elaborates:

And on the other hand we do not fail to note that among our companions who refuse to take the name of Christian responses to action are made that seem to be informed by the trust, the love of all being, the hope in the open future, that have become possible to us only in our life with Jesus Christ and in the presence of the One whom he encountered in all his encounters and to whom he gave fitting answer in all his answers to his companions. We believe that the reinterpretation

²³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 45. Niebuhr continues: “There is no such being, or source of being, surely, as a Christian God (though there may be Christian idols); but there is a Christian relation to God and I cannot abstract from that, as no Jew or Mohammedan can abstract from a Jewish or Muslim relation.” Cf. idem, “Life Is Worth Living,” 22; “Value Theory and Theology,” 104-5; and *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 20: “The Church is not the only human community directed toward the divine reality; its uniqueness lies in its particular relation to that reality, a relation inseparable from Jesus Christ.”

²³⁵ Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 249. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 124-25: “There may be other ways, but this is the usual way for us, that we confront in the event of Jesus Christ the presence of that last power which brings to apparent nothingness the life of the most loyal man.” See also idem, “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Interpretation of History,” 96: “God’s redemptive action in history is mediated by Jesus Christ, though perhaps not only by Jesus” and *The Responsible Self*, 177-78.

²³⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 60.

of existence has come into the world and that it is not confined to those who say, “Lord, Lord,” nor even necessarily best represented by them.²³⁷

Niebuhr refuses to judge other religions, even those that may fail to achieve radical monotheism. He states that different religions begin with different questions and problems, so that it should be expected that their final solutions will differ. For instance, while Judaeo-Christianity is fundamentally concerned with the question of radical monotheism, it may be that other religions, such as Islam and Buddhism, direct their energies toward other problems. Niebuhr asks:

Do they indeed represent alternative solutions to the same problem, or are they, in their historical beginnings at least, answers to different questions, cures for different evils? Is it perhaps true that the Judaeo-Christian movement is fundamentally directed toward the reconstruction of human faith as fidelity-trust in universal community, while Islam, though not irrelevant to the trust-fidelity--treason-distrust pattern of life, is directed primarily toward something else, and Buddhism to still another human dilemma.²³⁸

Consequently, Christians should not berate other religions for concluding their quest with non-Christian answers. No conflict need exist between religions, for they do not possess different solutions to the same question. Their differences lie in the questions themselves, the foundational problems that drive each religion. Niebuhr’s communal nature of theology does not permit him to evaluate between these fundamental questions. Instead, he asserts that each religion needs to hear from the perspectives of others, for the others’ unique questions enable them to possess portions of the truth inaccessible to those of a single religious tradition. He writes that “It is important, then, I think, first of all to recognize that each of us raises the question about God in a specific way, that it is necessary for us to phrase our question as sharply as we can, to seek an answer to that

²³⁷ *The Responsible Self*, 144.

²³⁸ Niebuhr, “On the Nature of Faith,” in *Religious Experience and Truth*, ed. Sidney Hook (New York: New York University Press, 1961), 102.

particular question and to avoid the defensiveness which makes us regard our question, just because it is ours, as more important than anyone else's."²³⁹

Niebuhr applies his inclusive gospel to the church by imploring it to openness rather than defensiveness. He believes that Christians should gladly cooperate with other religions that also seek to improve the world. Social activity is not a distinctively Christian task, and the church errs if it serves the world merely to demonstrate its own superiority. Instead, the church should be secure enough in its identity so that it does not feel the need to defend itself against other religions. Such a church is free to expend its energies and valuable resources to alleviate suffering in society, unconcerned whether it or another religion receives the credit.²⁴⁰

IV. Extent of Redemption

Niebuhr's relational ontology, which teaches that the entire world is interconnected and related to God, prompts him to argue for a cosmic, universal redemption. If the entire world is broken by sin, then it is the entire world that must be redeemed. As Niebuhr states, "By Jesus Christ men have been and are empowered to become sons of God--not as those who are saved out of a perishing world but as those who know that the world is being saved."²⁴¹ This section considers what Niebuhr means by the "world." Since the purpose of this dissertation is to evaluate Niebuhr's theology

²³⁹ Niebuhr, "The Gift of the Catholic Vision," 519; *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 114-15; and "The Nature and Existence of God," 13-14.

²⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "Utilitarian Christianity," 5: "In a world where the power struggle has taken precedence over every other concern, where every group is interested not only in doing good but in seeing to it that it gets credit for doing good and where good is being done for the sake of power, the church as church must surely feel called upon to go about its work with quietness and confidence, abjuring utilitarianism and the defensiveness that goes with it."

²⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 177. Cf. idem, "The Seminary in the Ecumenical Age," 307, 309: On the basis of this universal redemption the church "has been called to serve in the ministry of reconciliation to all the world."

from a Reformed perspective, we will compare and contrast his understanding of the extent of redemption with Neo-Calvinism.

First, Niebuhr agrees with Neo-Calvinists that in some sense redemption applies to all creation. He declares that all creation will join humanity's reconciliation with God so that salvation will indeed be universal.²⁴² Referring to Rom. 8:19-21, Niebuhr observes that Paul places redemption "in the context of confidence in the principle of being and of loyalty to all the realm of being."²⁴³ This realm of being includes human neighbors, both present and future, nearby and far away, but also angels, animals, and even inorganic beings. Because God cares enough to redeem the entire realm of being, his followers should also care for it. Anything that exists is subject to God's reconciliation and is thereby an appropriate target of human service.²⁴⁴

This belief in cosmic salvation rightly leads Niebuhr to resist any Gnostic dualism between material and immaterial spheres. He notes that to confine the gospel to only the spiritual sphere is tantamount to denying divine sovereignty, for the sovereign Lord is "the Lord of heaven and earth, creator of bodies no less than of spirits, author of

²⁴² Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 109: this union between creation with itself and with God is more than mere possibility, "rather it is the promise which rises into view with the restoration of trust in the Ground of all Being as faithful to all that proceeds from him." Cf. idem, "The Protestant Movement and Democracy in the United States," in *The Shaping of American Religion*, eds. James Ward Smith and A Leland Jamison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 34: the Reformers possessed "a wide sense of the meaningfulness of all life, of all creation, which--despite and through treason, agony, and death--was being, as it had been and would be, resurrected to glory."

²⁴³ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 55-56.

²⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 38: one's neighbor "is man and he is angel and he is animal and inorganic being, all that participates in being." Cf. idem, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 119: "All men and all societies, all the realms of being, belong to the neighborhood in which this community of Christians is required to perform its functions for the common welfare." See also *ibid.*, 116. Cf. idem, "Reflections on Faith, Hope and Love," 156: God's universal redemption also extends to abstract concepts. For instance, here Niebuhr declares that God redeems time as he restores and recreates the past. He writes: "It is the expectation that whatever there was of love of God and his cause, of faithfulness among men will be resurrected, while all hatred and betrayal and mistrust will be destroyed. It says, 'Behold all things will become new, including the past.'"

governments no less than of religions, judge of churches no less than of states.”²⁴⁵ In agreement with Abraham Kuyper, Niebuhr asserts that redemption will not be complete until “every part of human existence--from religion to eating and drinking--is brought into relation to him” (the sovereign Lord).²⁴⁶ So Niebuhr concludes that the church must seek to save every life, both “physically and spiritually.”²⁴⁷

Second, also in agreement with Neo-Calvinists, Niebuhr believes that a cosmic redemption must transcend barriers of race to include all peoples. He writes:

In that community of faith which we trust as loyal to God, loyal to men, loyal to us, there are no distinctions. There is here no Jew nor Greek. There are no B.C. and A.D. companies. The faith of Abraham is as great as the faith of Paul, the trust of the prophets is as great a gift, their loyalty as much to be relied upon as the faith of the apostles. It is a very catholic church, this community of faith to which we are related in memory and in personal trust.²⁴⁸

Although Niebuhr is using “neither Jew nor Greek” in diachronic rather than the synchronic fashion of Gal. 3:28, this statement still reflects his belief that the catholicity of the church extends to all peoples. This view comports well with Bavinck’s essay,

²⁴⁵ Niebuhr, “The Limitation of Power and Religious Liberty,” 4: Niebuhr concludes that the church must follow the example of its Old Testament prophets and take the gospel into politics, for the prophets indicate that God cares more about human political conduct than their religious practices.

²⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 61. Cf. idem, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 117: “when men know that they stand before an infinite judge and creator the content of their obligation becomes infinite; they are required to exercise moral freedom in all areas of existence; no part of conduct remains a matter of indifference or subject to pure necessity; nowhere can man act without the liberty and obligation of moral agency.” Cf. idem, *Faith On Earth*, 118: “But the reconstruction of faith is not something confined to the worship, the numinous feelings, the relations to the unseen world. It is something that extends into the whole of life. And so we see how the community of faith not only comes into appearance in our religious life, where it modifies, transforms, corrects our constant tendencies to fear, but in our domestic and our total cultural life.” For Kuyper’s famous quote, “...there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”, see Abraham Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty,” in *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader*, ed. James D. Bratt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 488.

²⁴⁷ Niebuhr, “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” 109. Cf. idem, “Greeks, Jews, and Americans in Christ,” *The Keryx* 23 (March 1932): 3-4. Niebuhr contrasts his preferred Jewish theology, which focuses on redeeming this physical world, and the more Platonic Greek theology, which cares only about one’s soul.

²⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 113-14.

“The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” in which he states that “Christianity is a world religion that should govern all people and sanctify all creatures irrespective of geography, nationality, place, and time.”²⁴⁹

Third, and here he parts company with Neo-Calvinists such as Kuyper and Bavinck, Niebuhr extends his belief in cosmic redemption to include the salvation of all individuals. His emphasis on the interconnectedness of society leads him to conclude that individuals are saved together, as one piece. Because individuals are interrelated with all others, the loss of any individual would constitute a loss for all others, so that no individual would attain full salvation. Thus, Niebuhr believes that all people will ultimately be saved. He explains that “...none of us liveth to himself and none dieth to himself, that members of the human family must by the law of life suffer, sin and be saved together, that we are members of one another and that just this relationship between men is the point where the saving work of Christ begins and ends.”²⁵⁰ Rather than divide people into the saved and unsaved, Niebuhr contends that the line between the church and the world runs through every soul. Each individual is ultimately the subject of God’s redemption, even while he participates in various henotheisms and polytheisms. Niebuhr elaborates:

Every person, so far as he is a self, participates in the life of faith and is a subject of redemption, thus belonging to the Catholic church more or less actively. Every person, so far as he participates in the anxiety, distrust and disloyalty of the world--that is to say every person--is outside the community of faith. The line between church and world runs through every soul, not between souls.²⁵¹

²⁴⁹ Herman Bavinck, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992): 221.

²⁵⁰ Niebuhr, “Christianity and the Social Problem,” 279. Cf. idem, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 61; *The Responsible Self*, 166; “The Gift of the Catholic Vision,” 519-20; “An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation,” 6; “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 86; and “Jesus Christ Intercessor,” 8.

²⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 116-17. This notion is also found in Niebuhr’s fourth Cole Lecture. See William Stacy Johnson, “Introduction,” *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, xxii.

A young Niebuhr, similar to Barth, stopped short of declaring with certainty that everyone will be saved. Conceding the freedom of divine sovereignty, he stated that one must leave humanity's fate "in the hands of God."²⁵² However, a more mature Niebuhr recognized that "the center and heart of all things, the first and last Being, is utter goodness, complete love." Although God's justice condemns sin and demands repentance, his sovereign goodness would ultimately save everyone.²⁵³ Here Niebuhr seems to go a bit further than Barth. He does not seem bothered by divine sovereignty to the same extent as Barth, whose awareness of divine freedom prevented him from conclusively holding a universalist position.

I have found only one text where a mature Niebuhr implies something less than soteriological universalism. In his lecture *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, Niebuhr encourages his listeners to follow Jesus' example in these perilous times. Just as Jesus conquered death through his steadfast trust in the Father, so we should refuse to live defensively, concerned to protect ourselves rather than sacrificially serving one another. If we do so we will receive eternal life, but "if we turn away from Jesus, we die forever."²⁵⁴ It is not clear whether Niebuhr thinks such apostasy is possible. The body of his work suggests not. Perhaps this is hyperbole, rhetorically powerful but not to be taken as a literal possibility.

The argument for universalism is strengthened when we consider Niebuhr's opposition to the idea of hell. Niebuhr states that belief in hell is detrimental because it

Niebuhr's statement that every person belongs to the Catholic Church is similar to Karl Rahner's notion of anonymous Christians (i.e., people who are not yet aware that they belong to the church). See Karl Rahner, *The Content of Faith*, ed. Karl Lehmann and Albert Raffelt (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 54-55.

²⁵² Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 277.

²⁵³ Niebuhr, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 127-28.

²⁵⁴ Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 21. For indications of Barth's position, see Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2, 186-87, 218-20, 417, 419, 477 and IV/3, 477; *Kirche Dogmatik* II/2, 205, 240-42, 462, 464, 529 and IV/3, 550.

reinforces the popular notion that some people are irredeemable.²⁵⁵ The notion of heaven and hell also detracts from the church's involvement in the world, for it replaces the Christian hope for a new heaven and earth with an eternal destination that is separate from this earth.²⁵⁶ Furthermore, Niebuhr suspects that heaven and hell were invented by a defensive church which sought to replace God and enforce its own will upon its members through offering the carrot of heaven and the punishment of hell. He writes that for "preachers of this defensive faith," "hell became a prison to which a divine judge committed the citizens who had failed to observe the laws, and heaven a reward for good deeds done."²⁵⁷ Consequently, Niebuhr favors demythologizing the traditional notion of hell. Rather than think of hell as a place of everlasting punishment, one might speak of a present social hell, a hellish existence marked by anarchy and destruction as various groups battle others who threaten their survival.²⁵⁸

To summarize: the very structure of Niebuhr's thought argues for universal redemption. His relational ontology implies that salvation is an all or nothing proposition. Because every being is defined by its relations with other beings, to lose any one being would be detrimental to the rest. Thus, the complete redemption of any one being demands that every other being must also be saved. And since Christ reveals that the universal power is sovereign and good, we may confidently expect that God will ultimately redeem each and every one of us.

Such assurance emboldened Niebuhr to proclaim a positive gospel of universal reconciliation and life amidst a twentieth century whose wars and holocausts pointed in

²⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 107.

²⁵⁶ Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Industrial Classes," 17.

²⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, 182.

²⁵⁸ Niebuhr, "The Anachronism of Jonathan Edwards," 130-31; *The Church Against the World*, 127; and Richard R. Niebuhr, foreword to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, x.

the opposite direction. Regardless how evil the culture might become, Niebuhr was confident that the power of God would transform it. To this topic we now turn.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHRIST THE TRANSFORMER OF CULTURE

Chapters 2 and 3 supplied Niebuhr's biblical-theological understanding of creation, fall, and redemption. To briefly summarize: Niebuhr believes that "whatever is, is good," for it comes from the hand of the benevolent, sovereign God. Creatures exist in triadic community with God and other creatures. Because all creatures are related to God, the source of all value, all creatures are valuable, and nearly equally so. Humanity distinguishes itself from the rest of creation through its ability to choose its response to God and the rest of creation. While other, non-rational creatures naturally comply with God's wishes, humans are free to trust and serve God or to disbelieve and disobey him.

Unfortunately, humanity consistently chooses the latter course, which is Niebuhr's understanding of the fall. Although he does not believe that a literal Adam plunged humanity into its sinful condition, he does think that Adam's story depicts humanity's universal distrust and disloyalty to God. People demonstrate their sin by replacing allegiance to God with various henotheisms and polytheisms and by substituting service to creation with abuse of the same. Such selfish rebellion fails to satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. Instead, it brings present despair and ultimate destruction to those who attempt to make their way without God.

Niebuhr applies the gospel to this fallen condition, asserting that God responds to the breach that humanity has created between itself, God, and other creatures by promising to reconcile the parties to one another. God has revealed the method of restoration through his Son, Jesus Christ, who modeled the complete allegiance required for reconciliation. This allegiance, or radical monotheism, occurs in two movements.

First, an individual forsakes all finite gods, including himself, and chooses to trust and serve God as his ultimate cause in life. Second, the individual then obeys God by making God's cause his own. Since God's heart lies with his creation, the individual who is committed to God will also devotedly serve other creatures. In this manner God works through individuals, in the church and probably even in other religions, to reconcile his creatures to himself and to each other. God will continue this redemptive activity until he has completely reconciled every last part of creation to himself.

This chapter builds upon this biblical-theological foundation, using its insights to interpret Niebuhr's important book, *Christ and Culture*, focusing on the phrase, "Christ the transformer of culture." The chapter first examines the theological source behind Niebuhr's Christ and culture problem. Next it explores Niebuhr's definition of "Christ" and his definition of "culture," briefly surveys the four positions in *Christ and Culture* which Niebuhr did not prefer, and finally probes his favored view: "Christ the transformer of culture." The chapter concludes by analyzing how Niebuhr applies his transforming culture model to war, a severe test case for his position.

I. Theological Foundation of the Christ and Culture Problem

The Christ and culture problem arises from the heart of Niebuhr's theology. His notion of radical monotheism teaches that true redemption involves individuals first relating appropriately to God and then following God's heart by serving him in the world.¹ But this double calling produces an inevitable tension for redeemed people. How can they respond appropriately to either God or the world without slighting the other?

¹Sedgwick, "Niebuhr's Ethic of Responsibility: A Unified Interpretation," 266, 283: Sedgwick identifies radical monotheism with Christ transforming culture, asserting that they are really the same thing. His point is that one's commitment to radical monotheism leads one to transform the culture, for every part of culture must submit to God. Ramsey, *Faith and Ethics*, 165, 169, makes a similar point.

Specifically, Niebuhr contends that churches that overemphasize God and slight the world become isolated while those that give too much deference to society become worldly.² The former often occurs when the church feels its “homelessness to a poignant degree.” Recognizing that it does not belong in the present secular age, it is tempted to flee the world and cease being salt and light.³ The latter occurs when the church supports utilitarian Christianity, using God to promote its culture’s interests. This worldly church errantly thinks that it is responsible *to society for God* rather than vice versa.⁴

Niebuhr believes that this tension between God and the world is inevitable. He claims that the church can only perform one movement at a time, either worshipping God or working in the world. Consequently, the church’s efforts will always be fragmentary.⁵ Niebuhr explains this tension in *Christ and Culture*, stating that Christians “are forever being challenged to abandon all things for the sake of God; and forever being sent back into the world to teach and practice all the things that have been commanded them.”⁶

²Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 120-24. Cf. idem, “The Disorder of Man in the Church of God,” 84.

³Niebuhr, “The Irreligion of Communist and Capitalist,” 1307: “Then also the great temptation of faith will return--the temptation to find a resting place for its homelessness in some heaven of anticipated attainment where it can ‘let the rest of the world go by!’”

⁴Niebuhr, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 120-23.

⁵Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xii-xiii: “This dialectic is expressed in worship and in work, in the direction toward God and the direction toward the world which is loved in God, in the pilgrimage toward the eternal kingdom and in the desire to make his will real on earth. It is impossible to express the Christianity of the redemption in terms of a one-way movement toward the infinite and eternal God who draws men to himself, for this God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son for the world’s salvation. It is equally impossible to express it in terms of love of the creature alone, for the meaning of the creature does not lie in itself but only in God.”

Niebuhr illustrates the difficulty of balancing both poles with American history. He claims that America’s early period focused on God and his sovereignty while the most recent period, marked as it was by the social gospel, focused on the world. Interestingly, America’s middle period was the time of awakening and revival, what Niebuhr calls the reign of Christ. Although Niebuhr does not make this connection, it is noteworthy that Christ is the middle period between the eras of God and the world. Perhaps his model inadvertently implies that Jesus Christ, because he is God and man, is alone able to join the opposite poles of God and world (see *ibid.*, x-xi).

⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 29.

Reflecting on his theological career, Niebuhr surmises that while others, including his brother, Reinhold, were especially suited to developing the pole of the world, his own calling was to work on the church's relation to God. This was especially necessary during the 1930s, for the church had become too worldly, as typified by German Christianity. So Niebuhr called the church to relinquish its various henotheisms and to return to the one true God, the ground of all being. Niebuhr adds that he never intended his effort in the direction of God to become an end in itself. Instead, he hoped that a reformed church would powerfully re-enter the world without being conformed by it. He thinks that now, in the 1960s, the church is finally able to accomplish its tasks in the world. He writes: "I believe our separation has gone far enough and that now we must find new ways of doing what we were created to do."⁷

Therefore, rather than accept either God or the world as a principled position, Niebuhr encourages the church to use each pole as a temporary strategy for its particular situation. Because a church can only pursue one of the poles at any given time, it must remember that its redemptive efforts will always be partial. But rather than succumb to an imbalanced position, the church should trust God to produce a synthesis, pulling movements toward either pole together into a coherent whole. So rather than attack others who are stressing the opposite pole of one's church, Niebuhr counsels believers to thank God for their balancing action and trust God to bring one's own efforts and theirs into synthesis.⁸

Niebuhr carries his dialectic between God and the world into the world itself. He contends that the world contains two poles, a valuable side that is related to God and a side that is unimportant because it is temporal. Inasmuch as the world comes from God, it is good and should be affirmed. However, inasmuch as the world is temporal,

⁷Niebuhr, "Reformation, Continuing Imperative," 249-50.

⁸Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, xiii.

ultimately to be destroyed by God in the eschaton, it should be denied.⁹ In a preview of the central problem in *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr suggests that Christians must attempt to balance this affirmation and denial of the world, a balance only possible by a fluid alternation between the two.¹⁰ He writes:

The Christian theory of history, moving between this denial and affirmation of the meaningfulness of human history, is in constant danger of developing into an other-worldliness in which the rejection of this world predominates over acceptance, or into a this-worldliness in which affirmation is unaccompanied by eschatological denial. A two-world theory also, in which dualism replaces the dialectic, is a perversion of the Christian view.¹¹

Those who take a principled stand for either this world or the next invariably produce a short-sighted theology. For instance, traditionalists who only care about the eternal fulfillment of the kingdom in the eschaton invariably “compromise with the world of sin, of relative satisfaction with the relative institutions of a sinful world.” With their eye on the sweet by and by, these Christians permit the present world to deteriorate. On the other side, millennialists who focus only on ushering the kingdom into this present world too easily “make this relative fulfillment the true goal,” forgetting that ultimate success will not come until God establishes his kingdom during the eschaton.¹²

⁹Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 87: “The acceptance of death as the end of humanity as well as of persons and cultures means that intrinsic value is denied to these events. No reason for living can be found within life itself.” While Niebuhr here describes the world’s problems as mere temporality, elsewhere he claims that the world, at least in terms of its human citizens, is also sinful. For instance, in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 26, Niebuhr explains that in contrast to the church, the world consists of unbelievers who distrust and are disloyal to God. He writes: “The world is the community of those before God who feel rejected by God and reject him; again it is the community of those who do not know God and seem not to be known by him; or, it is the community of those who knowing God do not worship him.”

¹⁰Cf. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 39-40.

¹¹Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 90.

¹²Niebuhr, “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 90. Cf. *idem*, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 26, where Niebuhr explains that the problem of how to balance this world and the next is peculiar to religious people. The issue does not arise for this-worldly people, for they do not believe that there is another world for which they need to prepare. They are free to preoccupy themselves with this life. Yet even there they have an important choice. When worldly people become consumed with temporal issues, they create idols and become enemies of the church. However, when they recognize that their

To summarize: Niebuhr's doctrine of radical monotheism raises the question concerning how the church should relate to both God and the world. Since radical monotheism is central to Niebuhr's theology, so must be the relation between God and world. This evokes a further question. If Niebuhr's central problem concerns God and the world, then why does he entitle his *magnum opus* in this area, *Christ and Culture*?¹³ Both terms, Christ and culture, appear to understate Niebuhr's true concern, God and the world. This is one of the questions which this chapter attempts to answer as it explores Niebuhr's notion of Christ and culture.

II. Niebuhr's Definition of Christ and Culture

A. Definition of Christ

Niebuhr selects the term "Christ" rather than "God" because he is writing for Christians. Since Christians find God's revelation specifically in Jesus Christ, Niebuhr uses the term "Christ" to stand in for God. To believe in Jesus Christ means to believe in God, for "To be related in devotion and obedience to Jesus Christ is to be related to the One to whom he undeviatingly points."¹⁴ Niebuhr concedes that other religions may view God through other perspectives. He is not speaking for them. He is writing as a Christian for the church, "that community of men for whom Jesus Christ--his life, words, deeds, and destiny--is of supreme importance as the key to the understanding of

temporal possessions are gifts from God, even though they may not be conscious of divine grace, they become partners with the church. They cultivate temporal matters for which the church and its eternal interests do not have time. In this manner the world may complement the church's eternal work with its own temporal perspective on God.

¹³ Cf. Frei, "The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr," 94. Frei states that Troeltsch found the hidden majesty of God in culture and Barth found it in Christ. Niebuhr learned from both of them, combining their perspectives into Christ and culture. While this is an interesting comparison, it does not seem directly relevant to Niebuhr's task. His use of Christ and culture arises from the application of his radical monotheism. He is primarily attempting to resolve how one's response to God impacts cultural duties, not worrying how to bring Barth and Troeltsch together.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27-28.

themselves and their world, the main source of the knowledge of God and man, good and evil, the constant companion of the conscience, and the expected deliverer from evil.”¹⁵

Just as God may be perceived through various perspectives, Christ, the Christian slant on God, also may be properly understood through different points of view. Niebuhr claims that all categories, whether moral, metaphysical, historical, or whatever, are important for completing the picture of Christ. No one perspective may claim to be the final answer. All are at best partial representations of the person of Christ, for there is a surd, something not understandable by human reason, in the statement that Jesus is the Son of God.¹⁶

Notwithstanding the inability of human categories to comprehend Christ, Niebuhr appears to favor the moral view. He claims that every possible perspective on Christ always leads to the same conclusion. This conclusion is Christ’s relation of sonship to the Father, a relation which Niebuhr ultimately defines in moral terms (i.e., the double movement of radical monotheism). He writes: “Other approaches besides the moral one must be taken if Jesus Christ is to be described adequately. Yet as the history of the church and its theologies indicate, each such approach tends toward the same issue.” What is this issue? It is that “belief in him and loyalty to his cause involves men in the double movement from world to God and from God to world.”¹⁷ By reducing all other perspectives to their contribution to radical monotheism, Niebuhr certainly favors the

¹⁵Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11.

¹⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 14, 111, 238: the personal nature of Christ and the finite, historical conditions of individual perspectives prevent any one view from adequately describing Christ’s essence. Nevertheless, while every human description falls short of Christ’s ultimate reality, yet they may, in an incomplete way, properly describe some aspect of him.

¹⁷Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 29. See also *ibid.*, 14. Perhaps it is Niebuhr’s bias as an ethicist that leads him to emphasize this moral component. He may well concede that another perspective, such as the metaphysical, may be equally justified in slanting everything toward the metaphysical side. Nevertheless, this will never do for Niebuhr, whose own historical situation demands that his ethical concerns dominate his discussion of theology.

moral component of Christ. Although he claims that other perspectives are needed, he not only slants his discussion of Christ in a moral direction but also implies that all other perspectives ultimately lead there.

So it is not surprising that Niebuhr declares that Jesus Christ is primarily a moral rather than metaphysical Son of God. For instance, he interprets John's belief that Jesus is the Son of God in moral terms. He writes that John's notion of sonship meant that Jesus is "inseparably united with the unseen Father in love and righteousness, in the power to achieve and the authority to command."¹⁸

Niebuhr states that Jesus earned the title of sonship through his "unique devotion to God and...single-hearted trust in Him... ." After recounting Jesus' virtues of love, hope, obedience, faith, and humility, Niebuhr asserts that what is unique about Jesus is how he possessed each one of these virtues in radical fashion, "only as a relation to God."¹⁹ Earlier, he explains that Jesus is extreme in the sense that he is devoted "to the one God, uncompromised by love of any other absolute god." He continues: "For Jesus there is no other finally love-worthy being, no other ultimate object of devotion, than God; He is the Father; there is none good save God; He alone is to be thanked; His kingdom alone is to be sought."²⁰ Jesus retained his loyalty to the Father even when his situation appeared hopeless and God seemed to be his enemy. God responded by resurrecting Jesus from the dead, thereby rewarding his faithfulness and demonstrating that the final power of the universe could be trusted.²¹

Jesus' ability to faithfully trust God enables him to accomplish the second component of radical monotheism, loving creation, specifically people, as only God

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 47.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 27.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 16.

²¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 17, 254.

could love them. So Jesus possesses “powerful pity for those who are foundering,” loving them with perfect agape love as he faithfully commands obedience to God, bestows divine gifts, and offers the promises of God to them.²² This ability to mediate God’s will to people is contingent upon Jesus’ human response to God. Only because the human Jesus fulfilled the first part of radical monotheistic faith, loyally trusting God, can he complete the second piece, representing God and his will to the people.²³ Thus, Niebuhr implies that Jesus is merely a human whose trust and loyalty to God earned him the title, Son of God.

Finally, I should address the relationship between Christ and the church in Niebuhr’s typology. Some scholars, such as Michael Pinner, suggest that Niebuhr uses “Christ” as a metaphor for the institutional church.²⁴ Correctly presuming that the church should follow Christ in his relation to culture, they then substitute the church for Christ in each of the types. Thus, churches which follow the “Christ against culture” mode are themselves antagonistic toward culture, churches which follow the “Christ of culture” mode are themselves comfortable in the world, and so on.

Despite the logic behind this reading of *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr himself would deny it. He does not identify the church with Christ, but clearly places it between Christ and culture. He writes in his preface that *Christ and Culture* addresses “the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis... .”²⁵ Again, he states that “Christianity, whether defined as church, creed, ethics, or movement of thought, itself moves between the poles of Christ and culture.”²⁶

²²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 19, 28.

²³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 28.

²⁴Michael R. Pinner, “The Responsible Community: Ecclesiology in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr and Dietrich Bonhoeffer” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 1990), 44.

²⁵Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xi.

²⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 11.

Thus, far from being identical with the church, Christ is its Lord, the One who places demands upon the church.²⁷

B. Definition of Culture

Like his definition of Christ, Niebuhr admits that his definition of culture is incomplete and tenuous. He attempts to create a definition that is neutral, free from theological bias regarding the ethical status of culture, general, unrestricted to any specific cultural form or society, and broad, inclusive of all human life.²⁸ His final product defines culture as “the ‘artificial, secondary environment’ which man superimposes on the natural. It comprises language, habits, ideas, beliefs, customs, social organization, inherited artifacts, technical processes, and values.”²⁹ It is noteworthy that Niebuhr uses the terms “artificial” and “superimposes” in his definition of culture, for the negative connotations of these terms seem ill fitted for the neutral definition he desires. More negative elements in his description of culture are discussed below.

Niebuhr unpacks this definition of culture by supplying its three main characteristics. First, culture is a social activity. Individuals and their idiosyncracies alone do not constitute culture. Culture occurs only when these individuals share their private modifications with others, thereby influencing others in their society. Second, culture is a human achievement, a quality that distinguishes it from creation. Creation supplies natural products, such as a river or raw quartz. Humans then act upon these natural substances to create culture, turning the river into a canal and the quartz into an arrowhead. Niebuhr summarizes: culture deals with “what man has purposefully

²⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 2: Niebuhr further distinguishes Christ from the church when he asserts that Christ rather than any particular church knows the correct strategy for the church’s involvement in the world. Niebuhr implies that Christ calls for different strategies at different times, so that no one ecclesiastical strategy can ever be the final solution.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 29-31.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32.

wrought and with what man can or ought to do. The world so far as it is man-made and man-intended is the world of culture.”³⁰ Unlike his definition above, this is a relatively neutral description of culture.

Third, culture deals with the world of values. Unlike nature, which just happens, people produce culture for some purpose, to achieve some good. Niebuhr obviously cares more about this aspect of culture than its social and human side, for he devotes five pages to this topic and only one page and a half to the other two combined. This is not surprising, given Niebuhr’s focus on the importance and religious nature of values found elsewhere in his corpus. Niebuhr makes three points concerning this world of values, all of which to some extent reflect negatively on culture. This is important to note, for earlier we noted that Niebuhr wishes to construct a neutral definition of culture that will not bias his subsequent discussion of Christ and culture. He appears to fail in this goal, for his negative description of culture’s values certainly prejudices him against views that assume a more positive stance on culture (e.g., the cultural and synthesist views).³¹

First, Niebuhr states that every culture is marked by anthropocentrism. He laments that the dominant value of any culture is the good of humanity. Rather than pursue radical monotheistic faith in God, people consider themselves to be the measure of all things and therefore strive only to serve their own good. Niebuhr observes:

In defining the ends that his activities are to realize in culture, man begins with himself as the chief value and the source of all other values. What is good is what is good for him. It seems self-evident in culture that animals are to be domesticated or annihilated so far as these measures serve man's good, that God or the gods are to be worshiped so far as this is necessary or desirable for the sake of maintaining and advancing human life, that ideas and ideals are to be served for the sake of human self-realization.³²

³⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 32-34.

³¹ Cf. Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 132.

³² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 35.

Niebuhr concedes that this cultural anthropocentrism need not be opposed to transcendent values. Numerous cultures aim at values higher than themselves, for people are incurably religious. They tend to “identify themselves with orders of being that include more than men,” such as life, rational beings, or the gods. Nevertheless, despite these good intentions, every culture fails to rise above its native anthropocentrism, for “the pragmatic tendency to do all these things for the sake of men seems unconquerable.” In each society there is a particular class which esteems itself as “the center and source of value” and therefore seeks only “to achieve what is good for it.”³³ Thus, every culture falls short of attaining its transcendent values. And since these values are a long way from radical monotheism, every culture fails to achieve radical monotheism as well. Although he does not explicitly say so here, since everything short of radical monotheism is rebellion against God, Niebuhr must regard such anthropocentric cultures to be sinful.

Second, Niebuhr observes that every culture is inherently temporal. Whereas anthropocentrism poses an ethical problem for culture, temporality represents an ontic limitation. Niebuhr explains that cultures are temporal because they manifest the “temporal and material realization of values.” He means that cultures must express their values, whatever they might be, in “concrete, tangible, visible, and audible forms.” Every culture that wishes to communicate its ideas must write them down, paint, or perform them in song.³⁴ Because cultures operate within a temporal medium, which by nature consists of “transient and perishing stuff,” they must expend much energy to preserve their gains and values. Physical structures, such as roads and bridges, and immaterial achievements, such as laws, customs, educational patterns, language, art, and religion, rapidly fall into disrepair unless they are constantly reinforced with each generation. Niebuhr comments: “Let education and training lapse for one generation,

³³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 35-36.

³⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 36.

and the whole grand structure of past achievements falls into ruin. Culture is social tradition which must be conserved by painful struggle... .”³⁵ This accurate description of culture’s temporal nature, while not nearly as negative as the preceding anthropocentrism, nevertheless reminds us of the inherent limitations of culture.

Third, Niebuhr contends that every culture is permeated with polytheism. He notes that cultures possess a plurality of values. Individuals have values that differ from other individuals, and groups have more values still, so that in any culture there are a myriad of competing values. Each culture attempts to hold these in some sort of tolerable balance, knowing that at any given moment it must select some values to actualize and leave the others largely unfulfilled. No culture can fulfill all of its possibilities. Niebuhr asserts that one of these possibilities is the kingdom of God. Unfortunately, the kingdom of God is just that, one of many possibilities, or competing values. Because it is not the dominant, supreme value, the kingdom of God here appears in neutered form. It scarcely resembles “the pearl of great price.”³⁶ Since no culture gives primacy to God’s kingdom, no culture achieves the ideal of radical monotheism. To the extent that it does not, each culture is sinful.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 37. Cf. idem, “Man’s Work and God’s,” in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 209. In this undated sermon on Psalm 90, Niebuhr comments on the transience of not only individual lives but also entire cultures and civilizations. He notes the rubble that archaeologists find--slabs of marble which used to belong to palaces, still containing the proud inscriptions of kings who thought their kingdoms would last indefinitely. But besides this lesson from history, Niebuhr remarks that our understanding of the transiency of culture “becomes more personal and more poignant as we repeat over and over again the same chores we did yesterday and which we know must be done again tomorrow. There is a great frustration in the work of the householder. There is no cleansing of linen or of dishes which must not be done over again tomorrow or within a few hours; no satisfaction of the human appetites which must not give way to hunger.” He continues: “The endless repetition of work which adds nothing permanent is the lot of teacher and doctor and statesman, of preacher and lawyer, of farmer and store-keeper, and banker.”

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 38-39. Niebuhr states on page 39: “Among the many values the kingdom of God may be included--though scarcely as the one pearl of great price. Jesus Christ and God the Father, the gospel, the church, and eternal life may find places in the cultural complex, but only as elements in the great pluralism.” Niebuhr adds that culture needs to follow the radical monotheism taught by Christ: “In his single-minded direction toward God, Christ leads men away from the temporality and pluralism of culture.”

To summarize: Niebuhr describes culture as anthropocentric, temporal, and polytheistic. The important point here does not concern the veracity of these claims but rather is that Niebuhr's description of culture is primarily negative. On one hand this is expected given Niebuhr's deep sense of the fall and the pervasiveness of sin. On the other hand it is surprising given his stated goal of achieving a neutral definition of culture that would not prejudice his evaluation of Christ and culture. Given the fact that Niebuhr views culture as a fallen entity, his discussion of Christ and culture tends to eliminate the cultural and synthesist positions from the outset.³⁷

Finally, just as this chapter earlier answered why Niebuhr uses the term "Christ" rather than "God," we must now ascertain why he substitutes "culture" for the more inclusive term "world," or "creation." While Niebuhr nowhere explains why he uses the term "culture" rather than "world," at least two arguments are possible for this move. First, like most other theologians, Niebuhr restricts the ethical fall to humanity. Creation's finitude and temporality may be negative, but humanity's distrust and disloyalty are far worse. Humanity's rebellion against God has twisted and marred both humanity itself and the work of its hands. Because these works are the stuff of culture, culture itself is adversely affected by human sin. Thus, it is culture rather than creation that has become evil. Since Niebuhr's theology focuses on God's redemption from evil, it is understandable why he discusses culture rather than creation.

Second, and perhaps a better argument, people are unable to contact creation in the raw. They inevitably bring their culture to their interactions with nature. The moment an individual touches creation he stamps his cultural imprint upon it. Thus, the

³⁷ Cf. Niebuhr, "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," 46: Niebuhr provocatively states that the good in culture depends upon a more foundational evil present there. Niebuhr apparently believes that Augustine's dictum that evil depends upon goodness for its existence does not apply to culture. Instead, Niebuhr assumes a severe view of culture, contending that even its good qualities have an evil base. He writes: evangelism attempts to persuade men not to trust their culture by "pointing out its finite and temporal character, the dependence of the good in it on the evil, its total and complete unfitness to be an object of devotion."

second movement of radical monotheism, the command to serve creation, is intrinsically a cultural command. People cannot serve creation without performing acts of culture. Because it is people who are doing the serving, culture is inevitable. For instance, a society may serve its natural environs by preventing a stream from overflowing its banks. Its solution is to divert part of the stream into a canal, which because it is dug by humans, immediately becomes an element of culture. Likewise, a society may serve its precious metals by cleansing them of any impurities. The resultant piece of pure gold is a work of human culture.

Here is the point: Niebuhr addresses the church's responsibility in its existence between God and the world. Because the church consists of people, its every deed in the world is an act of culture. Thus, culture is an appropriate term to describe one pole of the church's activity. Furthermore, Niebuhr's choice of the term "culture" does not exclude creation, for relating to creation is one aspect of human culture. Inasmuch as creation supplies the material substratum for cultural endeavor, all cultural activity implies effort within creation. Consequently, rather than limiting the scope of Niebuhr's discussion, using the term "culture" rather than "creation" merely emphasizes the human element in the church's interaction with God's world. Just as "Christ" is an appropriate Christian substitute for "God," so "culture" seems to represent a suitable human substitute for the world.

III. Niebuhr's Typology

This section supplies a concise overview of Niebuhr's general attitude toward the five Christian responses to culture and then briefly examines each of his four least favorite types. Because it is the focus of this dissertation, Niebuhr's preferred solution is reserved for its own subsequent section.

A. Introductory Issues

The strength of Niebuhr's book, *Christ and Culture*, undoubtedly lies in his ability to group various Christian responses to culture into five main categories. Conceding that no typology is perfect, he suggests that typical Christian attitudes to culture assume a radical, cultural, synthesist, dualist, or conversionist pattern.³⁸ Niebuhr claims that these categories arose as he read Troeltsch's *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*. He believes that he has supplemented and partially corrected Troeltsch's work, expanding Troeltsch's three types, church, sect, and mystical, into his own five.³⁹ Less reported than the influence of Troeltsch, Niebuhr elsewhere credits Etienne Gilson as a formative influence. In "Types of Christian Ethics," an unpublished essay written nine years before *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr states that he bases his typology on Gilson's *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages*. Just as Gilson cast medieval types according to the interchange between reason and revelation, so Niebuhr

³⁸ Cf. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 40 and Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 59, 174-77. These books are among some recent scholarship which has attacked Niebuhr's categories as outdated and no longer applicable to the church. However, the arguments used to support such a position are unconvincing. For instance, Clapp alleges that Niebuhr incorrectly regards culture as a monolithic block set over against the church rather than an inherent part of the church itself. This charge reflects a poor reading of Niebuhr, for he explicitly states against the radical position that no church can escape the culture which lies within (see Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 72).

Cf. Niebuhr, "Types of Christian Ethics," in *Authentic Transformation*, ed. Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager, and John Howard Yoder (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 16: Niebuhr warns against the tendency of types to overgeneralize. He admits that "a type is a mental construct to which no individual wholly conforms." Although types may help us to understand another individual, we should always give precedence to the individual who is empirically known rather than to our rational construct. Another limitation of types is that only one category at a time can be used. We must select either a religious, ethnic, economic, social, or similar category. We cannot mix and match categories in a single typology. A final weakness is the purely descriptive nature of types. While a good typology may help us to understand and appreciate other individuals, it does not enable us to evaluate them. Typologies can describe an individual but they cannot state whether he is good or bad.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, xii.

wished to do the same in the ethical realm, constructing church types according to their ethical responses to Christ and nature.⁴⁰

Niebuhr repeatedly states that *Christ and Culture* endeavors merely to describe rather than to resolve the church's relation to culture. He prefers to avoid the often bitter dispute between the views, opting instead to stake himself to the moral high ground of a neutral, non-committal position. He claims that the various positions are mere "phases" of the church's involvement in the world. None may claim to be the Christian answer, for the correct and final strategy for the church's action in the world lies with Christ rather than any one church.⁴¹ Anyone who pretends to possess the absolute Christian answer usurps the lordship of Christ, who alone knows the final solution, and infringes on the freedom of others, whose historical situations may call for a different answer than is appropriate for one's own circumstance.⁴² Thus, we should view each position as a mere strategy for a given situation, not as a principle to defend at all costs.

This ambivalence is reflected in Niebuhr's earlier writings. Already in 1935 Niebuhr was describing the cyclical pattern of the church's engagement with the world. First, the church withdraws from its corrupt culture. After it establishes a sense of security, the church begins to evangelize the culture. As the culture converts it begins to improve, leading the church to relax its earlier rigor and emphasis on withdrawal. Soon the church enters into a peaceful alliance with its now converted culture. However, over time the culture gradually turns lukewarm to the gospel, cooling the now enculturated church with it. Then the church realizes that a new withdrawal from culture is necessary, and the cycle begins again. Since the church's response to its culture depends upon its

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "Types of Christian Ethics," 19-20. Note that Niebuhr's five types are strikingly similar to his final categories in *Christ and Culture*. Niebuhr divides Christians into new law, natural law, synthetic or architectonic, dualistic or oscillatory, and conversionist types.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 2.

⁴² Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 232.

particular moment in the cycle, no one view may claim to be the Christian response. Each perspective is appropriate and necessary in its time.⁴³

Notwithstanding the relative, provisional nature of each type, Niebuhr contends that Christians must go ahead and choose a type for their specific moment in history. Borrowing from existentialist philosophy, he argues that choice is inevitable, for not to choose is itself a choice to avoid commitment. Borrowing from his theology of radical monotheism, Niebuhr states that it is more important how Christians choose, from a context of trust and loyalty, than what they choose.⁴⁴ So long as they confidently trust the absolute God to integrate their partial answers with other historical responses into a final solution, they may boldly align themselves with one of the types. They must remain properly humble in their selection, however, open to correction from God and permitting others with different historical situations to disagree.⁴⁵

Despite his ambivalence, various signs indicate that Niebuhr himself prefers the conversionist position. First, his order of presentation in *Christ and Culture* points to the conversionist type as the climax of the other positions. Niebuhr appears to have arranged the five types in order of preference, working from his least to most favorite views. He

⁴³ Niebuhr, "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," 133; *The Church Against the World*, 123: Niebuhr adds that the present need of the church is to withdraw from its corrupt culture which holds it captive. Cf. idem, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 16-17, where Niebuhr claims that various denominations arose from the church's interaction with culture. For instance, the disenfranchised often develop their own anti-cultural denominations, such as the Anabaptists, Quakers, and Methodists (28). Others, such as various Reformed groups, represent the middle class (80).

⁴⁴ Niebuhr's theological ethics emphasize one point: context. He argues that it does not matter so much what people do as how or why they do it. Every good response arises from people faithfully responding to God, the ultimate context. Every evil response occurs when people choose to respond to a limited, finite agent or context. See Niebuhr, *The Gospel for a Time of Fears*, 14 and "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 223. Cf. idem, "The Christian Church in the World's Crisis," 12-13, where he counsels Christians to stay with an action, following it out with other good actions. Even if one's action is bad, full of evil motives and hurtful to others, stay with it. Ask for forgiveness and trust God to bring good even out of evil. Conversely, Niebuhr warns Christians not to become complacent if their actions are largely good, for good actions may easily be followed by evil deeds.

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 238-39, 241-46, 251-53.

begins with the two extreme positions, radical and cultural, neither of which can be the best solution simply because they are extreme. Their exclusivity is unacceptable to the broad, inclusivist themes of Niebuhr's theology. Niebuhr next presents the centrist positions which attempt his preferred integrative approach. Of these, he begins with the synthesist view because this is the furthest from his position, tending as it does toward cultural Christianity and its detestable utilitarian Christianity. Niebuhr follows with the dualist position because he appreciates its emphasis on depravity and one's inevitable destruction at the hands of God. However, Niebuhr states that the dualist position errs in its belief that culture is *merely* temporal, transitory, and possibly even sinful. As such, dualists tend to denigrate culture. The conversionist view corrects this deficiency, making it the final and climactical type in the book.

Second, Niebuhr's absence of criticism also indicates that he prefers the conversionist type. While Niebuhr freely criticizes the other positions, he has nothing negative to say against conversionism. What problems he does find in those who have subscribed to this position he attributes to their individual inconsistencies rather than to conversionism itself. For instance, he argues that Augustine and Calvin's belief in limited salvation is inconsistent with the universalism of their professed conversionist position.⁴⁶

Third, Niebuhr's theology permeates the conversionist view. While other positions might possess a few points amenable to his theology, the conversionist type has his fingerprints all over it. Indeed, it appears that Niebuhr's own theology determines the content of the conversionist position. When Niebuhr finds other conversionists who disagree with his view, say on soteriological universalism, he suggests that it is they

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 208-9, 216-18.

rather than him who are inconsistent with the conversionist type. Thus, Niebuhr clearly believes that his theology supplies the foundation and criteria for conversionism.⁴⁷

Ironically, it is just Niebuhr's belief in the conversionist type which leaves him in his ambiguous, non-committal stance on the five views. Because Niebuhr's brand of conversionism believes in a universal salvation where God incorporates everyone and their various perspectives into an integrated community, he cannot state that his view alone is right. If he did, he would cast aspersions upon the other views, which would then prevent the whole from coming together in redemptive unity.⁴⁸ So it seems that Niebuhr's notion of conversionism is caught in a dilemma. His claim to the conversionist position implies that he believes that it is the best position. However, the moment he affirms the rightness of his position he denigrates the others, thereby preventing the ultimate redemption which his conversionism espouses. Niebuhr appears content to live with this insoluble problem, maintaining his conversionist position while affirming the viability and even necessity of competing views.

B. Radical Christianity: Christ Against Culture

This section now briefly examines each of Niebuhr's least favorite views, beginning with the radical, or "Christ Against Culture" type. Niebuhr states that he begins with this position because logically it seems to follow directly from the lordship of Jesus Christ and chronologically it was the dominant position of the early church.

This radical position claims that Christ is always opposed to culture, whatever its values. Christ presents his followers with a stark "either-or" choice. Either they will follow Christ's lead and reject culture (by attack or flight), or they will succumb to their culture's values and become worldly. Those committed to Christ submit to his lordship and reject all cultural forms merely because they belong to this transitory and often sinful

⁴⁷ See p. 220-27 of this dissertation.

⁴⁸ See p. 173-76 of this dissertation.

world.⁴⁹ Primary examples of this position are I John, Tertullian, and Tolstoy. Others include *The Didache*, *The Shepherd of Hermas*, *The Epistle of Barnabas*, *The First Epistle of Clement*, Kierkegaard, Wyclif, monks, and various sects, including Mennonites and to a lesser degree, the Society of Friends.⁵⁰

Niebuhr gives two reasons why this radical type is a necessary voice within Christendom. First, it maintains an important separation between Christ and the world. This separation is necessary for the other positions to hear, for every Christian at times must heed Christ's call to renounce culture, with its temporalism and pluralism, for the sake of the gospel. By reminding believers that Christ is Lord it prevents them from slipping into forms of utilitarian Christianity. Second, its rejection of society may inadvertently cause a society to reflect upon its sin and even reform itself. Thus, while transforming culture is never its intent, radical Christianity often contributes to this goal.⁵¹

Niebuhr demonstrates his appreciation for radical Christianity throughout his career. An early, 1925 essay carries the provocative title, "Back to Benedict?" Here Niebuhr observes that the social gospel has seemingly failed to usher in the kingdom. The world is not continually improving. Although it is not the final solution, Niebuhr suggests that perhaps monasticism, or separation from the evil world, is a necessary strategy right now. The soft and worldly church must withdraw in order to "recover its integrity" and cleanse itself. It must learn to value monasticism's simplicity to its own complexity, to replace its "luxurious and self-indulgent" and "materialistic" attitude with monasticism's "hardness and martyrdom" and "mysticism." Only a church so cleansed can reenter the world with any hope of changing it. Thus, far from being selfish or

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 40-41. Cf. idem, "Types of Christian Ethics," 20-21.

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 45-65. Cf. idem, "Types of Christian Ethics," 20: here Niebuhr adds Matthew's gospel as an example of the "new law" type because of its interest in the beatitudes as the new moral code for Christians.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 66-68.

unsocial, monasticism actually contributes to redeeming the world. Niebuhr comments: “It is not for love of self the monk retires from the world but for the love of his brethren who may be saved by no other means.”⁵²

The need for the church’s tactical withdrawal was still on Niebuhr’s mind in 1939. During this year he published a homily and an essay on the subject.⁵³ His homily, entitled “Preparation for Maladjustment,” asserts that Christ’s disciples will never be accepted by the world. They will always be rejected because the world is maladjusted, or living for false gods. If this is true, then the worst thing the church can do is to adjust itself to the world. Instead, it should be content to be maladjusted to the maladjusted

⁵² Niebuhr, “Back to Benedict?” *Christian Century* 42 (1925): 860-61. Cf. idem, “Sects,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, vol. 13, ed. Seligman, 630: the benefits of monasticism are also found in sects. Niebuhr writes: “They have called back the church from its accommodation to existing social customs and conditions and have been more important in the indirect influence which they have exercised in this way than in the effectiveness of their own organizations. They have provided, in the second place, for the rejection of religious sanctions of social customs which had become onerous and thus have helped to pave the way for radical reforms.”

⁵³ The presence of these two essays lead some scholars to believe that as late as possibly 1941 Niebuhr espoused the radical Christian position. See Ahlstrom, “H. Richard Niebuhr’s Place in American Thought,” 216. However, a careful reading of these essays indicates that Niebuhr only advocated a tactical withdrawal so that the church could reform itself before engaging culture. This is significantly different from the classic radical position.

John Yoder presents another interesting hypothesis. He asserts that as late as 1935 Niebuhr was endorsing the radical position in *The Church Against the World*. When Niebuhr later changed to the conversionist view, he wrote the pluralist typology in *Christ and Culture* to apologize for distancing himself from his previous hard line. See Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984): 89-90. Against Yoder, note that Niebuhr does strike conversionist themes in *The Church Against the World*. For instance, he confidently asserts that God’s power will transform the world (151-54, alternately, see “Toward the Emancipation of the Church,” 144-45). He also carefully distinguishes between culture, which is good in itself, and worldliness, which is the idolatrous misuse of culture (125, excised from “Toward the Emancipation of the Church”). Finally, he calls for only a tactical withdrawal so that the church may cleanse itself in order to readdress culture. Thus, he is not advocating radical Christianity here.

Grima, “Christ and Conversion: H. Richard Niebuhr’s Thought, 1933-37,” 2, is probably correct that Niebuhr began to think in conversionist categories sometime between 1933 and 1937. For support, see Niebuhr’s 1937 book, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. vii-ix, which describes Christianity’s ability to transform culture. This contradicts Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 42-43, who asserts that Niebuhr did not begin to use the term “transformation” until sometime after *The Kingdom of God in America*.

Despite their overstatements, Ahlstrom and Yoder uncover something that is true. They rightly note that Niebuhr was softer towards radical Christianity during the 1930s than he would later become in the 1940s. Cf. Niebuhr, “Towards a New Other-Worldliness,” 78 and “The Disorder of Man in the Church of God,” 86.

world, knowing that its true hope lies in the next world rather than this one. In this world the church consists of “pilgrims and strangers” who must “prepare themselves for hostility,” or “to be maladjusted” because they will never belong here.⁵⁴

Niebuhr’s essay, “The Christian Evangel and Social Culture,” discusses the relation between the gospel and culture. The essay acquires a decidedly radical bent because Niebuhr is attempting to overturn the popular support for cultural Christianity. He writes: “The danger seems to lie now in ‘Kultur-Protestantism,’ in the idolatry of culture, whether capitalistic, communistic, or nationalistic.”⁵⁵ Niebuhr begins this essay by explaining that both Jesus and Paul were indifferent to culture. They were much more interested in the inbreaking kingdom of God than preserving their present earthly culture. Niebuhr says that this indicates that the gospel addresses issues that transcend culture. It has bigger fish to fry than the redemption of culture.⁵⁶

Since the gospel transcends culture, Niebuhr suggests that perhaps Christians should move beyond indifference and actually become hostile to culture. While admitting that this “anticultural ascetism” is foreign to the gospel, Niebuhr argues that it would prevent the church from becoming worldly, which is far worse. A church that is not hostile to culture may become too comfortable in it and lose its focus on the kingdom of God. In this manner a good thing, such as culture, may become the enemy of the

⁵⁴ Niebuhr, “Preparation for Maladjustment,” *Yale Divinity News* (March 1939): 4. Niebuhr summarizes Jesus’ warning to his followers: “You will never be quite respectable intellectually; you will never be considered quite realistic or quite idealistic enough; you will never be thought worldly-wise enough; you will never fit in.”

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, “The Christian Evangel and Social Culture,” *Religion in Life* 8 (1939): 48. Cf. idem, “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 106, 110 and “The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology,” 12, where he cites contemporary failings of liberalism’s cultural Christianity. See idem, “Toward the Emancipation of the Church,” 133-37; *The Church Against the World*, 128-39, for the church’s captivity to capitalism and nationalism. Other warnings against worldliness occur in idem, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 3-5, 264-65 and *The Church Against the World*, 1-2.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, “The Christian Evangel and Social Culture,” 44-45. Cf. idem, “The Responsibility of the Church for Society,” 111-12.

best.⁵⁷ Niebuhr concludes that the best way to develop Christian culture is not to aim specifically for it, but to let it develop naturally as one aims for the higher values of the gospel. Christians who forsake their culture for Christ inadvertently sanctify it, while those who intentionally strive for Christian culture lose both it and their Christianity.⁵⁸

This survey of radical Christianity in Niebuhr demonstrates that though it is not his preferred position he yet possesses strong sympathy for it. He believes that its overemphasis is necessary to correct the dominant cultural Christianity of his day. Nevertheless, while he finds the radical type attractive and even necessary, Niebuhr believes that by itself it is inadequate.

Niebuhr states that radical Christianity is inadequate for two reasons. First, regarding their withdrawn Christian community, radical Christians find it impossible to consistently sustain their position. While they may separate themselves from a particular culture, they cannot rid themselves of culture altogether. Because people are inherently cultural beings, the withdrawn community must soon substitute its own culture for the one it discarded. For instance, it may reject the world's evil use of capitalism and nationalism but it cannot completely reject economics and government. The withdrawn community must possess its own "invention, human achievement, temporal realization of value, (and) organization of the common life." It cannot escape culture.⁵⁹

Second, regarding their withdrawn Christian community's conduct toward the outside world, radical Christians inevitably contribute to the transformation of the larger

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," 46. Regarding culture: "Because it is not evil in itself the gospel cannot be wholly hostile to it; anticultural asceticism is always somewhat foreign to the Christian faith but perhaps not quite so foreign as the worldliness which exalts culture."

⁵⁸ Niebuhr, "The Christian Evangel and Social Culture," 48: "The best way to conserve Christian culture is to forget about it and to let it be built from within in consequence of aspiration after a salvation that lies far beyond it." Cf. idem, "Toward the Emancipation of the Church," 136; *The Church Against the World*, 132: "The church has often behaved as though the saving of civilization and particularly of capitalist civilization were its mission."

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 69-73.

society. Because radical Christians cannot entirely leave their culture, they must conserve and convert parts of it. For instance, they retain the original language of their culture, though now they learn to sanctify their words so they are useful for Christ. They learn to communicate the truth of Christ in terms their original culture can understand. In so doing they are actually transforming rather than merely resisting culture.⁶⁰

Furthermore, radical Christians often attempt to improve their larger society. Although they believe that culture is evil, they think it is worthwhile to make it less so. For instance, their opposition to war leads them to work for the constriction of arms. But of course, such efforts involve them in culture.⁶¹

Niebuhr concludes this chapter by stating the fourfold criteria that he will use to compare the various positions: the relation between reason and revelation, between nature and sin, between law and grace, and between members of the Trinity. He then evaluates the radical position according to these criteria. First, he observes that radical Christians tend to denigrate reason and praise revelation. Second, they believe that sin resides in culture rather than individuals. This is why they claim that individuals may attain salvation by withdrawing from culture. Third, their concern for distinctive Christian conduct easily lapses into a preoccupation with rules that finally culminates in legalism. Fourth, and most pertinent to this dissertation, Niebuhr contends that the radicals so emphasize the Lordship of Christ that they tend to denigrate the God of nature. Their division between Christians and culture tends to produce an ontological dualism between Christ's spiritual realm and the physical, material realm of the Father. Niebuhr argues that they risk falling into Manicheism, for "their rejection of culture is easily combined with a suspicion of nature and nature's God."⁶²

⁶⁰Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 70.

⁶¹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 73-75.

⁶²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 76-82.

C. Cultural Christianity: Christ Of Culture

Niebuhr next turns to the antithesis of radical Christianity, which he calls the cultural or “Christ of culture” type. He states that this position blends Christ and culture. Cultural Christians tend to select as most important those parts of culture that most accord with Christ's person and work and to select from Christ's teaching those elements which most conform to their civilization. So they read their culture through Christ and Christ through their culture. They do not experience much dissonance between this present life and the eschaton, but consider Christ's return as merely an extension of this world. They esteem Jesus as “the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspirations, the perfecter of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit.” He is the “great educator,” the “great philosopher or reformer” who enables society to maximize its full potential.⁶³

Niebuhr states that this position has only recently become popular. Outside of Gnosticism during the early church period and Abelard during the Middle Ages, cultural Christianity did not blossom until the modern period produced what Niebuhr calls “Culture-Protestantism.” Examples of this latter movement include Locke, Leibnitz, Kant, Jefferson, Schleiermacher, Hegel, Emerson, Ritschl, Rauschenbusch, Harnack, Garvie, Ragaz, Shailer Matthews and D.C. Macintosh. Foremost of these is Ritschl, who fit Christ into his culture by reducing him to a moral example.⁶⁴

Niebuhr defends cultural Christianity with both a negative and positive argument. Negatively, he alleges that some of cultural Christianity's most severe critics actually share its perspective. For instance, the same Fundamentalists who attack liberals for their

⁶³ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 83-103. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 92: “Jesus Christ is the great enlightener, the great teacher, the one who directs all men in culture to the attainment of wisdom, moral perfection, and peace.” See also *ibid.*, 41 and *idem*, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 4.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 85-101. Cf. *ibid.*, 99: Niebuhr asserts that Ritschl also used Jesus to select the best parts of culture, as he opted for Kant's ethical idealism rather than other popular notions like capitalism and socialism. Cf. *idem*, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 23: here Niebuhr includes the book of James and Clement of Alexandria within cultural Christianity.

cultural Christianity also identify Christ with culture, albeit in Fundamentalist form. They are more concerned with preserving their traditional, conservative culture than with following the lordship of Christ. Positively, Niebuhr argues that the acculturation of Christ is an inevitable and significant part of extending his reign. Christians who attempt to make the gospel intelligible in a given society, to demonstrate that Christ agrees with the best ideas of that society, and to influence the highest sectors of society can not help but enculturate Christ into that society. Furthermore, just as radical Christians provide a healthy corrective to the over enculturation of Christ, so cultural Christians supply the same balance to the radical side. Cultural Christianity reminds believers that Jesus cares for this world and its culture. He is the Savior of the world, not merely a band of saints.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, Niebuhr observes that cultural Christianity often fails to satisfy both Christians and the unbelievers they are attempting to reach. From the Christian community's perspective, cultural Christianity often goes too far in accommodating Christ to the world. It selects one aspect of Christ that is amenable to its culture and then focuses on it. This produces a distorted, stilted, even idolatrous Christ. From the perspective of unbelievers, cultural Christianity often does not accommodate Christ far enough to win their acceptance. Unable to wholly avoid the offense of the cross, most unbelievers still reject it.⁶⁶

Niebuhr concludes by evaluating cultural Christianity according to his fourfold standard. First, cultural Christians counter the radicals by elevating reason over revelation. They believe that revelation is merely the truths of reason expressed in fables so the unintelligent can understand. Second, unlike the radicals, who propose that sin lies in culture, cultural Christians believe that humanity's main problem lies in nature. They

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 101-6.

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 108-110. Cf. idem, "Evangelical and Protestant Ethics," 213, for a different critique of cultural Christianity. Here Niebuhr accuses *Kultur-Protestantismus* of anthropocentrism. It is too defensive, more concerned to protect its own than to freely release itself in radical monotheism.

assert that nature consists of impersonal forces that threaten humanity's personhood. Salvation occurs when society uses the intellectual spirits of its individuals to overcome, organize, and control nature. In effect, culture becomes salvation from nature. Third, cultural Christians concur with radicals in their emphasis on law at the exclusion of grace. The Christian life means obeying the rational law, relying on oneself to do what he knows is right.⁶⁷

Fourth, like the radicals, cultural Christians struggle to understand the relationship between the Son and Father, albeit for a different reason. Identifying Jesus "with the immanent divine spirit that works in men," cultural Christians wonder how to relate this Jesus to the Father. Is the Jesus that is involved in culture related to the Creator and Sustainer of earth? This is important, for if the God of the earthquake and fire, the God who will destroy the earth, is not the same as or at least intimately connected with the Jesus who invigorates culture, then what hope do cultural Christians have that their work will survive? Moreover, some cultural Christians have been staggered by modernity's incipient naturalism. They wonder whether God even exists. Such doubt is debilitating for the conservation of culture, which makes it a severe problem for cultural Christianity.⁶⁸

D. Synthesist Christianity: Christ Above Culture

Having explained the benefits and dangers of both extreme positions, Niebuhr next turns his attention to more centrist views. He begins by evaluating these views according to his fourfold criteria, concluding that they are more theologically viable than the extreme types. First, the centrist positions inseparably unite Jesus Christ to the God who created nature. They recognize continuity between the Father, nature, culture, and Christ, so that none of these are opposed to any of the others. Second, they make room

⁶⁷Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 101, 110-13.

⁶⁸Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 114.

for both reason and revelation, asserting that obedience to God (revelation) involves one's cultural life (reason). Third, more than the radicals, who claim that their communities are free from sin, and the culturalists, who claim that their spirits are free from sin, the centrist positions acknowledge that depravity is pervasive in the world. Fourth, unlike the legalism found in radical and cultural Christianity, the centrists recognize the priority of divine grace. Only grace enables them to obey God.⁶⁹

Niebuhr calls the first of these centrist positions the synthesist, or "Christ above culture" type. This view attempts to take the best and discard the worst from each extreme position. It borrows its concern for culture from the cultural Christians and its higher concern for Christ from the radicals. As such, it may be described as a "both Christ and culture" view. The synthesist realizes that humans possess cultural responsibilities given to them by God the Creator and yet they possess supra cultural commands from Christ which point to their otherworldly existence. They cannot forsake either set of commands, as the radicals and culturalists do, but must submit to each as coming from the hand of God. While this position is similar to the other two centrist positions, the synthesist is unique in how he combines this dualism into one integrative structure. He states that while culture is able to make some strides by following the Christ it can reach, it will only be fully actualized if Christ graciously condescends to the human level with grace and a supernatural value center that culture could never achieve on its own.⁷⁰

⁶⁹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 117-19. Note that Niebuhr changes the order of presentation here, discussing the Trinitarian criteria first rather than last, as he did when evaluating the radical and cultural types. However, one should not read too much into this change, for it seems to arise from Niebuhr's easy transition from his discussion of the God-human relationship to the Trinity rather than from any obvious personal priority on this issue.

⁷⁰Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 42, 120-22. Cf. idem, "Types of Christian Ethics," 25-26: Niebuhr calls this the architectonic type because the two sets of commands and values do not lie on the same level. The gospel imperatives do not adequately supply directives for the cultural life and the imperatives of nature do not adequately guide people in their spiritual relations to God and others.

Synthesist examples include Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria. The greatest synthesist was Thomas Aquinas, who possessed both the necessary mind and cultural milieu to construct a feasible synthetic position. Niebuhr contends that notwithstanding the efforts of some, such as Pope Leo XIII, genuine synthesis is impossible today, for the modern church lacks the necessary robust faith and cultural impact of Aquinas' era. He mentions Joseph Butler and Roger Williams as a few weak examples.⁷¹

Niebuhr cites three strengths of the synthesist type. First, it rightly emphasizes the unity of the world, a unity that exists because God is one. Second, better than any other position, it teaches that creation is good. Because nature is God's world, it reveals God's will for cultural activities within that world. Christians may find the basis for acting in society within that society itself. More than the other positions, this view clearly states "the principle that the Creator and the Savior are one." Third, it balances its concern for culture with its priority on Christ and salvation that transcend culture. So while this view has contributed enormously to the world, it has always maintained a healthy perspective that remembers that this world is not most important.⁷²

Despite its strengths, Niebuhr finds four flaws in this position. First, it elevates what is finite into the infinite, producing a form of cultural Christianity. Because people are products of their particular cultures, all expressions of the transcendent natural law appear in cultural forms. These cultural forms are then identified with natural law, which thereby confuses a relative good with the absolute. So far as people are cultural beings, it seems almost inevitable that their expressions of the moral law will be influenced by their particular, relative, and cultural perspectives. Furthermore, because the cultural side is temporal, the synthesist must exert much energy to preserve his culture from its

⁷¹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 123-40.

⁷²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 141-44.

inevitable demise. However, his defense of culture brings him to the brink of cultural Christianity, so that he is sometimes indistinguishable from this position.⁷³

Second, synthesist Christianity brings the infinite down to the level of the finite, which also produces a form of cultural Christianity. Synthesists tend to institutionalize Christ into their culture, so that the law of Christ is identified with their particular church. This is necessary in order to prevent others from easily criticizing the culture and changing it. However, it comes at the expense of cultural Christianity, for now Christ is confined to one cultural expression. The recurring problem in these objections is the synthesists' temptation to play God, to explain in their own cultural expression how the synthesis between Christ and culture works. Instead, they should acknowledge that their attempt at synthesis is fallible and dependent upon God to correct and complete it. However, to admit this would be to fall short of true synthesis, for then they would concede that they do not know how their plans fit into the kingdom of God.⁷⁴

Third, synthesist Christianity is prone to a hierarchy that promotes grades of Christian perfection. Those who perform higher tasks are considered more perfect than those beneath them. For example, synthesists incorrectly assume that the contemplative life honors God better than other, active lifestyles. Fourth, its helpful attention to the goodness of creation prevents synthesist Christianity from adequately recognizing the "radical evil present in all human work." This objection is made most forcefully by the paradox view, to which we now turn.⁷⁵

⁷³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 145-46. Conversely, if the synthesist recognizes the inherent problems within the relativity of culture, he in effect concedes that all culture requires continual transformation in order to increasingly conform to the truth. But then he is on his way to holding a conversionist rather than a synthesist view.

⁷⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 146-47.

⁷⁵Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 147-48.

E. Dualist Christianity: Christ and Culture in Paradox

Like the synthesists, dualists believe in the value of both Christ and culture. However, rather than see Christ as continuous yet higher than culture, dualists posit a chasm between them. Culture is discontinuous with Christ because it is corrupted by depravity, a depravity so pervasive that even its religious activities are sinful. Nevertheless, dualists do not follow the radicals in their rejection of culture. Instead, they recognize that God demands obedience in the secular realm, so that people should not leave or disdain their culture. Dualists suggest that people live in tension, stuck between obeying the often conflicting laws of Christ and culture. Because it is impossible to obey both consistently, people must recognize their inevitable sinfulness and trust God for an ultimate “transhistorical salvation.”⁷⁶

Dualist examples include Paul and Marcion in the early church and Kierkegaard, Troeltsch, Roger Williams, and Nikolai Hartmann in the modern period. The foremost dualist is Luther, whose two kingdom paradigm divided life into the distinct realms of kingdom of God and the world. Luther said that while Christ bestows the proper motivation for one’s cultural life, the specific conduct required must be learned from the culture itself. Since often one’s cultural duties conflict with the law of Christ, the individual must confess his sinfulness and hope in the justification of Christ.⁷⁷

Niebuhr states that the strengths of the dualist position lie in its ability to correspond with experience and account for the dynamic character of life. Regarding the former, dualism satisfactorily describes the Christian’s struggle with sin as he lives between the times. It is not so idealistic as the radical or cultural positions. Regarding

⁷⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 44-45, 149-56. Cf. idem, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 26-27: Niebuhr calls this the oscillatory type, for the dualist swings like a pendulum between the demands of Christ and culture.

⁷⁷Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 159-84. Dualist strains are also visible in Augustine, Scotus, Ockham, and Wyclif. Cf. idem, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 27: other contemporary examples include Nikolai Berdyaev, Reinhold Niebuhr, the earlier Gogarten, Brunner, and perhaps Barth.

the latter, it leaves room for dynamic interaction between God and man, sin and grace. Avoiding the static legalism of the radical position, it frees people to creatively respond to God's actions upon them.⁷⁸

Niebuhr undoubtedly appreciates the dualist perspective, for much of its content concurs with his theology. First, dualists share Niebuhr's "religious sense of sin." They understand the pervasiveness of human depravity and their inevitable destruction before God, which is similar to Niebuhr's notion of God the destroyer. Niebuhr waxes eloquently on dualism's awareness of sin, sounding the same chords struck elsewhere when he spoke against henotheism, polytheism, and anthropocentrism.⁷⁹ Second, dualists share Niebuhr's strong sense of divine sovereignty. They assert that human evil, such as wars, come from the hand of God.⁸⁰ Third, dualists such as Luther explain that a person must find his security in God before he can faithfully serve his neighbor. This is similar to Niebuhr's notion that dependence and loyalty to God comprise the first element of radical monotheism. One must trust God before he can serve him.⁸¹ Fourth, dualism replaces the static quality of the other positions with a dynamic relation with God. It teaches that individuals are free to creatively respond to God's actions upon them. This is similar to Niebuhr's notion of responsibility theory. Finally, Niebuhr comments that the dualist is identical to the conversionist, Niebuhr's preferred position, except that it incorrectly believes that culture is merely transitory. Thus, only one point, albeit an

⁷⁸Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 185-86.

⁷⁹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 152-54.

⁸⁰Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 159.

⁸¹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 173-74.

important element, prevents Niebuhr from moving beyond appreciating dualism to approving it.⁸²

Despite his obvious appreciation for dualism, Niebuhr notes its weaknesses. First, dualism tends toward antinomianism. Because dualism recognizes that all human laws are necessarily sinful, falling short of God's holiness, it tempts people to disregard the law altogether. If whatever they do is wrong, they may conclude that it does not matter what they do. Second, dualism tends toward cultural conservatism. Because dualists esteem social structures to be wholly negative, restraining forces against sin rather than positive forces for change, they are not concerned to change society. For instance, both Paul and Luther concentrated only on reforming religion, permitting the rest of society and culture to continue as it would.⁸³

Third, and most important, Niebuhr alleges that dualists confuse creation and the fall. They imply that it is sinful to be temporal and finite. Since this describes all of creation, then all of creation is necessarily evil. Niebuhr explains that dualists have related "temporality or finiteness to sin in such a degree as to move creation and fall into very close proximity, and in that connection to do less than justice to the creative work of God." For example, Paul uses creation to underscore the condemnation of all men and flesh to imply that the human body is not necessarily good. Luther states that God's wrath is against the entire temporal world, not just sin. Both tend to think that new life in Christ requires more than the elimination of sin. The entire temporal order must go.⁸⁴

Niebuhr states that this is where he parts company with the dualists. He would accept their position if they better understood the goodness of creation and the value of

⁸²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 189. Other signs that Niebuhr appreciates the dualist perspective: he states that more than the previous three views, dualism has been followed by spiritual men of integrity (185); Troeltsch, who profoundly influenced Niebuhr, is placed in the dualist camp.

⁸³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 187-88.

⁸⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 188-89.

culture. Because the conversionists do, this is Niebuhr's preferred type. To this final position we now turn.

F. Conversionist Christianity: Christ the Transformer of Culture

This section examines Niebuhr's appreciative understanding of the conversionist position by studying what he considers to be its biblical-theological advantages, his critical interaction with other representatives of the position, and his meaning and application of "Christ the transformer of culture."

1. Its Biblical-Theological Advantages

Although Niebuhr values the other types, especially the radical, which he periodically defends, and the dualist, which conforms closely to his own theological bent, he most prefers what he calls the conversionist view, or "Christ the transformer of culture." He defines the conversionist type as basically dualism combined with a "more positive and hopeful attitude toward culture." Conversionist Christianity's improved perspective on culture arises from its superior understanding of the biblical theology of creation, fall, and redemption.⁸⁵

First, Niebuhr contends that whereas dualism's emphasis on redemption threatens to overpower creation, conversionists believe that God's creative activity is important in its own right. They ground this value of creation in the person of Christ, who not only redeems the world but creates it as well. Niebuhr states that grounding creation in the redeemer is the strongest possible way to say that "whatever is is good."⁸⁶ Furthermore, because the same Christ is both Creator and Redeemer, there is an inextricable unity between creation and redemption. Niebuhr explains: "The Word that became flesh and

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 191. Note that this is a powerful argument for the relevance of this dissertation. Niebuhr's proposal that his preferred type is superior because it best understands the biblical theology of creation, fall, and redemption nearly demands that one understand Niebuhr's own biblical theology. Only when one comprehends Niebuhr's perspective on creation, fall, and redemption can one understand the criteria by which he is evaluating the various types and opting for the conversionist position.

⁸⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 197.

dwelt among us, the Son who does the work of the Father in the world of creation, has entered into a human culture that has never been without his ordering action.”⁸⁷

Second, conversionists carefully distinguish between God’s good creation and the fall. Unlike dualism, which joins the fall to creation, implying that the physical world is bad, conversionists clearly separate the two events, asserting that the fall is the great reversal of creation. Conversionists believe concerning the fall that “It is entirely the action of man, and in no way an action of God’s. It is moral and personal, not physical and metaphysical, though it does have physical consequences.” The fall so corrupts God’s created world that it now is “warped, twisted, misdirected.” Sin’s corrupting influence on creation extends to culture. Like creation, culture is now a “perverted good,” though it is not entirely evil. This fallen culture needs conversion, not rebirth, yet its conversion must be so radical that it may seem like new birth.⁸⁸

Third, while every Christian subscribes to some notion of redemption, Niebuhr states that the conversionists’ distinct twist is that redemption is a present possibility.⁸⁹ Unlike dualism, which awaits a future redemption, conversionists believe that redemption occurs now. Believers need not wait for the eschatological kingdom, but may respond to the present inbreaking of the kingdom which God’s sovereign presence is accomplishing in their midst. God is currently transforming the world. The redemption of culture is possible now. Niebuhr writes: “The conversionist, with his view of history as the present encounter with God in Christ, does not live so much in expectation of a final

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 191-93. Cf. *ibid.*, 221, where Niebuhr approvingly cites F. D. Maurice’s understanding of Christ as Creator and Redeemer: “In him all things were created to live in union with God and each other; he reveals the true nature of life and the law of the created society as well as the sin and rebellion of its members; he redeems men in and for community with one another in God.”

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 194.

⁸⁹ Note that the present potency of redemption is not unique to conversionism. Cultural Christians also believes that redemption occurs now, though they mean something different by it.

ending of the world of creation and culture as in awareness of the power of the Lord to transform all things by lifting them up to himself.”⁹⁰

Although Niebuhr approves of these three insights, only the third seems to have been consistently developed in his corpus. Regarding creation, outside of these few pages Niebuhr does not explore a powerful cosmic Christology that would unite creation and redemption. He is content to describe Christ as merely the mediating symbol of God.⁹¹ While Christ as mediating symbol contains the notion of his creation and redemption, for Christ as the Word creates, orders, and rescues creation, Niebuhr does not investigate this further. This lacuna is especially surprising given Niebuhr’s statement that grounding creation in Christ is the best way to express its goodness. Since Niebuhr professed the goodness of creation, one might expect him to further develop his Christology in this direction.

Regarding the fall, it is unclear whether Niebuhr himself successfully avoids the dualist confusion between creation and fall. He frequently states that the fall is not some unique, cataclysmic event. Instead, the fall occurs repeatedly whenever people choose disloyalty and distrust of God. For instance, Niebuhr states that the fall “is a present falling away from the Word” rather than an event that happened in the life of a first man.⁹² Again, he writes concerning the fall: “This primal sin, which is more

⁹⁰Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 195. Cf. idem, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 28-29: here Niebuhr gives a different albeit compatible slant on creation, fall, and redemption, interpreting them through the lens of the law. Regarding creation, Niebuhr notes that natural law reflects God’s values. However, fallen reason distorts these values into items “detached from God and attached to the self or to some temporal final end.” Redemption occurs as Christ reveals final values and imperatives that transcend culture. These ultimate values restore the corrupted nature-culture and reinterpret the natural imperatives. Just as revelation restores rather than replaces reason in respect to knowledge, “so in the moral life the vision of eternal good in the gospel does not take the place of temporal good but puts this in its proper place and leads to restoration of the true order of values in the world--though the power of sin is so great and the corruption of the moral as of the rational life so deep-seated that no easy transvaluation is possible.”

⁹¹See p. 158-69 of this dissertation.

⁹²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 200.

significantly named the first sin of man than the sin of the first man... .”⁹³ Niebuhr’s dismissal of the fall as one-time, watershed event implies that the creation has always been corrupted. He may attempt to logically distinguish the fall from creation, but their temporal simultaneity betrays his effort.⁹⁴

Unlike Niebuhr’s less successful efforts with creation and fall, his portrayal of the conversionist notion of redemption’s present potency fits snugly into the body of his theological work.⁹⁵ Throughout his corpus Niebuhr emphasizes a divine sovereignty that accomplishes its redemptive will through every event, even war. Christians must seek to understand what God is doing in this redemptive moment and then respond accordingly. Niebuhr criticizes those who, like his brother, Reinhold, hold a pessimistic view of history. Such dualists are content to wait out these evil times until Christ’s return. Instead, Niebuhr counsels them to optimistically respond to God’s sovereign actions, confident that he will use their efforts to accomplish the present inbreaking of his kingdom.

2. *Its Representatives*

Niebuhr lists several examples of the conversionist type, most notably the Gospel of John, Augustine, Calvin, and F. D. Maurice. He also briefly mentions Wesley and Edwards.⁹⁶ The scant attention given to Edwards is surprising until one understands what

⁹³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 211.

⁹⁴It is interesting that Niebuhr declares the distinction between creation and fall to be an important element of the conversionist position, for neither he nor his favorite conversionist, F. D. Maurice, succeed in this area. Furthermore, including the distinction within the conversionist position does not seem to be logically necessary. Perhaps Niebuhr emphasizes the distinction for historical reasons: most conversionists, such as Augustine, Calvin, and Edwards, have taught a distinction between creation and fall.

⁹⁵Cf. Niebuhr, “Greeks, Jews, and Americans in Christ,” 4: The present potency of redemption is an important reason why Niebuhr prefers Jewish to Greek theology. He writes that the former teaches that “the present is important because the kingdom of God is potential in it and because that potentiality may at any moment become actuality, not by evolution but by revolution.” Again, the Hebrew model “represents that fundamental and real insight into *the reality of God in time and of the actuality of redemption in time...*” (emphasis is Niebuhr’s).

⁹⁶Cf. Niebuhr, “Types of Christian Ethics,” 29: other examples include Samuel Hopkins and Karl Barth.

Niebuhr is doing in this chapter. Since Edwards is one of Niebuhr's heroes and formative influences, we might expect him to devote more than one small paragraph to Edwards' thought. However, Niebuhr's chapter on conversionism does not merely celebrate its supporters, it also critiques them when they fall short of what he considers to be genuine conversionism. Niebuhr has just finished castigating Calvin for a few unforgiveable inconsistencies, most of which would also apply to Edwards' Reformed theology. Thus, it may be that rather than punish his hero, Niebuhr merely states a couple good things about Edwards, blames his descendents for any errors, and then moves on to the next representative.⁹⁷

As often happens with knowledgeable and passionate writers, an author's descriptions of other people often reveals more about himself than the people he is describing. This is certainly the case here. Based on his understanding of creation, fall, and redemption, Niebuhr's theology informs his criteria concerning what it means to be a conversionist. Niebuhr then applies this criteria to those who he believes best exemplify this position. This produces a fairly subjective exercise, where each representative is more or less a conversionist depending on how he measures up to Niebuhr's own theology.

For instance, Niebuhr's description of conversionism in the Gospel of John reads like a digest of Niebuhr's own theology. Here God is known as "the One." The Gospel of John understands creation and redemption to mean the same thing, which is that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Creation itself is good, for the Apostle John said in the strongest terms possible that "whatever is is good." John also has a firm grasp of

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 219-20: Niebuhr asserts that Edwards had a great idea (Christ as regenerator of humanity and culture) but that later American revivalists and the social gospel perverted his insights.

Niebuhr's responsibility theory, for he depicts the community that exists between God and the world and the need for people to respond appropriately. Niebuhr notes that in John's Gospel "the nature of the world's perversion is indicated by the constant comparison of the response of Jesus Christ to the Father with that of the world of men to its Creator."⁹⁸

Like Niebuhr, John does not believe that the world's perversion is a consequence of a historical fall. He writes that "the fall is not an event connected with the life of a first man in the sequence of historical generation; it is a present falling away from the Word." Also similar to Niebuhr, John defines sin as anthropocentrism. He notes that the world seeks only to do its own will, is intent on "glorifying itself," is full of "self-love," "calls attention to itself," and "loves its life in itself." John finds an example of anthropocentrism in ecclesiasticism, and warns his readers that Christ, "not the Christian church as a cultural institution," is the hope and true meaning of the world. People alone are responsible for their anthropocentrism, for there are no supernatural agents to tempt them into sin. Niebuhr is eager to demythologize John's notion of a devil, asserting that John did not mean that the devil is a real person but rather that the world follows a metaphorical devil when it pursues its own will rather than God's.⁹⁹

John's description of salvation also sounds remarkably Niebuhrian. For example, John possesses a holistic view of redemption, using the term "world" to refer to "the totality of creation and especially of humanity as the object of God's love." Moreover, John defines redemption as radical monotheism, the goal of which is "nondefensive worship of the Father." John's message is that Judaism must relinquish its desire and need to protect itself. Also similar to Niebuhr, John expresses his radical monotheism in two steps, asserting that people should not merely reciprocate love to God, but rather

⁹⁸Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 197-98.

⁹⁹Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 198-202.

should also love creation, or all that is loved by God. Finally, this act of love emphasizes the individual's motives more than his external actions. God seeks to transform the spirit of the person so that each action, including religious deeds, spring from a genuine trust and loyalty to him.¹⁰⁰

Besides the Apostle John, Niebuhr finds echoes of his theology in Augustine. For instance, Augustine recognizes that God is the "source of all being and value," so that creatures are primarily good for God and secondarily good for each other. Like Niebuhr, Augustine holds that whatever is is good. He also realizes that sin is basically anthropocentrism, or refusing to depend on God and choosing instead to live for oneself as the ultimate value. Augustine understands the inherent weakness of anthropocentrism to achieve an infinite value source, and he notes that it is this internal self-contradiction rather than some outside force that has bound humanity to transitoriness and death. He observes with Niebuhr that sin is primarily social, destroying relations between individuals and groups as each pursues its own selfish goals. Sin originates with people. Their depravity then corrupts their culture, which in turn reflexes back to corrupt them even more. Nevertheless, God sovereignly governs these sinful choices, using even evil wills for his good purposes.¹⁰¹

Moreover, Niebuhr surprisingly proposes that Augustine also shares his theory of the atonement. Instead of a substitutionary atonement, Christ reconciles people to God through "revelation and instruction" concerning God's love. This comports with Niebuhr's view of Christ as mediatory symbol. Christ's mediation is accomplished through his work as symbol, which is entirely an epistemic category. Niebuhr writes approvingly of Augustine's conception of Jesus' atonement:

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 198-203.

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 209-13.

By his life and his death he makes plain to man the greatness of God's love and the depth of human sin; by revelation and instruction he reattaches the soul to God, the source of its being and goodness, and restores to it the right order of love, causing it to love whatever it loves in God and not in the context of selfishness or of idolatrous devotion to the creature.¹⁰²

Not surprisingly, this quotation also illustrates that Augustine expressed redemption in terms of radical monotheism, or loving God first and everything else in him.¹⁰³

Nevertheless, for all the elements of his conversionist theology that he finds in the Apostle John and Augustine, Niebuhr alleges that they are inconsistent conversionists for their mistake on a most crucial point. Unlike Niebuhr, who believes that consistent conversionism compels belief in universalism, these erstwhile conversionists suffer from a "particularist tendency." Rather than "hope for the conversion of the whole of humanity in all its cultural life," they restrict the gospel to a chosen few. Niebuhr thinks that such exclusion is closer to radical Christianity than the conversionist position.¹⁰⁴

Niebuhr does not believe that exclusivist Christianity is an innocent mistake. For instance, he alleges that Augustine came to this position because of his need to justify himself and his church. He was too defensive, always seeking to protect his church and Christian culture from the attacks of those who could not accept the church's electing and damning God. So Augustine replaced the primacy of Christ with allegiance to the church. Because such ecclesiasticism is a symptom of the foundational sin, anthropocentrism, Augustine misses the conversionist theme in a significant way.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 213.

¹⁰³For commentary on Augustine's view of this double love method of redemption, see Albert C. Outler, "The Person and Work of Christ," in *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine*, ed. Roy W. Battenhouse (Oxford University Press, 1955; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 356; Raymond Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbour in St. Augustine* (Heverlee-Leuven, Brussels: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1993); and Tarsicius J. van Bavel, "Love," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 509-16.

¹⁰⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 204-8.

¹⁰⁵Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 216-17. Niebuhr is puzzled why Augustine, a master of spiritualizing exegesis, would interpret so literally the Bible's parables of judgment. Regarding predestination, Niebuhr prefers Augustine's earlier definition to his later formulation. Rather than the

In a scathing rebuke, Niebuhr attributes numerous facets of his radical monotheism to the conversionist position and then claims that Augustine is an inconsistent conversionist for rejecting them. Specifically, Niebuhr accuses Augustine of rejecting his understanding of the goodness of creation, responsible service to creation, reliance upon God for salvation, and the power of symbols. Niebuhr writes:

The possibility of the redirection of all man's work among temporal things into an activity glorifying God by rejoicing in and cultivating the beauty in His creation, by rendering mutual service in the spirit of self-forgetful love, by scorning death and the fear of it in the conviction of divine power over death, by tracing out in disinterested reasoning the order and design of the creation and by using all temporal goods with sacramental reverence as incarnations and symbols of eternal words--this possibility rises to view in Augustinian thought only to be dismissed.¹⁰⁶

Besides the absence of universalism, Niebuhr slights other would be conversionists for their failure to grasp the present potency of redemption. For example, he alleges that Calvin holds to a dualism between this temporal, earthly existence and one's eternal, heavenly destiny. So Calvin believes that redemption is an other-worldly, future event in which Christ redeems his elect from their physical existence into a heavenly, spiritual mode. Christ's kingdom must await the new heaven and earth; he is not able to come and bring redemption now. Niebuhr asserts that the Arminian John Wesley scores better here because his doctrine of Christian perfectionism emphasizes that entire redemption is a present possibility. However, Wesley's tendency toward utilitarian Christianity and his individualism (implying something less than universal salvation) disqualify him from the ranks of consistent conversionists.¹⁰⁷

belief that "God chooses some men and rejects others," Niebuhr claims that the early Augustine said merely that "God chooses man to love Him before man can love God."

¹⁰⁶ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 215-16.

¹⁰⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 218-19.

Unlike the Apostle John, Augustine, Calvin, and Wesley, Niebuhr praises a nineteenth century Anglican named F. D. Maurice as the most consistent conversionist.¹⁰⁸ A survey of Niebuhr's treatment of Maurice explains why. Unlike the others, Maurice consistently subscribes to Niebuhr's theology, even to the point of being a universalist and arguing for the present potency of redemption. For instance, Maurice holds to a Niebuhrian form of confessional theology. Theology's authority arises from and is bounded by the community in which it is practiced. Maurice's confessional theology proposes that Christ alone is king. No nation, pope, church, Bible, etc. should be allowed to usurp his dominant role. Maurice adds in Niebuhrian fashion that creation and redemption are simultaneous because God accomplishes them both from eternity. He emphasizes that because God created people to live in community they are inherently social. This latter point convinced Maurice to become a Christian socialist. Like Niebuhr, he argues that sin is primarily anthropocentrism and selfishness. People make themselves their own centers of value as they attempt to gain goods individually which can only be acquired through giving and receiving in community.¹⁰⁹

Maurice's conception of salvation is also vintage Niebuhr. Defining redemption in the categories of radical monotheism, Maurice argues that full salvation is possible now, in the eschatological present. Only God, not people can accomplish this redemption. He does so through Christ's work as the mediatory symbol in which Christ performs the "mysterious education" of a person's inner spirit. Those who are educated in this manner may not always appear different from others, but they will now perform whatever they do from a spirit of trust and loyalty to God. Most of all, Niebuhr

¹⁰⁸ *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1950; third printing, 1957), vol. VII, 257-58. As a churchman, theologian, and philosopher, Maurice was influential in nineteenth century England and America. His most important works were *The Kingdom of Christ*, *The Religions of the World and Their Relations to Christianity*, *The Gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven*; a *Course of Lectures on the Gospel of Luke*, and *Moral and Metaphysical Philosophy*.

¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 220-29.

appreciates Maurice for his emphasis on universal salvation. Maurice states that because salvation is God's work one can be certain that everyone will be saved. He denigrates the doctrines of double predestination and eternal punishment as facets of "negative Christianity." He supposes that those who believe such doctrines must be selfish, for they hope for an exclusive pardon for themselves rather than forgiveness which includes all. For all these reasons, Maurice best typifies Niebuhr's own notion of conversionist Christianity, thereby meriting Niebuhr's approval as the most consistent of the whole lot.¹¹⁰

To summarize: Niebuhr's chapter on "Christ the transformer of culture" is a digest of his entire theological system. All his principal beliefs about creation, fall, and redemption are here. As such, the chapter is more about Niebuhr's peculiarities, such as universalism and the present potency of redemption, than transforming culture in general. As Niebuhr inadvertently reveals in his critique of other conversionists, numerous people have subscribed to this position without accepting all of Niebuhr's particular beliefs.

3. Its Meaning and Application in Niebuhr's Theology

When interpreted through the lens of his larger corpus, it is apparent that "Christ the transformer of culture" is the central tenet of Niebuhr's theology. It is his core belief about reality. At bottom, the one element that combines all reality is the notion that a good and sovereign God is active within it to reconcile the world to himself. This notion is ably expressed from the Christian perspective as Christ transforming culture. While people are unable to stop the sovereign God from completing his universal reconciliation, they are able to participate in his kingdom program through their commitment to radical monotheism.¹¹¹ Thus, "Christ the transformer of culture" is shorthand for Niebuhr's belief in the inevitable divine redemption and human participation through radical

¹¹⁰Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 220-29.

¹¹¹See p. 124-30 of this dissertation.

monotheism. Since both concepts are central to Niebuhr's theology, so is his belief that Christ transforms culture. When one understands what he means by this phrase, one understands his entire system of thought.¹¹²

But Christ transforming culture is more than mere theory to Niebuhr. When applied to life, he believes that it must produce a form of the social gospel, or what he calls "Christian socialism."¹¹³ His priority on society is why he selects culture as the object of transformation rather than the individual. He believes that God wishes to save the entire world, not merely individuals. He is not excluding individuals, for the salvation of the world must also include them. His point is that the church must transform the entire world in order to fully redeem individuals. It must not allow its concern for individuals to allow the culture to deteriorate. Such an individualistic gospel does not work, for people are social beings. Individuals cannot experience full redemption unless their society is also wholly transformed. So Niebuhr argues for a social gospel. The true gospel must aim to correct society, and in so doing it also contributes to the salvation of individuals.¹¹⁴

Niebuhr explains the appropriateness of this social emphasis in an early, 1936 essay, "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel." The individualistic gospel of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, while appropriate for its time, is no longer satisfactory in the

¹¹² Cf. Sedgwick, "Niebuhr's Ethic of Responsibility: A Unified Interpretation," 266, 283; Ottati, *Meaning and Method in H. Richard Niebuhr's Theology*, 111, 205; and Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 45.

¹¹³ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 12.

¹¹⁴ Niebuhr, "Christianity and the Social Problem," 278-79; "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 13; "Reflections on the Christian Theory of History," 85-86; and "What Then Must We Do?," 145-46. Cf. *idem*, "The Responsibility of the Church for Society," 112-13: Niebuhr states another reason why the church should direct its concern toward society. Unlike earlier times, the modern church is somewhat responsible for the problems of its society. The modern church has instructed nations and civilizations. It has helped them to form and acquire their present shape. So it cannot properly stand back and claim no responsibility. Instead, the modern church must reach out to the world for the church's sake, to clear its own conscience and remove its self-doubt.

twentieth century. Today the drama of creation, fall, and redemption is played on a larger scale. Now entire societies participate in the process. It is entire “races and classes” of people who sin, who “commit crimes against other classes” and who suffer unjustly at the hands of others. Since sin occurs in the group salvation must be aimed at the group.¹¹⁵

This salvation does not overlook individuals, for not only will they participate in the salvation of their group, but their identity and character is derived from the group.

Niebuhr explains:

Now, at least, society appears to precede the individual, to mold his character, to determine his interests, to bestow rights upon him. The individual is what he is by virtue of the place in society which he occupies; or, if this is too extreme a statement, the interaction between society and individual is such that an interpretation which always makes the individual the first term is manifestly wrong.¹¹⁶

Thus, the social gospel rightly addresses the sins of society. When it does address individuals, it directs its gospel to the larger class to which they belong, treating them as representatives of a larger problem.¹¹⁷

Niebuhr’s version of the social gospel differs from many other forms in his day. Unlike others, whose dependence upon modern liberalism had developed a humanistic emphasis, Niebuhr wishes to emphasize that God is the one who transforms culture. Since God is known through Christ, at least from the Christian perspective, Niebuhr states that Christ is the agent who transforms culture. Thus, Niebuhr’s use of Christ as the agent of transformation reflects his commitment to ground his social gospel in God.

¹¹⁵ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 178.

¹¹⁶ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 177.

¹¹⁷ Niebuhr, “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 176.

He knows that the church's best efforts will always remain futile unless God graciously establishes its work, making it permanent and meaningful.¹¹⁸

This commitment to God's preeminence leads Niebuhr to distance his social gospel from liberalism, its historical theological partner.¹¹⁹ He repeatedly castigates modern liberalism for its anthropocentrism. Unlike their predecessors, such as Rauschenbush and Gladden, modern liberals focus exclusively on human efforts to transform culture. They give scant attention to God's role, limiting his value to one who provides religious motivation for those laboring for the kingdom. God is useful for inspiring human effort, but nothing more. People, not God, are the agents of redemption.¹²⁰

Niebuhr's rejection of liberalism prompts him to search for a new theology to ground his social gospel. He asserts that something like Neo-orthodoxy is needed. While previously Niebuhr had criticized Barth for his utterly transcendent view of God, a

¹¹⁸ Niebuhr, "Man's Work and God's," 211-14. He writes on page 214: "Yet even our best work cannot endure unless the transcendent power in being that presides over and works in all our working includes what we do in its deed, a deed not of final destruction but of final recreation. Not of enslavement to futility but of liberation to action, not of death dealing but of life-giving."

¹¹⁹ Niebuhr, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 12: Niebuhr rightly notes that fundamentalism had historically abandoned the social gospel, leaving the social field to liberalism. He writes: "A very important reason for the association of liberalism and Christian socialism in the past was the fact that the alternative to liberalism, fundamentalism so-called, was upon the whole inimical to the social gospel and represented that acceptance of a sinful world which allowed the radical protest of Christianity against sin in its corporate forms to sink into silence, preaching a repentance which failed to direct the attention of piety to an extremely powerful and vicious realm of human sin and satanic influence."

¹²⁰ Niebuhr, "Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?", 914; "Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism," 117-19; and "The Attack Upon the Social Gospel," 179-80. Cf. idem, "The Social Gospel and the Liberal Theology," 12-13: Niebuhr also criticizes liberalism for its weak view of sin, its worldliness, and its failure to earnestly grapple with biblical commands. See also idem, "The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus," 116: he states that whereas liberalism historically cared about individual souls, the social gospel has extended this concern to include the whole of society. The social gospel works for "an actual and temporal Kingdom of God" rather than the purely spiritual goals of liberalism.

transcendence which prohibited God from operating within history and discouraged human effort, now he claims that Barth is “the legitimate heir of the Social Gospel.”¹²¹ Niebuhr appreciates Barth’s rejection of human ability to accomplish redemption. He thinks that Barth rightly sees that God must initiate every act of reconciliation, leaving people to merely respond to his prior activity. Niebuhr asserts that such an emphasis on divine sovereignty can rescue the social gospel from the failed utopianism of liberalism and make it credible again.¹²²

Because God is the agent of transformation, there are no hard and fast rules for social gossellers to follow. True to his responsibility theory, Niebuhr counsels believers to continually listen and respond to God’s ever new instructions. He cannot tell them in advance what specific acts they must do to transform their culture. Instead, they must commit themselves to a process of continual conversion, always gauging their actions as responses to what God is doing in the world.¹²³ This open-ended ethical system prompts criticism that Niebuhr’s system is nothing more than a relativist, situation ethics.¹²⁴

¹²¹ Niebuhr’s early criticisms of Barth appear in Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 126; “Theology in a Time of Disillusionment,” 115; and *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, 277. The first work was composed in 1933 (though not published until after Niebuhr’s death—see Johnson, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 219), the second in 1931 (Johnson, introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr*, xxvii) and the latter in 1929. Niebuhr’s change in favor of Barth occurs in Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,” 122. Although this work was not published, Johnson asserts that it was composed after the preceding works (Johnson, introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr*, xxviii).

¹²² Niebuhr, “Kingdom of God and Eschatology in the Social Gospel and in Barthianism,” 120-22 and “The Attack Upon the Social Gospel,” 181. Cf. Diefenthaler, *H. Richard Niebuhr: A Lifetime of Reflections on the Church and the World*, 48-49: Niebuhr did not ever fully endorse Neo-orthodoxy, but eventually settled on “the older tradition of American evangelicalism” as the basis for his social gospel. As illustrated in the works of men like Rauschenbush and Gladden, the faith and piety of older liberalism was needed to avoid the pure activism of modern liberalism. See Niebuhr, “Can German and American Christians Understand Each Other?”, 914.

¹²³ Niebuhr, “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 157; “Reflections on the Christian Theory of History,” 90; and “The Hidden Church and the Churches in Sight,” 115.

¹²⁴ Many scholars have made this accusation, including Joseph Allen, “Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics,” *Christianity and Crisis* 23 (1963): 219; James Fowler, *To See the Kingdom*, 263-64, 267; Lonnie Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 137, 148; Thomas R. McFaul, “Dilemmas in H. Richard Niebuhr’s Ethics,” *Journal of Religion* 54 (1974): 47-49; Joon-Sik Park, “The Church As Ethical Reality:

While there is some truth in this charge, critics should appreciate why Niebuhr opts for this position. He leaves the method of transformation open because he fears that if he gives specifics he would infringe upon the prerogative of God to reconcile the world to himself by whatever means he deems appropriate. To say what people *must always do* is to limit God.

To summarize: “Christ the transformer of culture” encapsulates the heart of Niebuhr’s theology—God’s sovereign redemption and the human response of radical monotheism. The term “culture” in this phrase connotes Niebuhr’s preference for the social gospel. He believes that the gospel must aim at the entire society, not just individuals. But unlike other social gospel advocates, Niebuhr grounds the gospel in God. This notion is reflected both in the term “Christ,” who as the revelation of God is the agent of transformation, and in the method of transformation itself. Here Niebuhr resists supplying specific rules because he does not want to infringe upon God’s prerogative to transform the world by any method he desires.

V. War: Test Case for Niebuhr’s Conversionist Christianity

War is perhaps the most suitable test case for Niebuhr’s belief that Christ transforms culture, for war is the greatest evil found in any society. All serious attempts

A Critical Synthesis of H. Richard Niebuhr and John H. Yoder” (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1991), 36; and Robert B. Willis, “The Concept of Responsibility in the Ethics of Karl Barth and H. Richard Niebuhr,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 279. For Niebuhr’s own words, see Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 167-68, “Evangelical and Protestant Ethics,” 226-27, and foreword to *In His Likeness*, 5-6.

Other scholars, while conceding that Niebuhr’s ethics are too abstract and subjective, yet attempt to excuse these problems. See Gustafson, introduction to *The Responsible Self*, 13; Ingrid Olsen-Tjensvold, “Response to Creation: Christian Environmentalism and the Theology and Ethics of H. Richard Niebuhr,” 185; Allen, “Decisive Influence on Protestant Ethics,” 219; Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 148; Grant, *God the Center of Value*, 25-33; John Joseph Mawhinney, “H. Richard Niebuhr and Reshaping American Christianity,” in *America in Theological Perspective*, ed. Thomas M. McFadden (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976): 160; Timothy F. Sedgwick, “Faith and Discernment: Directions in Theological Ethics in the Thought of H. Richard Niebuhr,” *Andover Newton Quarterly* 18 (1977): 111-21; “Niebuhr’s Ethic of Responsibility: A Unified Interpretation,” *Saint Luke’s Journal of Theology* 23 (1980): 282-83; and “History, Faith and the Moral Life: A Study of H. Richard Niebuhr as Resource for Normative Ethics” (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975), 2-5, 82-84.

to transform culture must come to terms with the problem of war. If a conversionist theology is able to solve the war question, then no evil in culture and society is insoluble. If it cannot, then regardless how many social evils a conversionist theology might correct, it knows from the outset that it will never successfully transform the entire culture.

Because Niebuhr developed his theology within the context of the second world war, his conversionist theology wrestled with the problem of war throughout his career.¹²⁵ Already in 1932 Niebuhr wrote about the appropriate response of the Christian west to Japan's invasion of Manchuria. His essay, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," called for a responsible inactivity that arises from faith in God. This article provoked a critical response from his brother, Reinhold, who wanted a more realistic attitude toward violence. Niebuhr answered his brother in "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," in which he clarified and pressed his previous point.

Ten years elapsed before Niebuhr released a new spate of essays on war. Now mired in the midst of Germany's aggression, Niebuhr attempted to develop his seminal views from the previous decade. His 1942 essay, "War as the Judgment of God," explained how God is sovereignly present in war and how people can align themselves with his redemptive purposes. This time the rebuttal came from one Virgil Aldrich. As he had against his brother a decade earlier, Niebuhr wrote a follow-up response entitled, "Is God in the War?" The next year Niebuhr wrote "War as Crucifixion," a short piece on reading war through the symbol of Christ. This same year he also produced his greatest summary on the subject. In response to a request from the Calhoun Commission of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, Niebuhr wrote "A Christian Interpretation of War."

¹²⁵ Miller, "H. Richard Niebuhr's War Articles: A Transvaluation of Value," 244: Miller states that Niebuhr's war articles are the only place where Niebuhr directly addresses a moral problem, and they include virtually all of the main themes in his work.

Thus, Niebuhr devoted six essays to a Christian view of war, seven if one counts his 1962 essay on the cold war, "The Illusion of Power." Combined with assorted statements made in other articles, Niebuhr presents readers with a highly developed theology of war. This theology is now examined in this section, delineated in typical Niebuhrian fashion between God's action and human response.

A. God's Action in War

Niebuhr begins his discussion of war by assuming the hard truth that God is active within it. Since God is sovereignly present in all events, he must also be present in those which are evil. Niebuhr believes that one cannot pick and choose which events come from God's hand and which occur apart from him, for "to deny that God is in war is for the monotheist equivalent to the denial of God's universality and unity--to the denial that God is God."¹²⁶ To assert that God is not acting in war is to imply that there is something beyond his control and that the universe is ultimately run by the irrational forces of chance.¹²⁷ Such a foolish admission ignores the cosmic reality that God "is always in history...the structure in things, the source of all meaning, the 'I am that I am,' that which is that it is...the rock against which we beat in vain...the structure of the universe, that creative will... ."¹²⁸ Thus, the church must interpret war "as an event in the kingdom or rule of God in which God's action toward man and man's action toward God are to be

¹²⁶ Niebuhr, "Is God in the War?", *Christian Century* 59 (1942): 954. Niebuhr adds that because he is not a dualist he must presuppose "that there is no event in which divine reason and will are not involved." As a radical monotheist, he believes "that there is no person, no situation, no event in which the opportunity to serve God is not present."

¹²⁷ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," in *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, 163. Cf. *ibid.*, 161: "God, being the source, sustainer and end of all things, or, the source, sustaining power and end of all things being God, He is no less present in time or place of war than in time or place of peace; his work is being carried on through those who refuse to acknowledge him as well as through those who worship him."

¹²⁸ Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," *Christian Century* 49 (1932): 447.

understood.”¹²⁹ The church must be careful not to merely respond to other people, such as its nation’s enemies. Instead, remembering that God is operating within the actions of finite humans, it should ask what God is doing and respond appropriately.¹³⁰

While Niebuhr’s presupposition that God is sovereign compels his conclusion that God is active within war, his presupposition that God is good tempers this hard fact with the assurance that God’s actions in war must be redemptive.¹³¹ Unlike his brother, who views history as a tragedy that can only derive meaning from some outside goal, Niebuhr posits an “eschatological faith” which sees God inevitably working in all events in human history to accomplish his kingdom. The path to the kingdom may include tragedy, but only as prelude to history’s ultimate fulfillment.¹³²

Niebuhr explains how war might be a necessary means for accomplishing God’s redemptive program. Redemption occurs when God’s creatures are reconciled to God and with each other. Such reconciliation requires that creatures love one another. Love in turn requires fellowship and community, and community requires that individuals live unselfishly, relinquishing their own self interest and assertions. Thus, anything that contributes to “the tragic outcome of every self-assertion” advances God’s plan of redemption. Niebuhr suggests that war is able to do just this, for it promises to deliver people from “imprisonment in self.” The demands of war cause people to cooperate as

¹²⁹ Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 159.

¹³⁰ Niebuhr, “War as the Judgment of God,” *Christian Century* 59 (1942): 630. Cf. idem, “Is God in the War?”, 954 and “The Illusions of Power,” *Christian Century Pulpit* 33 (1962): 102-3.

¹³¹ Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 161: Niebuhr lists four presuppositions about God which inform his interpretation of God’s activity in war: God is omnipresent, omni-active, good, and one.

¹³² Niebuhr, “A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God,” 447. Cf. idem, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” *Christian Century* 49 (1932): 379: God is working within the world to lead history into an “inevitably good outcome.” However, this good end will not occur without “considerable destruction.” Note: Niebuhr’s belief that God is present within war solidifies his commitment to universalism, for if God is redemptively present in the worst evils then one can be certain that he is a redeeming force in all events.

equal partners in order to win, the dangers of war prompt people to freely sacrifice themselves for the good of others, and the horrors of war compel people to confess their own culpability in the war's destruction and recommit to a new life of love. In all these ways, war, though an unspeakable evil, actually contributes to the greater good of redemption.¹³³

Although Niebuhr strongly asserts God's sovereign activity in war, he does not for that reason excuse human responsibility. Niebuhr is a compatibilist.¹³⁴ He believes that since God is "not of the order of men" he is able to act within and through human actions without compromising human agency. Thus, people are responsible for their decisions. They cannot blame their actions on divine fatalism. Applied to war, Niebuhr states that war arises from humanity's failure to attain radical monotheism. A certain group begins by distrusting and being disloyal to God. No longer depending on God for its security, it strikes out against others in an aggressive attempt to achieve its own prosperity and security. So war is essentially an act of idolatry. Every war is religious in the sense that it stems from humanity's henotheistic attempts to protect their finite gods and values.¹³⁵

Niebuhr so emphasizes human responsibility that at one point he suggests that God's role in war is entirely passive. He states that war is an act of God only in the sense that it so belongs to the order of the universe that it is the consequence of certain human actions. For instance, war is God's just response to humanity's anthropocentrism. God

¹³³ Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," 447; "War as the Judgment of God," 632; and "A Christian Interpretation of War," 165-66.

¹³⁴ Ronald H. Nash, *Life's Ultimate Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 327: "Compatibilism is the theory that in ways that may be impossible to comprehend, determinism and human free will are compatible in the sense that both can exist in the case of human actions. Incompatibilism is the theory that it is impossible for determinism and human free will to be true at the same time."

¹³⁵ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 163-70.

has so determined natural law that war results whenever one group attempts to extend its dominance and serve its own desires over against other finite creatures. Niebuhr explains: war “is the apparently inevitable consequence of transgression of proper limits on the part of the finite and of the attempt of the finite to live without service of other members of the community of men and nations and creation as a whole.”¹³⁶ Thus, while Niebuhr contends that God is sovereignly present in war, he also endeavors to make that involvement as passive as possible.

B. Human Response to God’s Action in War

Niebuhr consistently applies his responsibility theory to war. Assuming that God sovereignly acts within the war event, it is the responsibility of his followers to correctly interpret and then actively respond to his prior divine action.

1. Interpretation

Niebuhr teaches that people may discern God’s presence in war in two ways. First, and least important, Niebuhr states that though war is a great evil, people may still see God’s presence there through various instances of human goodness. For instance, flickers of human goodness shine through the darkness of war whenever nations risk their lives to protect their weaker neighbors or soldiers fight to defend their families, displaying fierce loyalty to their comrades and to their cause. Such goodness, though often far from the perfection of radical monotheism, reveals the tenacity of the image of God within people. Even in their sin people still reveal elements of divine goodness. Niebuhr concludes that a person of faith may interpret these good strains in people during wartime and take them as “evidence of the faithfulness that will not let man go, and of the fulfillment of the promise that all things will be restored by him to an original, fundamental harmony.”¹³⁷

¹³⁶Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 163-64.

¹³⁷Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 170-71.

Second, and much more important to Niebuhr, he states that people may properly discern God's action in war when they interpret war through the appropriate symbol. As one might guess from Niebuhr's corpus, the correct symbol, at least from the Christian perspective, is Christ. Since the heart of the Christ symbol is the cross, Niebuhr uses the cross to make sense of war. Indeed, he contends that God's presence in war is unfathomable apart from the cross. For instance, he notes how wars tend to destroy the innocent. It is non-combatant civilians that become collateral damage and obedient soldiers who become fodder for the nation's war machine, while the leaders who instigated the war usually survive, even thrive.¹³⁸ Niebuhr asserts that he would not know how to interpret this suffering of the innocents if he did not believe in Jesus' vicarious suffering and resurrection.¹³⁹ But since history's key interpretive symbol depicts the innocent one suffering for the guilty, then we should not be surprised to find more of the same today. Indeed, Niebuhr suggests that vicarious suffering is God's *modus operandi*, so that the suffering of innocents in war is a typical, almost expected, act of God.¹⁴⁰

Niebuhr believes that the symbol of the cross, with its vicarious suffering, reveals at least four truths about war. First, the cross implies that God does not take sides in war. He does not condemn one side for its aggression and vindicate the other for its innocence. Instead, the cross indicates that God is gracious to everyone. He suffers his own wrath so that he can freely forgive and reconcile others. Niebuhr explains: the cross discloses that

¹³⁸ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 166: "Here individuals die for the sake of communities, because of the transgressions of nations. In war the children of the third and fourth generation bear the consequences of their fathers' guilt, for the roots of every war, considered as an event in the order of history or as an example of historic justice, always lie far back. In war the little and the weak peoples, whether we think of racial communities, or of generations, or of economic classes, or of cultural groups, bear the burden of suffering." Cf. *idem*, "War as the Judgment of God," 631.

¹³⁹ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 167 and "Is God in the War?," 954.

¹⁴⁰ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 166.

“the order of the universe is not one of retribution in which goodness is rewarded and evil punished, but rather an order of graciousness,” in which God sends rain and sunshine upon both the just and unjust.¹⁴¹

Second, although God does not condemn anyone, the cross and resurrection complex teach that the path to ultimate redemption leads through judgment. As explained above, God’s goal of reconciliation requires that he purge people from self-centeredness. So when people selfishly pursue their own interests, God judges their actions by allowing their aggressiveness to lead to war. In this way they learn the destructiveness of their selfish ways and the benefit of serving others. Just as the cross was a necessary prelude to the resurrection, so the destruction of anthropocentrism, most easily accomplished in war, is essential to God’s ultimate goal of reconciliation. God sends war not to punish people, but to lovingly correct their selfishness so that they will be fit to join his redemption.¹⁴²

Third, the cross assures the world that God is present among those who are suffering in war. God identifies with all sufferers as he identified with Jesus on the cross. He remains with these sufferers as he remained with Jesus, for he will not abandon “His thieving crucified sons any more than His thorn-crowned chosen child.”¹⁴³ Likewise, Jesus senses a deep kinship with those who suffer, and he remains with them also. The relationship is so close that Niebuhr describes Jesus’ sufferings in the present tense. He says that through the suffering of the innocent Jesus’ “body is being broken for our sakes.”¹⁴⁴ Niebuhr’s point is that those who suffer the grave injustices of war should not

¹⁴¹Niebuhr, “War as Crucifixion,” 514-15. Cf. idem, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 167: “The intense seriousness of the love of God, as revealed in Jesus Christ’s death, is confirmed and recalled and illustrated and reenacted in the vicarious suffering of war.”

¹⁴²Niebuhr, “Is God in the War?”, 953; “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” 379; “War as Crucifixion,” 514; and “War as the Judgment of God,” 631.

¹⁴³Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in the World’s Crisis,” 17.

¹⁴⁴Niebuhr, “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 172.

consider themselves to be merely the victims of great evils. Instead, they should remember that God and his Son dwells with them, bestowing honor upon their pitiful plight.¹⁴⁵

Fourth, and most important, the cross indicates the two ways in which war accomplishes the redemption of God. The first method was discussed above. War eliminates human self-assertion, instructing people to unselfishly give themselves to others in a universal band of reconciliation. A second method pertains more directly to the vicarious nature of the cross. Niebuhr argues that just as the innocent suffering of Jesus shames his followers into obedience, so the war-time suffering of the innocent may shame their oppressors into repenting of their aggression.

Niebuhr asserts that this vicarious suffering of the innocent is the only possible method for ending the “ceaseless round of self-interests.”¹⁴⁶ So long as a group defends itself from self-interest, it is not markedly better than its attacker. Only those groups which act from trust and loyalty to God are able to please him. While such radical monotheism may manifest itself in both going to war and pacifism (and may also be absent in both), it is typically present in the vicarious suffering of the innocent.¹⁴⁷ The group that endures the unjust strikes of its attacker has ceased to operate from its own self-interest. It has reversed the normal rhythm of human conduct. Instead of retaliating

¹⁴⁵ Niebuhr, “Participation in the Present Passion,” 2-3.

¹⁴⁶ Niebuhr, “The Social Gospel and the Mind of Jesus,” 123.

¹⁴⁷ Niebuhr, “The Christian Church in the World’s Crisis,” 15-16: both participation in war and pacifism may arise from either selfishness or love for neighbor. The real moral struggle does not concern one’s specific action, whether or not to fight, but rather the context of that action. Whatever action they choose, people must “make each particular word and deed part of a continuous action which is redemptive rather than defensive.” Cf. idem, “The Inconsistency of the Majority,” 43-44: he argues that many pacifists are inconsistent because they argue for “non-violent aggression.” This is a contradiction, for aggression by nature is violent. Niebuhr says that these pacifists err because they believe that their own moral ideals are correct and they seek to convert others to these ideals. Instead of adopting pacifism to promote their own ideals, they should adopt their position, whatever it might be, from loyalty to God.

in self-righteous vengeance, the group vicariously suffers the punishment due its attacker. As it bravely stands in its attacker's place, there is hope that the oppressor may be convicted of his brutality and relent. Even if he does not, Niebuhr states that the innocent victims have successfully communicated the redemptive word of God, which is all God asks them to do.¹⁴⁸

2. *Responsive Action*

Once people use the cross to correctly read what God is doing in the war, they are subsequently responsible to respond appropriately to him. Niebuhr states that a correct response involves trust and hope in God, repentance for self, and forgiveness of others.

First, Niebuhr believes that the resurrection of Jesus bestows confidence that new life follows the destruction of war. Just as Jesus entrusted himself to his Father during his crucifixion, so people should confidently hope in the resurrection power of God as they endure the crucifixion of the present war. Such confidence could be present in either fighting or pacifism, and Niebuhr oscillates between each during his career. The young Niebuhr favored the pacifist position. His first war article, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," contends that those who trust God to accomplish redemption may contentedly do nothing about Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Such inactivity is commendable because it originates within the context of radical monotheism. Unlike other kinds of inactivity, which may arise from pessimism that one's involvement will do any good, conservatism that approves of existing conditions, frustration and moral indignation that seeks the moral high road of pacifism, all the while knowing it is powerless, and communism, which waits patiently for economic forces to produce the perfect society, inactivity which issues from radical monotheism is superior because it trusts that divine forces are at work.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Niebuhr, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 167; "War as the Judgment of God," 631; "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," 447; and "The Inconsistency of the Majority," 44.

¹⁴⁹ Niebuhr, "The Grace of Doing Nothing," 378-79.

Against this initial pacifist opinion, Niebuhr writes a decade later that trust in God spurs believers to actively defend their innocent neighbors. Because radical monotheists trust God to protect them as they do what is right, they are secure enough to defend their neighbors from those who are abusing them. Niebuhr says that they are obligated to do so, even if they do not like their neighbors. Servants of God must protect anyone who is under attack, even if that someone is their enemy. Thus, it seems that Niebuhr would now approve intervening in Japan's earlier conquest of China. Inactivity is now a sign of disobedience rather than confidence in God.¹⁵⁰

Second, besides expressing hope and trust in God, Niebuhr states that an appropriate response to God's presence in war always includes repentance for one's own culpability and forgiveness of others for theirs. People who respond in this manner contribute to the reconciliation that God is accomplishing in the world. They are "clearing the road" for the kingdom, removing any roadblocks for its coming and guaranteeing themselves a place in it.¹⁵¹

Niebuhr states that repentance is appropriate for all people because everyone is to some extent culpable for any war. Because people are social creatures, everyone is somewhat responsible for what society has become. Niebuhr states that "The threads of responsibility run back and forth through space and time, from person to person in such an intricate pattern that none of us is uninvolved in any cross." He adds: "What lover of peace will exculpate himself from blame for the death of young soldiers representing his own land or enemy lands?"¹⁵² Besides the social character of the world, Niebuhr

¹⁵⁰ Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 632. Cf. idem, "A Christian Interpretation of War," 172-73: the church must attempt to restrict the damage of war, limiting the power of any one group to destroy another. It must aid all those who are suffering from war. Although it knows that economic and political sanctions are hurtful, it seeks to restrict violence between nations to these areas. See also idem, "Is God in the War?", 954 and "The Relation of Christianity and Democracy," 158.

¹⁵¹ Niebuhr, "A Communication: The Only Way into the Kingdom of God," 447.

¹⁵² Niebuhr, "Participation in the Present Passion," 2.

discovers universal culpability in the symbol of the cross. He easily moves from the observation that Jesus suffered for the sins of the world to the conclusion that those who are crucified during war must also be suffering on behalf of the world. To deny that war victims suffer for everyone would detract from the analogy of the cross. As the first cross carried universal implications, so must present crosses. Since war victims suffer for everyone, everyone is to some extent culpable and must repent.¹⁵³

Repentance is also appropriate because even the “innocent” parties of war are only relatively better than the oppressors. Niebuhr contends that people and nations should never naively think that God is on their side or that they are automatically on the right. Instead, they should recognize that they are closer to the evil of the oppressor than to the infinite holiness of God.¹⁵⁴ For instance, though America is not invading other countries as Japan and Germany are doing, yet it also is acting selfishly. America is deciding whether or not to get involved in the war by evaluating its own self-interests. So long as the nation decides for such selfish reasons, whatever it does will be sinful. Instead, America should leave its self-absorbed, “profound preoccupation with its own prosperity, safety and righteousness” and decide from its commitment to God alone. If it chooses from this correct religious context, then whatever it decides, whether to enter or stay out of the war, will be the right choice.¹⁵⁵

Finally, a genuinely repentant group or individual is too preoccupied with its own sin to worry about the shortcomings of another. Consequently, repentance always produces forgiveness. Repentant people refrain from condemning one side or the other in

¹⁵³ Niebuhr, “Is God in the War?”, 954; “The Relation of Christianity and Democracy,” 158; “A Christian Interpretation of War,” 172; and “Participation in the Present Passion,” 2.

¹⁵⁴ Niebuhr, “War as the Judgment of God,” 630-31; “The Illusions of Power,” 101; and “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” 379.

¹⁵⁵ Niebuhr, “War as the Judgment of God,” 632 and “The Christian Church in the World's Crisis,” 16.

war, gladly leaving all judgments to God alone. They focus on their own duty, how they have sinned and now should respond to what God is doing in the war. Their only thoughts toward their enemies are prayers that God will chasten and ultimately redeem them. In this manner their forgiveness contributes to the final reconciliation when God will unite all people to himself.¹⁵⁶

To summarize: Niebuhr consistently applies his theology to the problem of war, producing a predominantly passive method for transforming culture. Although he attempts to diminish God's involvement into a passive role, he nevertheless stands by his presupposition that God sovereignly and redemptively acts through every event, even war. The manner of this redemption can be understood when one views war through the Christ symbol, specifically the cross. Niebuhr's priority on God's role lessens the importance of human involvement. People do not initiate redemption. They merely interpret and respond accordingly to God's redemptive actions, a response that always involves repentance from self-interest and defense of the oppressed. However, knowing that these human responses are negligible next to God's contribution, radical monotheists refrain from feverish attempts to transform the culture of war. Instead, they patiently wait for God to use the war to transform culture and accomplish final redemption. Thus, from a human perspective, the transformation of war, the worst of culture, is largely a passive activity. God alone transforms culture. People should patiently wait for him to do just that.

¹⁵⁶Niebuhr, "War as the Judgment of God," 632 and "A Christian Interpretation of War," 172-73.

CHAPTER FIVE

CRITIQUE

This dissertation has analyzed Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" from the larger framework of his view of creation, fall, and redemption.

Chapter 2 explained that every creature and every event, because it comes from God and stands in relationship to him, is good. Unfortunately, individual humans do not naturally recognize this. They are born with distrust for the God who holds them in existence, a distrust that leads them to disloyalty. Rather than faithfully serve God and his cause they attempt to protect themselves from his power by serving other gods. Such acts of henotheism and polytheism, which are a form of anthropocentrism, only bring despair and certain destruction. Chapter 3 described how redemption occurs when individuals recognize that their distrust of God is misguided. From the example of Jesus Christ they learn that the ground of being is good and worthy of their trust. This newfound confidence releases them from their anthropocentric idols and encourages them to trust God and become loyal to his cause. This double movement, believing in the power and goodness of God and then serving his cause by ministering to other creatures, is what Niebuhr calls radical monotheism.

In chapter 4 we argued that this notion of radical monotheism is the key to understanding Niebuhr's concept of Christ transforming culture. Radical monotheism expresses the confidence that the good God is powerfully reconciling every facet of

creation to himself. In Christian terms, it means that Christ, the revelation of God, is transforming culture. Specifically, Niebuhr believes that such transformation will occur through a theocentric version of the social gospel. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Niebuhr refuses to ground his social gospel on the anthropocentrism of liberalism. He recognizes that God alone possesses the power to accomplish redemption. As such we should fix our hope on him rather than ourselves to usher in the kingdom.

Chapter 4 concluded by testing Niebuhr's "Christ transforming culture" position with the problem of war. Since war is the greatest evil found in any culture, it is appropriate to ask whether Niebuhr's conversionist theology can account for it. We found that Niebuhr does not shy away from the problem of war but rather consistently applies his grid of radical monotheism to it. For instance, he affirms that everything, including war, must come directly from the sovereign God and that because of this everything, including war, must also be good. Niebuhr claims that the goodness of war is evident in its redemptive purpose. When viewed through the lens of the cross, we recognize that while war is a great tragedy, yet God is able to use it to accomplish his larger end of reconciling creatures to each other and to himself. For example, just as Jesus' suffering on the cross shames his followers into obedience, so the pain of the innocent victims of war may shame their oppressors into repenting from their aggression. The cross instructs all participants in war to repent from their own self-interest and trust God for the resurrection that certainly follows crucifixion. Niebuhr concludes with a fairly passive human role in the transformation of the culture of war. Since God is powerfully using war to accomplish his redemption, Christians should take comfort in his

sovereignty, repent from their own contributions to the war, and aim to stay out of his way.

Chapter 5 will now build on this previous analysis and evaluate Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture." Since the purpose of this dissertation is to assess the compatibility of Niebuhr's theology with Reformed tradition (see chapter 1), we will evaluate his notion of Christ transforming culture from a Neo-Calvinist perspective. When we do so we discover that Niebuhr either fails to make or is unclear concerning four distinctions that are important to Neo-Calvinism. First, he fails to preserve personal distinctions within the Godhead. Consequently, he is insufficiently Trinitarian. Second, he fails to maintain temporal distinctions between the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption. This oversight compels him to take a different position from Neo-Calvinists regarding the nature of humanity's problem and its solution. Third, he fails to distinguish between the divergent destinies of the human race. The absence of this distinction leads him to subscribe to soteriological universalism. Fourth, he is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. This lack of clarity concerning humanity's two ends prevents Niebuhr from making some of the precise analyses of culture that are important to many Neo-Calvinists.

Interestingly, some Neo-Calvinists would not be bothered by Niebuhr's lack of clarity on this last point. For instance, John C. Vander Stelt, a Dooyeweerdian Neo-Calvinist, criticizes the Princeton-Westminster tradition for its dualistic ontology that divides the world into natural and supernatural spheres.¹ He argues that such dualism produces an incoherent theology that relies more on philosophy than Scripture. However,

¹John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture* (Marlton, N.J.: Mack Publishing Co., 1978), 272-78.

other Reformed scholars reject Vander Stelt's critique as a naive fixation with dualism. For example, John Frame replies that there is nothing inherently evil about dividing a given subject into two parts. Instead, making distinctions is merely one of the created laws of thinking.²

Finally, besides explaining how these four issues separate Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" from Neo-Calvinism, we suggest that the reason for each difference quite possibly lies in Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism. While we will cite evidence linking radical monotheism with Niebuhr's absence of distinctions at each point, it is worth noting here that in general Niebuhr identifies radical monotheism with the concept of universality. For instance, in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* he declares that radical monotheism within "Christianity has been marked by the passion for universality. It understands that faith in God cannot become incarnate except in a universal community in which all walls of partition have been broken down."³ Again, in *The Responsible Self* he states: "The Christian ethos so uniquely exemplified in Christ himself [radical monotheism] is an ethics of universal responsibility. It interprets every particular event as included in universal action."⁴ Since Niebuhr identifies radical monotheism with universality, it is plausible to query whether this fundamental aspect of his theology inherently leads

²John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 235-36.

³Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 62.

⁴Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 167 (parenthetical insertion is mine).

Niebuhr toward emphasizing unity rather than distinctions.⁵ As we will see, this appears to be the case for each of the four issues that separates Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" from Neo-Calvinism.

I. Unitarianism

This section attempts to demonstrate that, unlike Neo-Calvinism, Niebuhr's thought is insufficiently Trinitarian. Despite numerous protests to the contrary, Niebuhr's concept of God leans toward Unitarianism. The section concludes by examining the ramifications of this Unitarian tendency upon Niebuhr's notion that Christ is the transformer of culture.

A. Niebuhr's Profession of Trinitarianism

It may surprise informed readers of Niebuhr to read that Trinitarian deficiencies exist in his thought. After all, Niebuhr himself explicitly states that the Trinity is a necessary staple of Christian theology. In his insightful essay, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Niebuhr argues for a developed Trinitarian theology as a means of promoting ecumenical dialogue. He concedes that various segments of Christendom emphasize different members of the Trinity. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Trinity suggests that Christianity has room for all of them, for each person of the Trinity is united with the other members. Consequently, Niebuhr warns against valuing one member of the Trinity over another. Those who commit this mistake adopt

⁵Of course, this is not to say that Niebuhr avoids distinctions. Indeed, Niebuhr's fertile mind is capable of making many finely tuned distinctions within any given subject. For example, in his essay "The Grace of Doing Nothing," 378-79, Niebuhr observes that there are no less than five ways to do nothing in the present crisis of Japan's invasion of Manchuria. Specifically, there is the inactivity of the pessimist, conservative, morally indignant, communist, and believer in God. Our point here is not that Niebuhr is incapable of making distinctions but only that his fundamental doctrine of radical monotheism inherently leans towards emphasizing the unity among things rather than their differences. This turns out to be the case regarding the four issues that we examine in this chapter.

one of three popular types of Unitarianism: either a Unitarianism of the Father, Son, or Holy Spirit.⁶

First, the Unitarianism of the Father is notable for its monotheism. Against all forms of “polytheistic and idolatrous tendencies” it teaches that God is one. It also emphasizes that God is the Creator, the one who “accounts for the presence and the pattern and the dynamic of the natural world.” Because God is primarily the Creator, this form of Unitarianism relies heavily on natural theology. It is more prepared to learn about God from nature than from history or inner experience.⁷

Although Niebuhr begins his essay by warning against Unitarianism, he has nothing negative to say here about this first type. A bit later he will caution that this position tends to emphasize the goodness of nature and creation over the need for salvation, but initially he offers nothing but praise.⁸ He declares that many “heroes of the faith and philosopher-theologians” have subscribed to it, and that despite much suspicion and persecution it has proven itself to be “a perennial and unconquerable movement.” As might be expected from a radical monotheist, Niebuhr admires the Unitarianism of the Father for its “insistence on monotheism.” Moreover, it offers its own distinctive monotheism of the Father, a monotheism that is “a fundamental and persistent conviction of faith.”⁹

Second, the Unitarianism of the Son ignores nature and philosophy so prevalent in the first position and focuses instead on Christ as redeemer. It may believe that there is a

⁶Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” *Theology Today* 3 (1946): 372-73.

⁷Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 373.

⁸Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 376.

⁹Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 373-74.

high God who transcends and has made the world, but it focuses exclusively on Jesus and the salvation that he brings. This position is exemplified in Marcion, who denigrated the Creator God of the Old Testament in favor of the God revealed in Jesus Christ. Niebuhr also finds this Unitarianism prevalent in the church's expressions that attribute creation and providence solely to Jesus, apart from his relation to the Father. He writes:

The medieval hymns which modern piety uses as its own and which celebrate Jesus Christ independently of his relation to the Creator and the Spirit give evidence of its presence. In them the "Fairest Lord Jesus" is the "Ruler of all Nature;" Jesus is not only the "joy of loving hearts" but "the fount of life" and "life of men."¹⁰

Contemporary examples include the "Jesus-cult of pietism" which practices "the mystic sense of Jesus' presence," with "its hymns of adoration, and its prayers addressed to him." This pietism does not honor the Father who loved the world but rather Jesus alone, who "is the source and center of love, so that no reference to the Creator is necessary." The social gospel is also guilty here, for it focuses on Jesus as the ideal Man who taught people the "ideal of a perfect society" and then inaugurated it through his life and death. Jesus becomes the leader and martyr of a hero-cult that focuses exclusively upon him as the ideal man.¹¹

Niebuhr's criticism of this Unitarianism of the Son is mild here compared to his comments elsewhere. Sydney Ahlstrom observes that in 1936 Niebuhr began a "lifelong protest against the Unitarianism of the Second Person," a Unitarianism he found in such diverse places as "Jesus only" Pentecostals and Barth's Christomonism.¹² Niebuhr's opposition to the Unitarianism of the Son is most powerfully stated in *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*. There he warns that "the most prevalent, the most deceptive

¹⁰Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 374.

¹¹Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 374-75.

¹²Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Place in American Thought," *Christianity and Crisis* 23 (1963): 215.

and perhaps ultimately the most dangerous inconsistency” in the present time is the tendency for churches and schools to substitute Christology for theology, devotion and love for Jesus Christ for love of God. In this case Jesus Christ becomes an idol which detracts from God.¹³

Characteristic of Niebuhr’s inclusivism, he opposes the Unitarianism of the Son at least in part because he fears that it leads Christians to emphasize the uniqueness of their religion. They insist that they alone possess the true religion and they exaggerate the differences between themselves and other religions, such as Judaism. Thus, they rebuild the walls of division between Christianity and Judaism which Jesus had torn down and lead the followers of the humble Christ to proudly boast in the correctness of their religion.¹⁴

Third, the Unitarianism of the Spirit neglects the Creator of the natural world and the Redeemer of history and instead focuses exclusively on one’s inner life. There, within his own spirit and conscience the person experiences “direct spiritual awareness of religious experience,” gaining the “inner knowledge of inner truth and good.” Perhaps the most prevalent of the Unitarianisms, Niebuhr claims that this mystical position obtains whenever “spiritual experience takes precedence over both natural theology and Scriptures.” He believes that this type climaxed in nineteenth century liberalism, which valued inner experience as the most important access to God. Niebuhr evaluates this position by stating that it is fine as far as it goes. Its affirmations are correct, but it errs in its denials, or what it excludes.¹⁵

¹³Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 44. See p. 90-91 of this dissertation. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church*, 45: “Yet in many churchly pronouncements the faith of Christians is stated as if their one God were Jesus Christ; as if Christ’s ministry of reconciliation to the Creator were of no importance; as if the Spirit proceeded only from the Son; as if the Christian Scriptures contained only the New Testament; as if the Old Testament were relevant only insofar as it contained prophecies pointing to Jesus Christ; as if Jesus Christ alone were man’s only hope.” See also Niebuhr, “Reformation, Continuing Imperative,” 250.

¹⁴Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 46. Cf. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 43.

After this brief survey of the three Unitarianisms, Niebuhr examines the relationship among them. He claims that the three Unitarianisms are in conflict with each other, attempting to counter balance what they perceive as extremes in the other types. For instance, the Unitarianism of the Father protests the Unitarianism of the Son's "exclusive reliance on Scriptures for knowledge of God" and the "exclusive worship of the Christ of Scriptures as the object of trust and the bringer of salvation." It also may protest the "enthusiasm and spiritualism" found in the Unitarianism of the Spirit. Likewise, the Unitarianism of the Son rejects the Unitarianism of the Father's "exclusive concern with the Creator and with rational knowledge as the way to faith." Furthermore, this view consciously opposes the Unitarianism of the Father's belief in the goodness of humanity as created in the image of God and in the natural powers of reason and morality to progress toward union with God. Instead, it emphasizes the presence of sin and the need for redemption in Christ. Finally, the Unitarianism of the Spirit objects to the "exclusive concern with rational and historical knowledge of God" found in the other positions.¹⁶

Nevertheless, despite these internal conflicts, Niebuhr contends that the three Unitarianisms are actually interdependent. Each position is logically dependent on the others, often passing from itself to the other views. For example, the Unitarianism of the Father initially seeks to base its theology on science and philosophy. However, it soon discovers that nature does not deliver unambiguous evidence for the personal and moral character of God. Because this information is found in the revelation in Christ, this position turns to the Unitarianism of the Son. While it may posit the existence of God from creation, his character as Father is revealed only through his relation to his Son. Thus, the Unitarianism of the Father requires the Unitarianism of the Son to support its

¹⁵Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 376-78.

¹⁶Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 379.

description of the Father. Alternately, and even more likely, Niebuhr observes that the Unitarianism of the Father often transitions to the Unitarianism of the Spirit, discovering its knowledge of the Father in religious experience.¹⁷

Likewise, the Unitarianism of the Son initially begins with the goodness of Christ, but then asks concerning his power. This question leads it to the Creator of nature, who is the one who empowers Christ. Because “faith in Christ implies faith in the God who is known through nature, or who rules over nature,” the Unitarianism of the Son logically flows into the Unitarianism of the Father. And similar to the Unitarianism of the Father, the Unitarianism of the Son also leads to an emphasis on spiritual experience, as the Spirit of the Son makes contact with our spirits. Thus, the Unitarianism of the Son easily blends into the Unitarianism of the Spirit.¹⁸

Finally, the Unitarianism of the Spirit also points to the other positions. It is not able to remain isolated in its mystical experience, for it “always implies convictions about the deity of the author of nature and the historic Jesus Christ.” This position leads to the Unitarianism of the Father because spirit only seems real to humanity when nature itself is a manifestation of spirit, and people need rational knowledge to test the claims of the spirit. Similarly, this position leads to the Unitarianism of the Son because only Christ provides the criteria to evaluate whether a given spirit is from God or Satan.¹⁹

Thus, Niebuhr concludes that the interdependence of the three Unitarianisms requires the church to retain its Trinitarian dogma. Only the doctrine of the Trinity is able to maintain the unity of the church’s common faith, combining its various emphases

¹⁷Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 380-81. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Churches and the Body of Christ*, 16-17, where Niebuhr argues for an interdependence of the Unitarianisms on epistemic grounds. He observes that the Unitarianism of the Father acquires knowledge of God through nature, the Unitarianism of the Son through history, and the Unitarianism of the Spirit through inner experience. All three avenues of knowledge are necessary. Unitarians hurt themselves when they opt for only one source of knowledge and denigrate the other two.

¹⁸Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 382.

¹⁹Niebuhr, “The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church,” 382-83.

into one coherent, interdependent whole. Without the Trinity's unity in diversity, the church will divide into opposing factions, all claiming that their particular Unitarianism is the whole truth. So in the interest of a united church, Niebuhr rebuffs the isolationist attitudes of the three Unitarianisms and seeks to unify them in an ecumenically sensitive doctrine of the Trinity.²⁰

Besides the ecumenical urgency found in "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," Niebuhr elsewhere grounds the doctrine of the Trinity in its utility for theology, the Christian life, and for resolving the Christ and culture problem. First, regarding theology, Niebuhr claims that Christianity becomes unproductive when it emphasizes only one pole or absolute principle, such as Barth's sole emphasis on God or Schleiermacher's sole emphasis on man. It is better for theology to oscillate between these dual principles, for in this way the tension, which confounds reason, turns out to be a fruitful production of mystery and power. Niebuhr suggests that an illustration of such fecund tension exists in the Trinity, which derives its strength from maintaining both poles of unity and diversity.²¹

Second, Niebuhr proposes that the Trinity is the foundation for the Christian life, for only the Godhead's unity in diversity is able to unite the various aspects of our world.²² Elsewhere Niebuhr suggests that a Trinitarian pattern is necessary to produce an ethic for the Christian life²³ and to evaluate missionary motivation.²⁴ Finally, he claims that all genuine Christian piety is directed toward the Trinity as its proper object.²⁵

²⁰Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," 383-84.

²¹Niebuhr, "From the Religion of Humanity to the Religion of God," 407.

²²Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 102-3.

²³Niebuhr, "Christian Ethics," 56.

²⁴Niebuhr, "An Attempt at a Theological Analysis of Missionary Motivation," 1.

²⁵Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 31.

Third, regarding Christ and culture, Niebuhr criticizes the radical and cultural positions for their inadequate Trinitarianism. He states that both views struggle to adequately relate the Son to the Father. The radicals must explain how the Lordship of Jesus relates to the Father who created and sustains the world. Since the Father created nature, and nature grounds culture, then a Christ who opposes culture would also oppose his Father. This, of course, would create a division within the Trinity.²⁶ The cultural position has a different problem. It so focuses on the Christ of culture that it tends to neglect the Father. It is not certain whether he even exists, and if he does, whether or not he is good. Perhaps he is the enemy who will destroy the world and its culture. Thus, its concentration on the Son tends to separate the Son from the Father, which again causes a division within the Godhead.²⁷

Because Niebuhr criticizes the radical and cultural position for their inadequate view concerning the Trinity, he must believe that his conversionist position performs better in this area. If Niebuhr demands a full Trinitarianism in order to properly evaluate Christ and culture, then it would be a significant mistake, especially concerning the topic of this dissertation, if Niebuhr himself fails to develop a sufficiently Trinitarian theology. The following section will argue that this in fact is the case. Despite his protests to the contrary, Niebuhr is a Unitarian.

²⁶Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 80-81, 117-18.

²⁷Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 114-15. Cf. Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 110-11: Hoedemaker states that Niebuhr discovered that the Christ and culture problem is essentially a Trinitarian problem, and that only the conversionist position is sufficiently Trinitarian. The radical position leans toward the Unitarianism of the Spirit, the cultural view towards the Unitarianism of the Father, and the synthesist and dualist positions are too static. Only the conversionist view properly models the Trinity, maintaining the different segments of moral reality in dynamic interrelation.

B. Niebuhr's Demonstration of Unitarianism

Niebuhr's Trinitarian theology is ambiguous enough to provide fodder for scholarly disagreement on the subject. Johnson, Hoedemaker, and Kliever²⁸ contend that Niebuhr is Trinitarian. While the need of any given moment may require him to emphasize different Unitarian strengths, they claim that he retains the various positions within the dynamic unity of the Trinity. As Johnson states, Niebuhr's perspective is always "theocentric in focus and trinitarian in shape."²⁹ Other scholars, such as Godsey, Frei, and Hamilton,³⁰ suggest that Niebuhr leans in a Unitarian direction. Godsey wonders if Niebuhr's radical monotheism prevents him from developing a full Trinitarian theology,³¹ Frei observes that Niebuhr gives almost no attention to the Holy Spirit,³² and Hamilton argues that Niebuhr's commitment to natural theology implies a "radically unitarian God having no feature owing anything at all to the outlook of Christian trinitarianism."³³

The previous section would seem to indicate that Johnson, Hoedemaker, and Kliever are correct to suggest that Niebuhr favors a Trinitarian construction. Nevertheless, with Godsey, Frei, and Hamilton, I will contend in this section that Niebuhr is actually Unitarian. First, Niebuhr himself admits that he is, at most, a functional Binitarian. Following Schleiermacher's lead, Niebuhr evaluates his theology from "the

²⁸Johnson, introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, xxiii, Hoedemaker, *The Theology of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 109-12, and Kliever, *H. Richard Niebuhr*, 138.

²⁹Johnson, introduction to *H. Richard Niebuhr: Theology, History, and Culture*, xxiii.

³⁰Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 37, 99, Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," in *Faith and Ethics*, 14, and Kenneth Hamilton, "Trinitarianism Disregarded: the Theological Orientation of H. Richard Niebuhr and Cyril C. Richardson," *Encounter* 23 (1962): 344.

³¹Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 99-100.

³²Hans Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," in *Faith and Ethics*, 14.

³³Hamilton, "Trinitarianism Disregarded," 344.

point of view of the analysis of faith.”³⁴ When he does so, he realizes that his faith is not aware of the Holy Spirit in the same way that it senses the Father and Son. He explains:

Spirit, rather than being a third personal principle in the Deity, is an attribute of the two persons in the Godhead and that which makes it possible for us to be selves with them. We are thus led to a kind of binitarian formula; God is Father and Son in two persons. The Spirit is that which, being of the very nature of God, is given and matured and restored to human persons. It is the principle of community among selves who are united in trust and loyalty to Father and to Son. But Spirit on the basis of this analysis is not person in the sense in which Father and Son are.³⁵

Niebuhr supports his Binitarianism with two arguments. First, it seems prevalent in the Scriptures and the church. These sources often speak only of the Father and Son rather than the Father, Son, and Spirit. Second, our own experience of faith gives less importance to the Spirit. We pray to the Father through the Son, treating them both as personal companions. We may pray in the Spirit, but we do not thereby imagine the Spirit to be “another person besides Father and Son.” We “rarely address him in prayer” as we address the Father and Son. Furthermore, we may pledge ourselves to the Father and Son, but “it is not ‘natural’ or usual for Christian faith to commit itself in allegiance to the Holy Spirit.” For all these reasons, our analysis of faith prompts us to downplay the personal viability of the Spirit.³⁶

Nevertheless, Niebuhr attempts to stop short of full-blooded Binitarianism by claiming that although his own faith does not produce belief in the Spirit’s personality, yet others in his community of faith do. He states that this incongruity may be handled in one of three ways. First, we may choose to rely on our own experience and reject the experience of others. Second, we may choose to trust the community's experience, taking their word for the personality of the Spirit even though we have not experienced this

³⁴Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 105.

³⁵Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 105 (emphasis is Niebuhr’s).

³⁶Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 105-6.

ourselves. Third, and the position which Niebuhr prefers, we may avoid making either our own experience or the experience of our community normative.³⁷

This view suggests that we should refrain from using one experience to evaluate another, but should allow room for both to stand within our community. In this way we can permit others within our community to hold a Trinitarian position, even assigning great significance to it ourselves, all the while excluding it as an expression of our faith.

Niebuhr explains:

We can attach great significance to the statement that the Spirit is consubstantial with Father and Son. What we cannot say for ourselves is that the Spirit is not the Father, that he is not the Son, and that he is equal to Father and Son--as a power or a person like them but distinct from them. But those of us who speak in this fashion are not in a position to deny that the classic formulation is true. We can believe it; it is not an expression of our trust in God, however, and not an oath of loyalty to him but only an expression of our lower trust, our secondary but real loyalty to the community of faith which has so expressed its trust in God and so made its vow of fidelity. I believe that there is a Holy Spirit.³⁸

However, can this weak form of Trinitarianism, based solely on the implicit faith of the community, withstand close scrutiny? Is it enough for Niebuhr to place implicit faith in his community, asserting that he believes in the personality of the Holy Spirit because others do? Here Niebuhr appears to anticipate the later Yale school of Hans Frei and George Lindbeck who base doctrine upon a narrative, cultural-linguistic foundation.³⁹ Besides questioning whether this cultural-linguistic method supplies a sufficient ground for belief, we also note that Niebuhr himself does not appear to follow it consistently. In the end he seems to favor the normativity of his own viewpoint over his community. For instance, after explaining that neither his Binitarian perspective nor

³⁷Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 107-8.

³⁸Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 108.

³⁹Hans Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William Placher (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 46-55 and George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1984), 32-41.

the community's Trinitarian perspective should be normative, Niebuhr states: "We shall consider only one reality as normative, God in Christ, Christ in God, to whom the faith of the past and ours is directed and from whom it proceeds."⁴⁰ Since Niebuhr's exclusive use of "God in Christ" and "Christ in God" is a Binitarian position, it appears that, despite his protests of neutrality, he actually prefers his own Binitarian construction to the community's Trinitarianism belief. To summarize: since Niebuhr's own analysis of faith concludes that the Spirit is less than a person, then regardless of what others in his community believe, for all intents and purposes he is a functional Binitarian.⁴¹

Second, having used Niebuhr's own confession to argue that he is functionally Binitarian rather than Trinitarian, I will now consider whether Niebuhr is even Binitarian or whether the thrust of his theology points in a Unitarian direction. My judgment is that Niebuhr is not Unitarian in the modalist sense, for he explicitly states that the members of the Godhead are not identical.⁴² However, he appears to subscribe to the Unitarianism of the Father, implying that the Father alone is God.

The primary evidence for this is Niebuhr's description of the Son. As demonstrated in chapter three, Niebuhr describes divine Sonship in ethical rather than ontic terms. Jesus Christ is the Son through his commitment to radical monotheism. His radical trust and loyalty earn him the right to be the Son of God. It is not something he is by nature.⁴³ Consequently, rather than worshipping Christ as the divine Son of God, Niebuhr warns that any undue attention directed his way detracts from the glory of God. Christians must remember that Jesus is only their own particular path to God, the symbol

⁴⁰Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 108.

⁴¹Cf. Frei, "Niebuhr's Theological Background," in *Faith and Ethics*, 14, which states that Niebuhr gave almost no attention to the Holy Spirit. But see also Niebuhr, "The Ego-Alter Dialectic and the Conscience," 359, where Niebuhr assigns a valuable role in the human conscience to the Holy Spirit.

⁴²Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 105.

⁴³See p. 152-58 of this dissertation.

who reveals God to them. He must not be confused with God himself, for then he becomes an idol, stealing honor from God and casting aspersion on other religions and their paths to God.⁴⁴

If the Son is not truly God, but merely “a man who single-mindedly accepted the assurance that the Lord of heaven and earth was wholly faithful to him and to all creatures,” then Niebuhr’s professed Binitarianism is actually reduced to the Unitarianism of the Father.⁴⁵ As we saw above, while Niebuhr professes discomfort with all Unitarianisms, the Unitarianism of the Father receives almost no criticism from him. Indeed, Niebuhr praises it for its appropriate emphasis on monotheism. Unlike the Unitarianism of the Holy Spirit, which Niebuhr rejects because the Spirit cannot be deduced from an analysis of faith, Niebuhr here observes that the Unitarianism of the Father is “a fundamental and persistent conviction of faith.”⁴⁶

Furthermore, as Kenneth Hamilton cogently argues, the epistemic strategies of the Unitarianism of the Father permeate Niebuhr’s own theology. Specifically, Niebuhr states that Unitarians of the First Article gain knowledge of God through natural theology, such as science and philosophy.⁴⁷ Hamilton contends that this is the precise route which Niebuhr relies upon for knowledge of God. The content of radically monotheistic faith is to know that the One is the center of value. This is something that all people know, or at least could know if they reflect on the nature of faith. Thus, the ultimate knowledge of God appears in natural theology. Special revelation may be

⁴⁴See p. 90-91 and 173-76 of this dissertation. One way that Niebuhr could avoid the Unitarianism of the Father is by distinguishing between the Son who is eternally God and Jesus Christ whose ethical conduct unites him with the Son. While it is theoretically possible that he believes this, he nowhere makes this claim. Instead, he implies that the Son himself exists in a merely ethical relationship to the Father. See Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 99: “The Son reveals himself as Son in his moral, personal character.”

⁴⁵Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 42.

⁴⁶See p. 250 of this dissertation.

⁴⁷See p. 253 of this dissertation.

helpful, but it is unnecessary. Jesus Christ may illustrate the ideal faith, but he is not necessary for one to obtain it. Because Niebuhr relies upon natural theology, and natural theology is a characteristic of Unitarianism, Hamilton concludes that Niebuhr is a Unitarian. I add that Niebuhr is a Unitarian of the Father, for natural theology is characteristic of this particular variety of Unitarianism.⁴⁸

Finally, we agree with Godsey that this Unitarianism of the Father comports well with Niebuhr's view of radical monotheism.⁴⁹ Indeed, since radical monotheism is the heart of Niebuhr's theology, it may well be the case that it has inclined Niebuhr toward his belief in the Unitarianism of the Father. Niebuhr defines radical monotheism as "radical faith in the One God." To count as *radical* monotheism, an individual's faith must focus exclusively upon the "One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist."⁵⁰ Thus, radical monotheism teaches that God is absolutely One. He must have no competitors, not even from fellow members of the Trinity. This is why Niebuhr warns against ascribing worship to the Son. Those who worship and serve the Son as if he was "the center of value and the object of loyalty" commit the heresy of "Christism" and cheat the Father of the honor and service that is due to him alone.⁵¹ Thus, Niebuhr's radical monotheism appears to supply the rationale for rejecting the full deity of the Son and Holy Spirit (as formulated by the Nicene Creed), thereby leading us to conclude that he is actually a Unitarian (of the Father, first article).

To summarize: despite protests to the contrary, Niebuhr appears to be a Unitarian. He does not acknowledge the full deity of the Son, nor worse yet, that the

⁴⁸Hamilton, "Trinitarianism Disregarded: the Theological Orientation of H. Richard Niebuhr and Cyril C. Richardson," 344-46.

⁴⁹Godsey, *The Promise of H. Richard Niebuhr*, 99-100.

⁵⁰Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 31-32.

⁵¹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 59-60. See p. 80 of this dissertation.

Holy Spirit is fully a person. This leaves only the Father as God, which is a Unitarian position. This Unitarianism seems to be grounded in Niebuhr's doctrine of radical monotheism, a doctrine that emphasizes the unity of God at the expense of the Trinitarian distinctions of classical orthodoxy.

C. Implications for His Conversionist Position

Niebuhr's Unitarianism of the Father produces at least two adverse consequences for his belief in "Christ the transformer of culture." Specifically, Niebuhr's inadequate pneumatology prevents him from stating precisely how the transformation of redemption occurs and, second, it prevents him from clearly giving humanity an active role in the transformation process.

First, as we noted in chapter three, Niebuhr struggles to explain how redemption occurs. Lacking orthodoxy's internal operation of the Holy Spirit to explain the miracle of faith, Niebuhr concedes that he "cannot easily say" how faith is mediated to individuals.⁵² Obviously this creates a problem for Niebuhr's conversionist position. It is difficult for him to convincingly argue that Christ will transform culture if he is unable to explain how Christ will accomplish this. How can Niebuhr be certain of the outcome if he does not know the method? His position differs significantly from Neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper, who wrote an expansive treatise entitled, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. Here Kuyper explains that it is the Spirit's internal work of regenerating and sanctifying sinners that culminates "in leading all creation *to its destiny*, the final purpose

⁵²See p. 169 of this dissertation. Cf. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 176.

of which is the glory of God.”⁵³ Kuyper observes that the Holy Spirit is the divine person who perfects or completes the work of God on earth. He “is the Person in the Holy Trinity whose office it is to effect this direct touch and fellowship with the creature in his inmost being, it is He who *dwells* in the hearts of the elect; who *animates* every rational being; who sustains the *principle of life* in every creature.”⁵⁴ Such an emphasis on the Spirit’s contribution to the transformation of culture would significantly strengthen Niebuhr’s own understanding of his conversionist position.

Second, the absence of the Holy Spirit in Niebuhr’s theology tends to reduce humanity to a passive role in the transformation of culture. As noted in chapter three, numerous scholars argue that Niebuhr’s emphasis on the pre-eminence of God in the act of redemption forces him into fatalism. While Niebuhr responds with several reasons why human participation in redemption is important, this participation assumes the predominantly passive forms of waiting for God and preparing the way for his coming.⁵⁵ This passivity is most visible in Niebuhr’s discussion of war. There we saw that Niebuhr advocates waiting upon God to transform the culture of war. Rather than taking it upon themselves to correct this evil situation, people should repent of their own contribution to the war and trust God to end hostilities. This passive attitude prompted Niebuhr to argue that those who genuinely trust in God to redeem the world will not attempt to defend Manchuria from the Japanese invasion but will rather quietly wait for God to act.⁵⁶

⁵³Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, trans. Henri De Vries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 22 (emphasis is Kuyper’s). For the Spirit’s work of regeneration and sanctification see 304-14 and 485-89.

⁵⁴Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 21, 26 (emphasis is Kuyper’s).

⁵⁵See p. 124-30 of this dissertation.

⁵⁶See p. 241-44 of this dissertation. Niebuhr, “The Grace of Doing Nothing,” 378-79.

Niebuhr's passive role for humanity in the transformation of culture would give way to more active involvement if he had a more prominent place for the Holy Spirit in his theology. In contrast to Niebuhr's view of the transcendent Father, whose work of redemption inspires human passivity, the immanent Spirit accomplishes his salvific work through people. Because the Spirit is divine, the work of transformation still belongs to God. However, now through his Spirit God is transforming culture through his people rather than without them. Herman Bavinck illustrates this better way in his essay, "Common Grace." There Bavinck argues for Christian involvement in every area of culture because every aspect "can be sanctified by the word and Spirit of Christ." Because the Spirit is actively transforming culture, people should be, too.⁵⁷

II. Conflation of Creation, Fall, and Redemption

Besides failing to make personal distinctions within the Godhead, Niebuhr's second difference from Neo-Calvinism is his failure to consistently maintain temporal distinctions between the historical acts of creation, fall, and redemption. As we noted in chapter 2, this blurring of temporal distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption is grounded in Niebuhr's understanding of the unity of God. Rather than state that God variously creates, judges, and redeems the world, Niebuhr asserts that the one God

⁵⁷Herman Bavinck, "Common Grace," trans. Raymond C. Van Leeuwen, *Calvin Theological Journal* 24 (1989): 62-65. Cf. Kuiper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 488: "Unless the breath of the Lord blow through the garden of the soul, not a leaf can stir. The Lord alone performs the work from the beginning to the end. But He performs it partly by the aid of means; and the instrument chosen is often *man himself*, who cooperates with God" (emphasis is Kuiper's). See also Arnold Van Ruler, "Structural Differences Between the Christological and Pneumatological Perspectives," in *Calvinist Trinitarianism and Theocentric Politics: Essays Toward a Public Theology*, trans. John Bolt (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1989), 27-46 and John Bolt, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35 (2000): 233-37. These essays explain that while the language of divine-human cooperation is out of place when speaking of the work of Christ, it is appropriate when speaking pneumatologically.

performs one action that believers variously construe as creation, judgment, and redemption.⁵⁸ Here is the point: if Niebuhr's inadequate chronological distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption arises from his view of the oneness of God, and, if as suggested in the previous section, his view of the oneness of God is grounded in his doctrine of radical monotheism,⁵⁹ then we may conclude that Niebuhr's failure to consistently make chronological distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption is at least in part a product of his doctrine of radical monotheism.

This section will attempt to demonstrate that Niebuhr indeed fails to consistently make temporal distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption. It will then explain how this inadequacy produces an understanding that is quite different from Neo-Calvinism concerning the nature of humanity's problem, its solution, and what it means for Christ to transform culture.

A. Absence of Chronological Distinctions

Niebuhr does not consistently make chronological distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption. First, he obscures the chronological order between creation and the fall. As we noted in chapter 2, Niebuhr most likely does not believe in a chronological distinction between creation and the fall. At best, he may have adopted a dialectical approach which enables him to both downplay the unique, cataclysmic fall of Adam and yet criticize his brother, Reinhold, for holding the same view. According to this view, he appears to both deny and defend a chronological distinction between creation and the

⁵⁸See p. 30-35 of this dissertation.

⁵⁹See p. 262 of this dissertation. Note that it is not a contradiction to declare on p. 23-27 that Niebuhr grounds divine unity in his responsibility theory and to say here that he grounds it in radical monotheism, for radical monotheism is merely one, albeit the correct, form of responsibility ethics (i.e., radical monotheism is the only approved conduct in Niebuhr's responsibility theory).

fall.⁶⁰ However, (H. Richard) Niebuhr's own writings seem to emphasize only one side of the dialectic: the side that dismisses a chronological distinction between creation and the fall. Indeed, outside of Niebuhr's criticism of Reinhold and one passage in *Faith On Earth*, I have found no place where he argues for or implies a chronological distinction between these two events.⁶¹

Instead, Niebuhr asserts that there never was a golden age of perfect righteousness that existed prior to a cataclysmic fall. Rather he believes that humanity has always been fallen, or alienated from God.⁶² Furthermore, in *Christ and Culture* he states that the fall "is a present falling away from the Word" rather than an event that happened in the life of a first man.⁶³ He adds that the fall "is more significantly named the first sin of man than the sin of the first man...".⁶⁴ Unlike Niebuhr, Neo-Calvinists such as Bavinck clearly make a chronological distinction between creation and the fall. Bavinck writes: "The third chapter of Genesis already tells us of the fall and the disobedience of man. Presumably it was not a long period after his creation before he made himself guilty of transgressing the Divine commandment. Creation and fall are not co-existent and are not to be identified with each other. They differ from each other in nature and essence, but chronologically they are close together."⁶⁵

⁶⁰See p. 30-35 of this dissertation.

⁶¹See p. 31-32 and 271 of this dissertation.

⁶²See p. 30-31, 65-66, and 219-20 of this dissertation.

⁶³Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 200.

⁶⁴Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, 211.

⁶⁵Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 221.

Second, besides removing temporal distinctions between creation and the fall, Niebuhr also fails to consistently distinguish, either chronologically or logically, between the fall and redemption. Niebuhr's dialectical understanding of redemption does enable him to chronologically distinguish between it and the fall. On the one hand, if understood as the process by which God transforms distrustful and disloyal sinners into faithful and obedient subjects, then redemption would be chronologically distinct from the fall, since by definition the term "process" implies temporal order. Nevertheless, while one side of Niebuhr's dialectic enables him to chronologically distinguish redemption from the fall, the other side prevents him from doing so consistently. For instance, Niebuhr also defines redemption as God's attitude of love and faithfulness to his creation. According to this definition, since every event expresses God's loyalty and commitment to creation then every event, no matter how perverse, must be redemptive. Thus, there is no temporal or logical distinction between the fall and redemption.⁶⁶

The absence of this distinction appears most noticeably when Niebuhr uses the symbol of the cross to interpret fallen activity, most notably war.⁶⁷ He does not clearly distinguish fallen activity, such as war, from God's redemptive response to that activity, the cross. Rather than representing God's response to evil, the cross becomes identified with the evil activity, for it informs us concerning what God is doing in the war. Thus, God is no longer merely saving people from evil, but he is now directly responsible for it.

This in itself might not be so bad. Anyone who believes in divine sovereignty would admit that no event, regardless how evil, occurs outside God's sovereign will.

⁶⁶See p. 35 of this dissertation.

⁶⁷See p. 162-64 and 238-44 of this dissertation.

However, Niebuhr's confusion between the fall and redemption leads him to credit God's *redemption* with the many atrocities of war. Niebuhr is not merely confessing a belief in divine sovereignty, but is asserting that evil is God's method of redemption. He asserts that God uses the suffering of people, whether deserved or not, in a vicarious way to reconcile people to God and to each other.⁶⁸ While it is true that God may bring good out of evil, Niebuhr appears to go too far when he states that evil is the intended avenue for the good. It would be preferable to say that redemption is God's response to evil, not its cause.

Finally, if Niebuhr fails to consistently make chronological distinctions between creation and the fall and between the fall and redemption, then using the fall as the middle term, he must also fail to consistently make chronological distinctions between creation and redemption. In short, creation, fall, and redemption become temporally indistinguishable. And this is what we find when we examine Niebuhr's own words. As we discovered in chapter 2, Niebuhr believes that God performs a single, eternal action that simultaneously affirms (creation), sustains (providence), limits (judgment), and saves his creation (redemption). Rather than positing temporal distinctions between these events, Niebuhr insists that they merely comprise various perspectives on the single divine act.⁶⁹

⁶⁸See p. 164 and 240-41 of this dissertation.

⁶⁹See p. 27-30 of this dissertation. Niebuhr's conflation of creation, fall, and redemption is inconsistent with his support for narrative theology. He eloquently argues for framing theology within the story of creation, fall, and redemption. So it is surprising that he himself does not sufficiently distinguish between them. See Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation*, 43-59 and *Christ and Culture*, 191-96.

B. Consequences

Niebuhr's failure to consistently make temporal distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption leads him to differ from Neo-Calvinism regarding the nature of humanity's problem and its solution. First, concerning humanity's problem, Neo-Calvinism's temporal distinction between creation and the fall prompts it to assert that the human race has suffered an ethical fall. Though originally created with a good nature, humanity since Adam has been born with a sinful nature. For example, Kuyper approvingly cites article fifteen of "The Confession of the Reformed Churches," which states that "through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind."⁷⁰

Unlike Kuyper's position, Niebuhr's failure to consistently make chronological distinctions between creation and the fall appears to alter the fall from an ethical collapse to an ontological description of reality. If there never was a golden age that preceded a unique, cataclysmic fall, then people have always been fallen. Indeed, it is the act of creation which makes them sinners. People are alienated from God merely because they are distinct from him. Finding themselves distinct from God, they are not sure whether they can trust him. This fear breeds unfaithfulness, and they immediately fall into

⁷⁰Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 256. Cf. *ibid.*, 222-26 and Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 167, 179, 183, and 225.

various forms of henotheism and polytheism as they attempt to protect themselves from the God who they perceive to be an enemy.⁷¹

Niebuhr's own words support this evaluation. In *Faith On Earth* he writes that our faith in God "has always been present to us in a negative form and is now so present to us. Faith in God is the accompaniment of our existence as selves but first of all it is a dark background; it is present negatively as distrust and fear and hostility."⁷² Since Niebuhr does not believe in a unique, cataclysmic fall, then the negative faith that has always been with us must have begun at creation. The following pages confirm this suspicion, for Niebuhr states that "our natural faith, our ordinary human attitude toward the transcendent source of our existence, is one of disappointment, of distrust, and of disbelief." A moment later, he explicitly identifies this "natural" condition as a "fallen" state.⁷³

Niebuhr attempts to back off from this chronological conflation of creation and fall by appealing to an Augustinian understanding of evil. He explains that while our natural condition is distrust towards the "Transcendent," this is not our "fundamental" state.⁷⁴ It cannot be fundamental, for the existence of evil requires the existence of a prior good. Because evil is a parasite on the good, it cannot exist apart from the good. Thus, "distrust or disloyalty cannot be the first fact." Instead, "the negative relations of

⁷¹Cf. Gilkey, *On Niebuhr*, 234-35, where Gilkey perceptively observes that the elimination of a chronological distinction between creation and fall leaves neo-orthodox theologians unable to explain "why each of us, and all of us together, fall." Neo-orthodox theologians such as Niebuhr do not wish to ascribe human fallenness to creation. But lacking a chronological distinction between creation and fall, this seems inevitable.

⁷²Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 64.

⁷³Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 67.

⁷⁴Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 68.

distrust, disloyalty, and disbelief all presuppose the previous establishment of trust, loyalty, and belieffulness.” Niebuhr concludes that the fall is genuine and “cannot be the absolute beginning of our personal existence.”⁷⁵

While Niebuhr uses an Augustinian view of evil to create some chronological distance between creation and the fall, his implication that the fall is an ontological event is clearly not Augustinian. Unlike Augustine, who taught that a good creation did not have to turn bad, Niebuhr implies that the fall was inevitable. Furthermore, unlike Augustine, who believed that the atonement would not be necessary had Adam not fallen, Niebuhr’s belief in the inevitability of the fall implies the logical necessity of redemption. Thus, even if Niebuhr is sometimes able to chronologically distinguish between creation, fall, and redemption, yet his understanding of these events still falls short of an Augustinian position.⁷⁶

Second, Niebuhr’s absence of a consistent chronological distinction between the fall and redemption compels him to differ from Neo-Calvinism concerning the solution to humanity’s problem. If the fall and redemption are not temporally distinct, then there is no time when humanity is actually unredeemed. We noticed this in chapter 3 when we mentioned Niebuhr’s subjective understanding of the atonement. There we found that Niebuhr reduces the atonement to an act of revelation. The atonement occurs when individuals become aware that God is on their side. Once they realize that God is their friend rather than their enemy, they understand that they have never actually been

⁷⁵Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth*, 78.

⁷⁶See p. 34 of this dissertation.

alienated from him. Thus, redemption is only a cognitive act. It is learning that humanity's alienation from God existed only in their minds.⁷⁷

This cognitive understanding of redemption differs significantly from Neo-Calvinism's view. Because Neo-Calvinists chronologically distinguish between the fall and redemption, they assert that there is a time in the lives of all individuals when they are actually alienated from God. Neo-Calvinists add that individuals are ethically alienated from God, not merely separated by their cognitive misinterpretation of reality. Kuyper explains this ethical alienation: "Our confession is, and ever shall be, that by nature man is dead in trespasses and sin, lying under the curse, ripe for the just judgment of God, and still ripening for an eternal condemnation."⁷⁸ The only way out of this ethical alienation is by what Kuyper calls the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration. Unlike Niebuhr's cognitive view of redemption, Kuyper explains that regeneration radically transforms a sinner's ethical nature. He writes: "there is one great act of God which re-creates the corrupt sinner into a new man, viz., the comprehensive act of regeneration, which contains three parts—quickenings, conversion, and sanctification."⁷⁹ Bavinck agrees that regeneration accomplishes "a spiritual and moral change" within believers.⁸⁰ And like Kuyper, his description of regeneration contrasts sharply with Niebuhr's merely cognitive view. He writes concerning God's work:

⁷⁷See p. 109-11, 165-66 of this dissertation. It is noteworthy that Niebuhr's understanding of redemption is similar to Barth, who declares that sin is an "impossible possibility." G. C. Berkouwer suggests that Barth's denial of the reality of sin prevents "a transition from wrath to grace in the historical sphere." See G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 233.

⁷⁸Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 304.

⁷⁹Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*, 319. Cf. *ibid.*, 315-17, where Kuyper approvingly cites articles on regeneration from the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort.

⁸⁰Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 424.

...He also penetrates to the inner man with the powerful operation of that same regenerating Spirit. And this operation, in the words of that same confession, is an entirely supernatural one, a very powerful and at the same time a very sweet, wonderful, mysterious, and unspeakable operation, which, according to the testimony of the Scriptures (given, we must remember, by the author of this same working or influence), is not less in power than the power exhibited at the creation or at the resurrection of the dead (Canons of Dordt, III, iv, 12).⁸¹

Finally, Niebuhr and Neo-Calvinism's disagreement concerning the nature of humanity's problem and its solution contains implications for the transformation of culture. For example, Neo-Calvinism asserts that culture is transformed as the Holy Spirit regenerates sinners into righteous children of God who then seek to redeem their world. In his *Lectures on Calvinism* Kuyper observes that since the world is fallen then "only a *regenerating* power can warrant it the final attainment of its goal."⁸² Calvinists understand that they must not restrict their personal regeneration to concern for only spiritual realities but that they must use their regeneration for *the restoration of the entire cosmos*.⁸³ Likewise, Bavinck affirms the need for grace to transform culture. He writes: "Grace does not remain outside or above or beside nature but rather permeates and wholly renews it. And thus nature, reborn by grace, will be brought to its highest revelation."⁸⁴ On the other hand, Niebuhr's view does not demand the same radical grace of regeneration to transform culture. Instead, his understanding of humanity's problem and its solution implies that culture is transformed when people are informed that they are

⁸¹Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 423.

⁸²Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931; reprinted 1999), 132 (emphasis is Kuyper's).

⁸³Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism*, 118-19 (emphasis is Kuyper's).

⁸⁴Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59-60.

already accepted by God and encouraged to live as if they believe it (i.e., in loyal service to God and his creation community).

III. Universalism

As we observed in chapter 3, Niebuhr fails to distinguish between the divergent destinies of the human race. In other words, he believes in soteriological universalism.⁸⁵ Now we suggest that that this universalism quite possibly arises from his foundational belief in radical monotheism. This possibility is demonstrated by each of radical monotheism's two movements. For instance, the first movement of radical monotheism is its trust in God as the sovereign and good power of the universe. Because God is both sovereign and good, Niebuhr concludes that God will ultimately save everyone.⁸⁶ If any individuals are lost then God is either not sovereign or not good, and in that case radical monotheism will turn out to be a misplaced faith. Niebuhr clearly does not believe that this will happen. Thus, the first movement of radical monotheism leads Niebuhr to believe in universal salvation.

The second movement of radical monotheism occurs when the believer recognizes his interconnectedness with every other facet of creation. Since this interconnectedness forms his personal identity, the loss of any one part of creation would diminish his personhood and consequently lessen the fullness of his salvation. Thus, the full redemption of any individual requires the redemption of all creation.⁸⁷ Besides this interconnectedness, the second movement of radical monotheism also consists of the

⁸⁵See p. 179-82 of this dissertation.

⁸⁶See p. 181 of this dissertation.

⁸⁷See p. 179 of this dissertation.

believer loyally serving all of creation. However, this universal service is only possible if all creation is ultimately reconciled to God. If any part of creation is lost, then service to all creation, and consequently radical monotheism, becomes impossible. Thus, this analysis of radical monotheism's two movements demonstrates that it is logical to assume that Niebuhr's belief in radical monotheism and soteriological universalism are interdependent. Since radical monotheism is Niebuhr's more foundational doctrine, we suggest that it logically gives rise to his belief in universalism rather than vice versa.

In relation to the transformation of culture, Niebuhr's belief in universalism differs from Neo-Calvinism in three important areas. First, as we noted in chapter three, Niebuhr believes in religious inclusivism. He contends that other, non-Christian religions may successfully locate their own path of reconciliation with God.⁸⁸ Surprisingly, this inclusivism is not so different from Neo-Calvinism as one might suppose. Though he does not open the door to other religions as widely as Niebuhr, yet Bavinck does concede that he cannot say for certain that salvation never occurs outside the church. He writes that "both with regard to the salvation of pagans and that of children who die in infancy, we cannot get beyond abstaining from a firm judgment, in either a positive or a negative sense."⁸⁹ He continues by observing that Reformed theology teaches that God, if he wishes, can regenerate people without using the Word and sacraments. However, while salvation outside the church is possible, Bavinck does not use this possibility to argue for soteriological universalism. Unlike Niebuhr, he asserts that certain universalistic texts

⁸⁸See p. 173-76 of this dissertation.

⁸⁹Bavinck, *The Last Things*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 165.

cannot mean “that all humans or even all creatures are saved, nor are they so understood by any Christian church.”⁹⁰

Second, Niebuhr offers a lighter view than Neo-Calvinism of divine judgment. Although Niebuhr speaks often of God’s judgment, how severe can it be if it is not final? As we saw in chapter three, Niebuhr does not believe in the existence of hell. Instead, he asserts that hell is the creation of a defensive church that seeks to threaten people into obedience.⁹¹ This position is in sharp contrast with Bavinck, who clearly states that God’s judgment upon evildoers is everlasting. Bavinck states that everlasting punishment is necessary to vindicate God’s justice. He concludes: “There is, therefore, no doubt that in the day of judgment God will fully vindicate himself in the presence of all his creatures even when he pronounces eternal punishment upon sinners.”⁹²

Third, Niebuhr differs from Neo-Calvinism in regard to the specifics of his eschatology. For instance, Bavinck’s *Reformed Dogmatics* discusses at length specific eschatological issues, such as the nature of immortality, the intermediate state, the return of Christ, the day of the Lord, the last judgment, and the new earth.⁹³ In contrast, Niebuhr’s eschatology is curiously vague. Indeed, his commitment to soteriological universalism is nearly his only statement regarding the eschaton. Niebuhr is silent concerning how the final end occurs and what it will be like.⁹⁴ One can only wonder how

⁹⁰Bavinck, *The Last Things*, 166. Cf. *ibid.*, 144-54.

⁹¹See p. 180-81 of this dissertation.

⁹²Bavinck, *The Last Things*, 153. Cf. *ibid.*, 147-54.

⁹³This portion of Bavinck’s dogmatics has been translated into English as the volume, *The Last Things* (cited above).

⁹⁴It is telling that no secondary source comments on Niebuhr’s eschatology. This silence indicates that Niebuhr did not consider eschatology to be an important subject.

Niebuhr envisioned his universal salvation. In the end, what does it mean for culture to be transformed? While transforming culture is a fine principle, in Niebuhr's thought it appears to lack any final content.

IV. Conflation Between Humanity's Natural and Supernatural Ends

We have noted Niebuhr's lack of clarity concerning personal distinctions within the Godhead, temporal distinctions between the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption, and soteriological distinctions between the various members of the human race. Now we also note that Niebuhr is unclear concerning the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. While his meaning is not as clear as it was in his previous failures to make distinctions, yet Niebuhr does seem to dismiss the notion that individual humans possess distinct natural (limited to this life) and supernatural ends (directed beyond this life).⁹⁵

Like the previous absence of distinctions, so this particular lack of distinction quite possibly arises from Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism. In *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, Niebuhr argues that radical monotheism creates an egalitarianism within the order of being. In order to promote this egalitarianism, radical monotheism eliminates any distinction within being that would suggest a hierarchy. In particular, one of these eliminated distinctions is any ultimate difference between the natural and supernatural realms. Niebuhr explains:

⁹⁵Niebuhr certainly understands the distinction between natural and supernatural ends. Indeed, this distinction corresponds to and addresses the same issues as his typology of Christ and culture. Nevertheless, while Niebuhr wrestles much with the distinction, his rejection of the synthesist view (which explicitly argues for a natural-supernatural distinction) and monistic explanation of his preferred conversionist view indicates that he did not finally subscribe to it.

The theology of *radical monotheism* knows that the second commandment is implicit in and equal to the first. If the first requirement on every man in every action is loyalty to the Universal and Transcendent its corollary is loyalty to all other beings emanating from and proceeding toward that Beginning and End of all. A kind of equalitarianism must prevail therefore in the universal society, not only as among individual men, communities, and cultures but among the orders of being. Matter and spirit, mind and body, *nature and supernature* proceed from the one source and are bound together in one community in which there is no high or low, no hierarchically ordered chain of being, but in which each kind of being is entitled to reverence, understanding, and service, while it in turn is servant to the rest.⁹⁶

Elsewhere Niebuhr suggests that the reason why the natural-supernatural distinction cannot be ultimate is because both spheres are finite. As such they fall short of the ultimate unity of all things espoused in radical monotheism. God, or the One, is the sole and final reality that unites all lesser, finite distinctions. Thus, radical monotheism's doctrine concerning the ultimate unity of all things prevents Niebuhr from attributing finality to the natural-supernatural distinction. He implies as much in his discussion of the source of value. There he writes: "It is not a relation to any finite, *natural or supernatural*, value-center that confers value on self and some of its companions in being, but it is value relation to the One to whom all being is related."⁹⁷

Niebuhr's dismissal of the finality of the natural-supernatural distinction comports well with Neo-Calvinism's avoidance of Gnostic dualism.⁹⁸ Like Neo-Calvinists, Niebuhr seeks to eliminate any hard distinction between sacred and secular realms. No sphere of life is secular, meaning unrelated to God, because all of life matters to the One

⁹⁶Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 97-98 (emphasis mine).

⁹⁷Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 32.

⁹⁸See Albert Wolters, *Creation Regained* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 42-43, 50-56, 64-69.

who created it.⁹⁹ This may be all Niebuhr intends by the following quote from *The Responsible Self*: “When my world is divided into two domains, *the natural and the supernatural*, or the physical and the spiritual, or the secular and the religious, in which different powers are interpreted as at work, and different meanings and patterns of actions are evident, then I have two selves. But insofar as in (faith) trust I acknowledge that whatever acts upon me, in whatever domain of being, is part of, or participates in, one ultimate action, yet I am now one.”¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr expresses a similar thought in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*. There he states that radical monotheism directs every sphere of life, even those that are not overtly religious, to the omnipresent God. He writes: “The radical faith becomes incarnate insofar as every reaction to every event becomes a response in loyalty and confidence to the One who is present in all such events. The First Person encountered in the temple is also the First Person encountered in the political arena, or in the market place, or among the hungry and plague-ridden. No

⁹⁹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 53: “How difficult the monotheistic reorganization of the sense of the holy is, the history of Western organized religion makes plain. In it we encounter ever new efforts to draw some new line of division between the holy and the profane. A holy church is separated from a secular world; a sacred priesthood from an unhallowed laity; a holy history of salvation from the unsanctified course of human events; the sacredness of human personality, or of life, is maintained along with the acceptance of a purely utilitarian valuation of animal existence or of nonliving being. The secular aspects of holy books, churches, and histories are denied; the holiness of the secular is unrealized. Organized religion often seems to co-operate with other institutions in the attempt to give a purely utilitarian evaluation to natural goods, physical life, political activity, and family existence. In the history of Western organized religion we cannot discern a progressive movement toward a universal secularization accompanying universal sanctification of being, but only ever new reformations tending in that direction, followed by renewed lapses into the bifurcation of the holy and the profane.”

Cf. Niebuhr, “Toward the Independence of the Church,” in *The Church Against the World*, 126: radical monotheism recognizes that “it is difficult to draw a precise line between culture and religion.” Nothing is merely cultural or religious. Religious activities are performed in culture, and cultural activities, insofar as they are directed to the One, are religious.

¹⁰⁰Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self*, 122 (emphasis mine).

action directed toward human companions or toward other nations or toward animals but is also directed toward the One who is their creator and savior.”¹⁰¹

Nevertheless, while on the one side Niebuhr’s apparent dismissal of a natural-supernatural distinction clearly and correctly avoids a false dualism, it is not as clear whether it successfully avoids the other extreme of monism. Does Niebuhr’s zeal for radical monotheism and the subsequent unity it brings to life prevent him from making an important distinction within humanity? While Niebuhr correctly implies that there is no final difference between the natural and supernatural domains, does he incorrectly suggest that there is no significant difference between them at all? In short, does he sufficiently distinguish between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends?

Niebuhr’s lack of clarity on this issue contrasts sharply with the clear delineations of Neo-Calvinism. Calvin himself employs the distinction between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends in order to explain the damage caused by sin. Consciously drawing on his Augustinian tradition, Calvin professes that “the natural gifts in man were corrupted, but the supernatural taken away.”¹⁰² By natural gifts he means the soul’s faculties of intellect and will, and by supernatural he means the ethical function of these faculties, such as “faith, love of God, charity toward neighbor, zeal for holiness and righteousness.” These supernatural gifts were intended “to attain heavenly life and eternal bliss.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 48.

¹⁰²Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.4. Cf. *Institutes* II.2.12 and II.5.19. See also Augustine, “On Nature and Grace,” chap. 3, 21-22, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprinted 1991), 122, 127-28.

¹⁰³Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.12, vol. I:270.

Calvin's distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends is picked up by Bavinck. While Bavinck resists a sharp division between these two ends, stating that Scripture "maintains the intimate connectedness of the spiritual and the natural," he nevertheless thinks that a distinction between them is necessary in order to account for human nature.¹⁰⁴ He explains that a human individual is a compilation of natural and supernatural ends. Bavinck explains: "He is of kin to all the world, formed out of matter, earthy of the earth; nothing natural is strange to him. But in one respect he is different from all creatures; he is the son, the image, the similitude of God, his offspring. Thereby he is elevated above animal and angel, and destined and fitted for dominion over all the world."¹⁰⁵

Bavinck believes that humanity's supernatural end is superior to his natural side. He states that it is humanity's fellowship with God that "can raise him above, and maintain him against, the world."¹⁰⁶ He explains:

In all his thinking and in all his work, in the whole life and activity of man, it becomes apparent that he is a creature who cannot be satisfied with what the whole corporeal world has to offer. He is indeed a citizen of a physical order of affairs, but he also rises above this order to a supernatural one. With his feet planted firmly on the ground, he raises his head aloft and casts his eye up in a vertical look. He has knowledge of things that are visible and temporal, but he is also aware of things that are invisible and eternal. His desire goes out to earthly, sensuous, and transient, but it goes out also to heavenly, spiritual, and everlasting goods.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴Herman Bavinck, *The Last Things*, ed. John Bolt and trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker; Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1996): 161.

¹⁰⁵Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 107-8.

¹⁰⁶Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 254-55.

¹⁰⁷Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 17-18.

Bavinck believes that humanity's supernatural end cannot be satisfied by this earthly, merely natural existence. People possess a "*desiderium aeternitatis*," a "yearning for an eternal order" that can only be fulfilled when it comes to rest in "a highest, absolute, Divine goodness."¹⁰⁸

Neo-Calvinism's clear distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends enables it to state more precisely than Niebuhr how Christ transforms culture. Specifically, the distinction is important to understand the transformation of culture throughout the biblical narrative's three movements of creation, fall, and redemption. First, regarding creation, Neo-Calvinism's clear distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends suggests that cultural acts can be prioritized. Some human decisions and actions are more important than others. In short, those actions that pertain to humanity's supernatural end are more valuable than those that merely relate to its natural side. Bavinck explains this distinction in priority by comparing the gospel to the pearl of great price. As a pearl, the gospel is infinitely more valuable than anything on earth. Everything in the natural world fades into insignificance when compared to the inestimable worth of the kingdom of heaven. Referring to the gospel that Jesus preached, Bavinck explains:

And in that connection he said, that nothing a man possesses in this world--food or drink, covering or clothing, marriage or family, vocation or position, riches or honor--can be compared with that pearl of great price which he alone can present. It must all be abandoned, if necessary, for the gospel's sake, and the treasures of earth are often a great obstacle to entrance into the kingdom of God. In a word, agriculture, industry, commerce, science, art, the family, society, the state, etc.,--the whole of culture--may be of great value in itself, but whenever it is thrown into the balance against the kingdom of heaven, it loses all its significance. The gaining of the whole world avails a man nothing if he loses his own soul; there is nothing in creation which he can give in exchange for his soul.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁸Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 18-19.

¹⁰⁹Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 257.

With this comparative value in mind, Bavinck concludes that “culture, therefore sinks into the background; man must first become again a son of God before he can be, in a genuine sense, a cultured being.” This is why the Old Testament prophets and Christ preached the gospel rather than the development of culture. They knew that nothing in this world was as important as establishing the kingdom of heaven.¹¹⁰

In contrast to Bavinck’s clear distinction in priority, Niebuhr’s apparent lack of a natural-supernatural distinction levels the importance of human actions. Niebuhr denies that a hierarchy exists within the order of being. Instead, inasmuch as all beings are related to the One, which is the source of value, then all beings are equally valuable. This implies that any action performed for the benefit of any being is equally valuable. So long as the action is ultimately directed toward the One, it is as valuable and worthwhile as any other action. In this view it seems that preserving the life of vegetation can be as important as preserving human life.¹¹¹ While Niebuhr correctly declares that every human action must be directed toward God, his overstatement of this point precludes him from making important distinctions between the actions themselves. The fact that all human actions are important to God need not imply that all actions are equally so.

Second, Neo-Calvinism’s clear distinction between humanity’s natural and supernatural ends enables it to state precisely how good remains possible in this fallen world. Calvin himself states that though human nature has been corrupted by sin, it cannot be eliminated. Even a fallen intellect retains the ability to reason and produce

¹¹⁰Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 266. Bavinck observes that Christ does not only compare the gospel to the pearl of great price whose value transcends the world. He also compares it to leaven. Thus, rather than take his followers from the world, Christ sends them back into the world to shape and influence culture with his wisdom and sacrificial life. In this way Christians live with a tension between the gospel as pearl and leaven, nature and supernature, or to use Niebuhr’s expression, Christ and culture. They must refrain from paying too much attention to culture, thereby allowing it to eclipse their commitment to Christ. On the other hand, they must never ignore culture, for to do so is to diminish the power of Christ upon the world. Bavinck believes that this tension will remain with all Christians until they reach the state of glory. See idem, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, 268, “The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church,” 223-24, 236, 248, and “Common Grace,” 56.

¹¹¹See p. 42-45, 115-21 of this dissertation.

culture, making great strides in the liberal arts, societal laws, science, and philosophy.¹¹² Although such cultural advances fall far short of supernatural good, concerning which Calvin remarks that “the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles,” yet he insists that they are still important.¹¹³ They are a tribute to “the general grace of God,” a common grace that inspires Christians and unbelievers alike to cultural activity in the natural realm.¹¹⁴ Thus, while sin has eliminated the possibility of performing supernatural good, it cannot erase humanity’s natural abilities. We should not make too much of this, for it is only *natural* good. On the other hand, we should not make too little of it, for it is still *good*.

Calvin’s notion of God’s “general grace” is incorporated into what later Neo-Calvinists call “common grace.” For instance, Bavinck declares that God’s non-salvific, common grace bestows the gifts of nature on all people and restrains the extent of their depravity, thereby allowing them to employ their natural powers for the development of culture. Such “natural gifts” as the “seed of religion,” “reason,” “music,” “the arts and sciences,” “the state,” “a sense of the truth and of right and wrong,” and the “natural love that binds parents and children together” all belong to common grace. Bavinck’s point is that God does not merely leave sinners to wallow in their corruption and misery. Rather he bestows common gifts that inspire even them to improve their world.¹¹⁵

In contrast to Neo-Calvinism, Niebuhr’s lack of clarity concerning humanity’s natural and supernatural ends prevents him from clearly formulating a doctrine of

¹¹²Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.13-17, vol. I:271-77. Dewey Hoitenga rightly criticizes Calvin for not preserving the same amount of natural goodness for the fallen will as he does for the fallen intellect. Although Calvin states that the fallen will does not perish (II.2.12, vol. I:271), yet he does not retain the possibility of any good for it. See Dewey Hoitenga, *John Calvin and the Will* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 73-74, 120-21.

¹¹³Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.18, vol. I:277.

¹¹⁴Calvin, *Institutes* II.2.17, vol. I:276.

¹¹⁵Bavinck, “Common Grace,” 51, 40-41.

common grace. To be fair, there is one passage where Niebuhr notices the presence of something like common grace. In *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* he writes:

...the world is the community of those who are occupied with temporal things. When, in its sense of rejection, it is preoccupied with these temporal matters it is the world of idolatry and becomes foe of the Church. When it is occupied with them as gifts of God--whether or not the consciousness of grace becomes explicit--it is the partner of the Church, doing what the Church, concerned with the nontemporal, cannot do; knowing what Church as such cannot know.¹¹⁶

Unfortunately, Niebuhr does not develop this concept further, and it remains at the periphery of his theology. The overriding thrust of his concern for radical monotheism implies that human actions are either good because they are directed toward the One or sinful because they are directed to some finite cause. This all or nothing implication of radical monotheism obscures the possibility and importance of merely natural good.¹¹⁷

Third, Neo-Calvinism's clear distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends enables it to account for an important element of redemption. Specifically, Bavinck asserts that one significant feature of redemption is that it will end all dualisms and uncomfortable tensions of the present age. Whereas now Christians struggle to relate nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural, religion and culture, and the gospel as pearl and leaven, such problems will become moot in the final

¹¹⁶Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry*, 26. In relation to common grace, Niebuhr also admits that cultures which fail to achieve radical monotheism may still possess lesser goods. For example, in *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 65-67, Niebuhr observes that modern nations often direct their citizens' loyalties to a cause which transcends the nation itself. Popular causes include democracy, human rights, freedom, a specific religion, or even the caretaker of culture. While none of these causes rises to the level of the One of radical monotheistic faith, yet they all still surpass purely selfish, anthropocentric ends. They fall far short of Niebuhr's goal, but they remain better than many alternatives.

¹¹⁷Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 48: though speaking in quantitative rather than the qualitative terms used in the text above, this passage reflects the all or nothing nature of radical monotheism. Niebuhr states that "radical faith, therefore, is either expressed by the self in all its roles and relations, or is not expressed at all. It is either revealed to and incarnate in the total human life or it does not exist."

redemption. Then Christ will unite all dualities, reconciling them with each other before handing them over to the Father.¹¹⁸

In contrast to Bavinck, Niebuhr is silent concerning this facet of redemption. This may be expected on account of his general silence on eschatology and his particular lack of a natural-supernatural distinction. Because Niebuhr does not explain what the eschaton is like he does not consider the possibility of a union between natural and supernatural spheres there. Furthermore, because he apparently does not make a distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends, no redemptive union is required. Since the problem of relating humanity's natural and supernatural ends does not exist, there is no need for a solution. Thus, Niebuhr's failure to explicitly acknowledge the present tension between humanity's natural and supernatural ends precludes him from the fuller, Neo-Calvinist understanding of redemption.

To summarize: although Neo-Calvinists often use the phrase "Christ the transformer of culture" to explain their Reformational worldview, they do not entirely mean by the phrase what its originator, H. Richard Niebuhr, intended by it. Specifically, Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism quite possibly influenced his failure to make adequate or clear distinctions concerning the transformation of culture in four important areas. First, Niebuhr fails to preserve personal distinctions within the Godhead, a mistake that leads him to subscribe to the Unitarianism of the Father. In relation to transforming culture, Niebuhr's Unitarianism prohibits him from giving adequate attention to the Holy Spirit. This neglect of the Spirit in turn prevents Niebuhr

¹¹⁸Bavinck, "Common Grace," 59. Cf. *ibid.*, 56: "The relation of faith and knowledge, of theology and philosophy, of authority and reason, of head and heart, of Christianity and humanity, of religion and culture, of heavenly and earthly vocation, of religion and morality, of the contemplative and the active life, of sabbath and workday, of church and state--all these and many other questions are determined by the problem of the relation between creation and re-creation, between the work of the Father and the work of the Son. Even the simple, common man finds himself caught up in this struggle whenever he senses the tension that exists between his earthly and heavenly calling. No wonder, then, that such a delicate and complicated problem remains unresolved and that no one in this dispensation achieves a completely harmonious answer." Cf. Syd Hielema, "Herman Bavinck's Eschatological Understanding of Redemption" (Ph.D. diss., Wycliffe College, Toronto School of Theology, 1995), 79, 82, 231-32, 237, 271.

from stating precisely how the transformation of redemption occurs and from giving humanity an active role in the transformation process.

Second, Niebuhr fails to consistently make chronological distinctions between the historical events of creation, fall, and redemption. This mistake leads him to interpret the human problem as an ontological rather than ethical fall. People are fallen merely because they exist. Since the beginning of creation people have naturally distrusted God and been disloyal to his cause. Niebuhr's failure to consistently make temporal distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption also leads him to base the solution to the human problem in the cognitive domain. The absence of temporal distinctions means that not only have people always been fallen, but also that they have always been redeemed. Thus, redemption occurs when individuals realize that the God they feared is actually their friend. Once they recognize that God is on their side, they understand that they have never been alienated from him, except in their minds. In relation to transforming culture, this cognitive notion of redemption suggests that the method to transform culture is to inform people that they have always been reconciled to God and then to so live as if this was true (i.e., in loyal service to God's cause).

Third, Niebuhr fails to ascertain that various members of the human race will attain different soteriological ends. This soteriological universalism leads Niebuhr to espouse an inclusivist view of world religions and to limit the severity of divine judgment. Furthermore, Niebuhr differs from Neo-Calvinism in his silence concerning the nature of the eschaton. It is noteworthy that for all Niebuhr's discussion of the need to transform culture, he does not describe what that final transformation will be. Fourth, Niebuhr is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends. This lack of clarity prevents him from prioritizing among human cultural acts, stating precisely how even fallen humans may still perform some natural good, and understanding how redemption reconciles the present tension between humanity's natural and supernatural ends.

In all these ways Niebuhr's understanding of "Christ the transformer of culture" differs from Neo-Calvinism. Thus, while Neo-Calvinists may continue to use the phrase to depict their attitude toward culture, they should be careful to recognize their differences from the theologian who initiated the phrase and distance themselves accordingly.

APPENDIX: THESES FOR THE DISSERTATION DEFENSE

I. Dissertation Theses

1. H. Richard Niebuhr's denial of a historical fall denigrates the goodness of creation. In his view people are depraved simply because they exist as creatures distinct from God.
2. H. Richard Niebuhr's belief that every event, including war, is a redemptive act of the sovereign God fails to sufficiently account for the evil nature of fallen conduct.
3. Niebuhr appears to reduce redemption to a cognitive act of revelation. He implies that redemption occurs when individuals learn that the God they mistook for their enemy is actually their friend.
4. "Christ the transformer of culture" is shorthand for the foundational theme of H. Richard Niebuhr's entire theology: God is presently reconciling the world to himself.
5. Niebuhr's signature doctrine of radical monotheism quite possibly influenced his failure to make adequate or clear distinctions concerning the transformation of culture in four important areas. Specifically, he fails to make adequate personal distinctions within the Godhead, temporal distinctions between creation, fall, and redemption, and soteriological distinctions between various members of the human race. He is unclear regarding the distinction between humanity's natural and supernatural ends.

II. Coursework Theses

1. A comparison between Augustine's works *De libero arbitrio* (388-95) and *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (426-27) demonstrates that his mature view of the will is more accurate theologically but less satisfying philosophically than his previous position.
2. John Calvin rightly believes that the metaphysical distinction between God and creation supplies the ground for the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom.

3. Karl Barth's doctrine of the "God who loves in freedom" simultaneously presses him toward and prevents him from an assured belief in universalism.
4. A sanctified good is not considered good on its own merits (Wesley) nor merely by the forgiveness of God (as suggested by the doctrine of double justification in Luther and Calvin). Rather a sanctified good is considered good because it both is forgiven by God and demonstrates progress in righteousness.
5. Belief in God does not arise automatically from religious experience, but is a result of one's prior set of basic beliefs interpreting religious experience in such a way that the experience supports belief in God.

III. Miscellaneous Theses

1. The Lutheran Reformation was more than a misunderstanding.
2. Presuppositional apologetics is not necessarily identical with fideism.
3. Since God is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived," it is better to say that he is eternal, not merely everlasting.

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