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ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE DOCTRINE OF SIN IN THE THEOLOGY OF
REINHOLD NIEBUHR

A thesis presented to the faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Historical Theology
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

by

Hiroyuki Kanamori

May 2000

Approved by _____
Advisor

Reader

Reader

To My Wife
Junko

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INTRODUCTION

Richard W. Fox describes Reinhold Niebuhr by comparing him to Amos:

It was Amos he wished to follow. The Hebrew prophet had warned that the day of the Lord would be darkness and not light, that Yahweh had no use for solemn assemblies or burnt offerings. God would be impressed when justice rolled down like waters and righteousness like an everlasting stream. He scorned those who were at ease in Zion, who lay upon beds of ivory and ignored the urgency of the hour. Niebuhr shared Amos' sense of crisis.¹

Reinhold Niebuhr was an Amos-like prophet who from the 1930s to the 1960s boldly proclaimed the sinfulness of individuals and society in America. At the time he raised his prophetic voice, the most popular understanding of man was liberal optimism's view of human goodness and possibility. His prophetic voice of "man as sinner" caused a major shock, and it resounded not only in church but also in American society. He has often been recognized as one of the best theologians in American history.² Furthermore, his public influence would be proved by the fact that *Time* featured Niebuhr in the cover story of its twenty-fifth anniversary issue of 8 March 1948. It is very rare to find a figure like Niebuhr who was influential in both church and society.

¹ Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), viii.

² Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), 1.

Niebuhr taught Christian ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York from 1928 to 1960. He was also extremely active in editing and writing for both a Christian and public journal; he was also extensively involved in various political activities.

Niebuhr's influence is still evident even today. For example, more than 12 major books about Reinhold Niebuhr have been published in the 1980s and 1990s.³ Niebuhr's importance for the entire twentieth century is obvious; for example, the Christian journal *First Things*⁴ in March 2000 chose Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) as one of the most influential books in the twentieth century, along with Karl Barth's lecture, *Dogmatic in Outline* (1946).

Niebuhr's influence and achievements are so enormous in church and society that the total understanding of Reinhold Niebuhr is obviously impossible in this thesis. Here, the core of Niebuhr's thought and activity, and the theological center of his prophetic denouncing of sin in individuals and societies, will be studied: the doctrine of sin and anthropology as its presuppositional understanding.

³ For example, Ronald H. Stone, *Professor Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), Kenneth Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse Publishing, 1989), Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1992), Larry Rasmussen, ed. *Theologian of Public Life* (London: Collins, 1989), Robin W. Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), and so forth.

⁴ Matthew Berke, "A Century in Books: An Anniversary Symposium," *First Things* 101 (March 2000): 33-36.

Niebuhr's anthropology and doctrine of sin have been crystallized in his magnum opus, *Nature and Destiny of Man* (vol. 1 in 1941 and vol. 2 in 1943). This book will be the main text to be studied, along with consulting of his other works which treat the same theme, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937) and *Faith and History* (1949). Niebuhr's anthropology and doctrine of sin will be analytically studied and evaluated in this thesis, observing the coherence of his hermeneutics in his theology. Furthermore, how much orthodox Christianity⁵ can learn from and interact with Niebuhr's doctrines will be part of the final evaluation.

⁵ Niebuhr uses the term *orthodox Christianity* with reference to Christianity within the classical theological tradition of Augustine and the Reformation. See the quotations on pages 59 and 63.

CHAPTER 1

THE HERMENEUTIC OF REINHOLD NIEBUHR

Understanding the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr is a great challenge, because all components of his theology are intricately interrelated with each other. It is therefore not proper to describe only his anthropology and doctrine of sin, the primary focus of this study, without also mentioning other matters related to it.

This first chapter will first examine Niebuhr's theological presuppositions and framework, namely Christian Realism and dialecticism, within which his theology developed. Next his doctrine of revelation and history will be presented.

Christian Realism

Reinhold Niebuhr has often been categorized as a neo-orthodox theologian. This categorization is true when Niebuhr's role in American church history is compared to neo-orthodoxy's shattering of liberal optimism in Europe. Just as Barth began his criticism of liberalism with *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919), so did Niebuhr with *Moral Man in Immoral Society* (1932). Without question the strong influence on Niebuhr of European neo-orthodoxy is obvious: Niebuhr himself publicly expressed his theological indebtedness to Emil Brunner.¹

¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought* (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 431. Hans

Even so, the theological position of Niebuhr is more correctly known as Christian Realism. Under his leadership, a group of theologians became convinced of the need to correct the prevalent liberal optimism in America. This group was persuaded that Christian Realism presented a more correct understanding of the nature of man. The members of this group were Walter Marshall Horton, Robert Lowry Calhoun, John Coleman Bennett, and H. Richard Niebuhr.

Bennett elucidates in his *Christian Realism* the group's theological concern and distinctives as follows:

The primary reference of the word "Realism" in the title is to the conviction pervading the book that Christianity avoids the illusions of both the optimists and the pessimists. I believe that the liberal optimism of the past generation and the theologians who deduce their view of human possibilities from a dogma of original sin which goes beyond the evidence are both wrong.²

Moreover,

We are distrustful of ambitious theological schemes based upon dogmas that are never fully criticized in the light of what they mean in terms of concrete experience.³

Here Bennett rejects both the optimism of liberalism and the pessimism of neo-orthodoxy. The balance between them is what concerns

Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, trans. Louis Pettibone Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 238. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age*, 69-70.

² John C. Bennett, *Christian Realism* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), x.

³ Bennett, *Christian Realism*, 17. See also Edward Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 38.

Christian Realism the most. More precisely, Christian Realism denies any dogmatic forming of reality into its theological system. On the contrary, they emphasize experience as the judge of dogma.

We desire to know more clearly what a doctrine of sin means psychologically or in terms of actual social experience, and when we hear about such ideas as the doctrine of the two natures of Christ or the theory of the impersonal humanity of Christ we press for some explanation of what those ideas mean for our understanding of Jesus Christ as a concrete human individual. When we hear pious words about the Church, with a capital C, we desire to know how those words apply to the very familiar and very human institutions in our communities which we call churches. This empirical temper seems to me to be a quite necessary corrective for traditional ways of thinking⁴

Thus the role of theology is an interpretation of empirical reality from a biblical perspective. The concern is not with metaphysical or ontological discussions. Theology must be related to experiential life. In this sense Christian Realism has a strong pragmatic emphasis on theology.⁵

Historically, the experience of WWI and the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s were severe enough for people to face the disillusionment of the optimism of liberalism. Within such an atmosphere, Christian Realists came to understand “man as sinner” rather than as essentially good. This experiential judgment required a reexamination of the doctrine of sin,

⁴ Bennett, *Christian Realism*, 17.

⁵ Roger L. Shinn, “Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment,” *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. by Nathen A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 91, points out Niebuhr’s pragmatic approach to the theological enterprise.

which had been neglected for so long by liberalism.⁶ Reformation doctrine of course sees man as sinner, but Christian Realists could not accept such doctrine because their commitment to the prominence of experience would not allow for the supernatural elements of the story of the Fall and original sin.

Consequently the reinterpretation of the Reformation doctrine of sin became an urgent task for Christian Realists. Thelen's words succinctly describe the goal and method of the theological approach of Christian Realism:

These men [Christian Realists] have come to believe that historic Christian theology possesses in its doctrines of the creation of man and his Fall from an original perfection a description of the human situation which strikes a more just balance between optimism and pessimism, and so provides the basis for a sounder approach to the problems of ethics and social salvation, than has recently prevailed in American thought.⁷

To sum up, the theological characteristics of Christian Realism are a proper balance between optimism and pessimism, plus a reinterpretation of traditional Christianity from an empirical and pragmatic outlook that seeks the salvation of society.

In terms of a theological position, it can be inferred from its sense of

⁶ Mary Frances Thelen, *Man as Sinner*, in *Contemporary American Realistic Theology* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1946), 5.

⁷ Thelen, *Man as Sinner*, 1.

balance between optimism and pessimism⁸ that Christian Realism is located between liberalism and neo-orthodoxy.⁹ Naturally there are a variety of positions for Christian Realists to assume between these two poles.

Reinhold Niebuhr belonged to and led, as its most influential leader, this theological movement. His theological works and activities shared the goal and method of Christian Realism, as it will be examined later.

Dialecticism

In philosophy, dialecticism arose as an attempt to overcome the established Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. The dialecticism we will discuss here is Kierkegaard's, which recognizes the phenomenal-noumenal distinction but emphasizes the importance of the dynamic tension between those two realms.

To identify Niebuhr as the most prominent Christian Realist is meaningful for clarifying the goal and motivation of his theological endeavor. In this section the principles of his theology will be considered.

⁸ In balancing optimism and pessimism, Christian Realists reject the pessimism of neo-orthodoxy. This pessimism comes from their rejection of the essential continuity between God and man. Neo-orthodoxy does not see the divine character in man, which is foundation of the optimism of liberalism. God is "Wholly Other." Philosophically speaking, neo-orthodoxy strongly affirms the discontinuity between eternity and time. The dialectic of eternity and time and their discontinuity are key concepts of neo-orthodoxy. In contrast Christian Realism holds the continuity between eternity and time, while it admits the distinction between them (balance of continuity and distinction). This will be treated fully in the next section.

⁹ Thelen, *Man as Sinner*, 7-8.

Dialecticism is the most fundamental principle that drove his theological task. As will be demonstrated later, a dialectic and tension between two poles exists in almost every subject of Niebuhr's works.¹⁰ In fact Niebuhr has often been called a representative of neo-orthodoxy in America, for his theology is the one which utilized a dialectical perspective most effectively and indispensably.

This seems to contradict what was presented above as one of the characteristics of Christian Realism, namely a rejection of neo-orthodoxy's belief in the discontinuity of the divine and human. It is thus important to remember that although Niebuhr constructed his theology based on a dialectical perspective, he did not agree with neo-orthodoxy's absolute discontinuity between God and man, the so-called "supernaturalism" of Barth.¹¹ As a Christian Realist Niebuhr had to set himself to pursue a balance of discontinuity and continuity, adapting dialecticism for his theological principle.

The origin of dialecticism in Niebuhr's theology is Kierkegaard. Niebuhr was deeply influenced by Kierkegaard's thought and often praises Kierkegaard's profound insight on his understanding of man based on

¹⁰ Langdon Gilkey, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology of History," *The Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Nathan A. Scott, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), 44.

¹¹ The problem of continuity and discontinuity had appeared in the neo-orthodox school as the debate on the issue of "point of contact" between Brunner, who recognized the possibility of natural theology, and the supernaturalist Barth.

dialecticism in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.¹² To understand Niebuhr's dialectic theology, first an apprehension of the significance of Kierkegaard's dialecticism in philosophy and theology is essential.

Kierkegaard's dialecticism should be understood in comparison to, or as a contradicting alternative for, Hegel's dialecticism. The rise of dialecticism occurred as an attempt to overcome the inherited problem of the dualism of eternity and time by presenting their unity. In Hegel's dialecticism, this problem is rejected in the context of a subject-object epistemology, because as long as Hegel treats epistemology in this framework the problem remains inescapable. Instead, Hegel posited the Spirit, absolute subject, which is inclusive of eternity and time in itself. This absolute Spirit produces subjective development continually through the becoming of the temporal to a new higher concept of unity. In this process, the dialectic of the temporal and the eternal comes to a synthesis. This synthesis then becomes a new thesis, which has a new antithesis and reaches to a new synthesis of higher unity.

Kierkegaard emphasized the importance of subjectivity, as Hegel did by positing absolute subject. But Kierkegaard's subjectivity is that of the individual, so-called "subjective-self." Kierkegaard opposed Hegel's dialectical movement of logic. He argued that establishing such an existential system to comprehend the reality of existence was impossible.

¹² Niebuhr Reinhold, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, (New York: Charles

Any kind of system within history cannot express the profound meaning of the reality of existence. Van Til explains Kierkegaard's conviction with a quotation:

He says that existence is "a difficult category to deal with." It will not allow itself to be neatly thought into a pattern. When we think existence, says Kierkegaard, we thereby abrogate or destroy it. The individual will lose itself when it betakes itself to the highroad of logical relationships. That highroad is built in the sky. Its realm is that of abstract possibility. Upon it one may go in any direction and always reach the same destination, which is the same as no destination.¹³

The dialectic of Hegel, "both/and," is firmly rejected by Kierkegaard. Eternity and time cannot be unified in history. Instead, the dialectic of eternity and time is "either/or," such that the distinction and discontinuity between them is absolute. In this tension and decision to take "either/or," the reality of existence appears. Thus Kierkegaard sustains the dualism of eternity and temporality and believes that the discontinuity between them is absolute. The emphasis on the absolute Spirit as the subject of Hegel's historical realization of unity is substituted with the individual as subject. Van Til describes this point as follows:

But the true subjective thinker is constantly occupied in striving. He has no finite goal before him. He "strives infinitely, is constantly in process of becoming. And this, his striving, is

Scribner's Sons, 1941), 170-71, 243.

¹³ Cornelius van Til, *The New Modernism, An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner*, (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1946), 55. His quotation of Kierkegaard is from *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), 274.

safeguarded by his constantly being just as negative as he is positive." Finality at any point must at all costs be avoided. "System and finality are pretty much one and the same, so much so that if the system is not finished, there is no system." According to Kierkegaard, Lessing was right when he said that if God held eternal striving in His left hand and eternal, finished truth in His right, he would choose the left.¹⁴

Therefore, according to Kierkegaard, the subjective-self must be about its endeavor to reach eternity with its everlasting process of becoming, even though that sought-after possibility is in the end an impossibility because of the absolute time-eternity discontinuity. This existential situation of the individual is presented well in the words of Carnell:

Sin is a tensionless surrender to things as they are. Only in either/or decision is passion in man aroused. Both/and is of sin. In existential living one passionately seeks to mediate in his own person the height of an absolute law of love, yet sensing all the time the inevitability of his own sinfulness. Existential living, then, is inward tension in crisis, decision, passion. Character and salvation are created in the passionate, choosing moment of either/or decisions, those moments when life and death, happiness and unhappiness, health and sickness lie in the balance.¹⁵

When Kierkegaard ponders Christianity with his dialecticism, the concept of "leap" is very important.

"For how great is the difference" between man and himself. God has reserved for Himself His "unfathomable grief" because of the distance between man and Himself. He cannot bring man

¹⁴ van Til, *New Modernism*, 63, quotations are from Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 84, 98.

¹⁵ Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 33-34.

up to a level with Himself. So He brings Himself down to the level of man. God becomes. He suffers all things, endures all things, makes experience of all things. He walks about *incognito*. Hence man cannot prove His existence. The logic of man has no direct connection with Him. "As long as I keep my hold on the proof, i.e., continue to demonstrate, the existence does not come out, if for no other reason than that I am engaged in proving it; but when I let the proof go, the existence is there." Existence can be reached only by a leap. God remains wholly unknown even when He becomes man. God must be known as the Unknown.¹⁶

The individual before God has to leap to know God, Absolute other, giving up reason. But still here God as the Unknown even in temporality remains, because of discontinuity.

Kierkegaard's dialecticism was discovered and adapted by Karl Barth as the core principle of his theology that appeared in his *The Epistle to the Romans* (1919). The book was filled with the exact resounding of the message of Kierkegaard's dialecticism: God as the Unknown, the Wholly Other based on the absolute discontinuity of eternity and time as well as of reality and reason. Without question Barth set his theological center on Kierkegaard's. Barth is the most faithful successor of Kierkegaard with his further theological development along the lines of dialecticism.

Niebuhr also adapted Kierkegaard's dialecticism for his theological principle. He rejected the romantic approach of Hegelian dialecticism, which believed in the unification of the eternal and the temporal right in history. In all of his works, when he reviews human history, Niebuhr

¹⁶ van Til, *New Modernism*, 60.

criticizes the human endeavor to find fulfillment of the unification in nature or history, as well as in eternity as the idealists tried to do.¹⁷ As we will examine later, Niebuhr's theology of history is constructed on Kierkegaard's dialecticism of the discontinuity between eternity and time. With Kierkegaard, only at the "moment" of decision within the tension of the dialectic condition, or at the moment of the "leap," the possibility of unification is only implied. Niebuhr, on the other hand, believes that the fulfillment of unification is only by God beyond history.¹⁸ Also the dialectic between the existential system of philosophy, logic, rationality, etc. and reality of existence, like religious truth, is obviously a consistent belief for Niebuhr. This will be proved by his reply to Paul Tillich's question on epistemology, which was a long-term discussion between them.¹⁹

Revelation

Revelation (considered in this section) and history (taken up in the next section) are intimately related in Niebuhr's theology. Niebuhr's fame as a theologian is often ascribed to his theology of history. His perspective

¹⁷ For example, Niebuhr Reinhold, "History Reduced to Nature" and "History Swallowed Up in Eternity," *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, (Charles Scribner's Sons: New York, 1943), 7-15.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 96. Shinn, "Realism, Radicalism, and Eschatology in Reinhold Niebuhr: A Reassessment," 87, analyzes the importance of Niebuhr's endeavor to synthesize the Reformation and Renaissance as lying in his use of the categories of discontinuity and continuity.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," 432-33.

of the history of man is soteriological. The fruits of human cultures, states, and societies in history are seen as human endeavors for self-redemption that sought to reach the highest truth or overcome social sin and evil. How this self-redemptive action should be understood from a position of biblical faith is his concern and way to approach theologically the problem of social sin. For this reason, it is necessary to understand his concept of human history and of the revelation of God as an indispensable element for its salvation.

To understand the meaning of history for man, Niebuhr posits two dialectics: the dialectic of eternity and time and the dialectic in human nature. For man history is not only the flux of time in nature. There is also the dialectical nature of man: on the one hand, man was created in the image of God so he is spiritually able to transcend himself, but on the other hand, because of his creatureliness, he is bound and limited to nature.²⁰ This spiritual transcendence of man allows him to interact with nature, or the natural flux of history, and it leads him to change that flux in an attempt to direct the way in which he believes history would be fulfilled. But at the same time nature is the other part of history, which opposes the freedom of man in history. Thus Niebuhr says:

Man's ability to transcend the flux of nature gives him the capacity to make history. Human history is rooted in the natural process but it is something more than either the

²⁰ The dialectical nature of man will be fully discussed in the next chapter.

determined sequences of natural causation or the capricious variations and occurrences of the natural world. It is compounded of natural necessity and human freedom.²¹

With such a framework of the possibility of the development of history within human nature, man lives and struggles with both the process of natural necessities and his various interpretations of the meaning of history and life. Because of human sin, Niebuhr sees the impossibility for man to have any satisfactory interpretation of history and its meaning through human endeavor. The only way to have a proper interpretation comes from revelation from God.²²

Three types of revelation that Niebuhr presents are general revelation, God's creation as revelation, and special revelation.²³

The first is general (or private) revelation. Niebuhr means general revelation as private revelation in the consciousness of every person, through which he can reach a reality beyond himself. Because this experience is universal, it is called general revelation. In this contact with God in his consciousness, man gets a dim recognition of the relationship with the "Wholly Other":

The first is the sense of reverence for a majesty and of

²¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 1.

²² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 96.

²³ Instead of more traditional understanding of general revelation as revelation in the created world, including inner human nature, and of special revelation as revelation through His supernatural action, Niebuhr attaches his own understanding to them.

dependence upon an ultimate source of being. The second is the sense of moral obligation laid upon one from beyond oneself and of moral unworthiness before a judge. The third, most problematic of the elements in religious experience, is the longing for forgiveness.²⁴

According to Niebuhr, dim recognition of God as “Creator,” “Judge,” and “Redeemer” by general revelation will become sharply defined by creation revelation (a type of general revelation) and historical and special revelation.

The second is the revelation of creation. God reveals Himself as Creator through His creation. Every human receives the message from nature. In this revelation inner recognition of the Creator becomes the reality of the outer world. Man acknowledges that he is created by and dependent on God and has responsibility before Him.

The last revelation is special revelation. Niebuhr thinks that special revelation is given to man through historical events.²⁵ Dim recognition of God as Judge in human consciousness was a serious concern of personal religions. Furthermore, in Hebrew religion the theme of God as Judge and Redeemer was significantly developed in the religious and historical events, even though they could not reach a full understanding of the relationship

²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 131.

²⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937), 13. See also Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin And Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980), 53.

between God's righteousness and his mercy.²⁶ The final special revelation is the revelation of Christ on the Cross. In this revelation, God revealed His transcendent divine mercy and freedom over His own law, namely, God as Redeemer.²⁷ The fact that even Hebraic religion as the highest human religious product could not resolve the truth of God's mercy and righteousness demonstrated that the true Messiah is not a natural result of human endeavor, because the resolution of the truth is not possible with human wisdom. Niebuhr emphasizes the uniqueness of the revelation of Christ as follows:

The truth which is revealed in the Cross is not a truth which could have been anticipated in human culture and it is not the culmination of human wisdom. The true Christ is not expected. All human wisdom seeks to complete itself from the basis of its partial perspective.²⁸

Just as the truth of salvation was only revealed by the special revelation of Christ, and as the incomplete understanding of man had to be completed and clarified by revelation, so was it that ethical truth, the law of love, had to be revealed by the revelation of Christ. The highest ethical standard of man within Roman law (mutual love) could not reach the law of the sacrificing love of Jesus. Christ as the "Second Adam" revealed the law

²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 131-32. Cf. Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 153.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 67.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 62. See also, Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 107.

of *Agape* to man as the law to follow.²⁹

Finally, there is the relationship between historical and special revelation and faith. For Niebuhr, faith and contrition are keys to discern special revelation.³⁰ Without faith and contrition, revelation from God cannot be apprehended.³¹

History

Niebuhr's analysis of history is also based on his anthropology of the dialectical nature of spiritual transcendence and finiteness in nature. While man is bound within the flux of nature because of his creatureliness, he can positively relate to history and direct it toward his goal. In other words,

²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 92. The relation between revelation and salvation will be fully discussed in chapter 2.

It is important to understand that the Scriptures are not treated as a revelation in Niebuhr's doctrine of revelation. Niebuhr does not believe the Scriptures to be verbal revelation from God given through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In fact, it is manifestly the case that Niebuhr does not mention the work of the Holy Spirit and is criticized for the lack of doctrine of the Holy Spirit. As it is, the revelation of creation and general revelation in the individual relate neither to the Scriptures nor to the final revelation in Christ. For Niebuhr, the Scriptures are basically the mythology of Hebraic religion and symbolical interpretations of the primitive church. So prophetic judgemental words and messianic hope in the Old Testament are mostly human recognition of them through the experiences in history with nonscriptural revelation of creation and general revelation.

³⁰ Kenneth Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit: A Continuing Theology Thorn," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (1966): 30, 32, criticizes Niebuhr's theology of revelation as essentially the product of human experience or "built-in revelation."

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 136. The importance of faith for apprehension of revelation from God will be discussed further in chapter 2.

he is capable of making history.³²

In actuality, human understanding of the fulfillment of history is related to the dialectic of the eternal and the temporal. Niebuhr analyzes the human understanding of the locus of the fulfillment of history as follows:

The attempt to deny the reality of history, by reducing it to the dimension of a meaningless natural sequence, is most perfectly expressed in classical thought in its meditations upon death and its protestations against the fear of death.³³

and

But they find something in man which classical naturalism does not find; and by that something man is to be emancipated from history. That something is either the intellectual principle of his soul, or something even more transcendent than his mind. Classical idealism and mysticism in short understand the transcendent freedom of the human spirit; but they do not understand it in its organic relation to the temporal process.³⁴

Excluding transcendent spiritual freedom, naturalism (like Democritus and Epicurus) reduces history to the flux of nature. By contrast, ignoring human finiteness within the natural and temporal process, idealism and mysticism seek fulfillment in eternity. These two types of interpreting history are the only possible ones within man's own endeavor, according to Niebuhr's anthropology. In other words, man can

³² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 1.

³³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 7.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 11.

only see the fulfillment of life and history in either side of the dialectic, the eternal or the temporal. If man believes that his spiritual side is transcendent, he will seek the fulfillment of history in the eternal; if he identifies himself with nature, he seeks that fulfillment within history. Basically, human thought and activities, like culture, can be analyzed with this formula.³⁵

Human history and man's productions within it, for example cultures, are his endeavors to see the fulfillment of the meaning of history with such understandings. In terms of the human endeavor, the closely interwoven situation of revelation should also be insisted upon. Through the revelation of creation and general revelation, man can recognize that he is responsible to the Creator God who gave him life and to God as the Commander of law and Judge of his moral achievements. Revelation has been a strong basis for man to think the truth and about human life. Man has been seeking the truth and ethical life as he should be to fulfill his life and history. In history man has his freedom to fulfill the goal but is trapped with his sinful nature of pride.³⁶ Niebuhr expresses the struggle and continuing thoughts:

Only gradually it is realized that man's effort to deny and to escape his finiteness in imperial ambitions and power add an element of corruption to the fabric of history and that this

³⁵ While this idea of history is everywhere in his works, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, chapters 1-4, especially discusses this matter.

³⁶ The subject of sin will be fully discussed in chapter 2.

corruption becomes a basic characteristic of history and a perennial problem from the standpoint of the fulfillment of human history and destiny. It is recognized that history must be purged as well as completed; and that the final completion of history must include God's destruction of man's abortive and premature efforts to bring history to its culmination.³⁷

In human history without special revelation from God, man can reach the understanding of the need for a moral society, along with its impossibility due to the problem of prospering evil. People will then have a messianic hope to vindicate the victory of righteousness over evil. Human thought and social endeavor for better community in human history could be understood as evidence of his struggle for its realization. Human wisdom of truth and ethics does not give the resolution for this problem. Niebuhr gives the verdict that it is fruitless.

This ultimate problem is given by the fact that human history stands in contradiction to the divine will on any level of its moral and religious achievements in such a way that in any "final" judgment the righteous are proved not to be righteous.³⁸

Without special revelation, at the most man can come to a concern over how the righteous will gain victory over the unrighteous.³⁹ Niebuhr believes that only through special revelation in Christ is the answer given. Through the special revelation of Christ man can realize that the real problem was

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 4.

³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 43.

³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 43.

not the vindication of the righteous over evil but overcoming evil with good and the unrighteousness of the righteous.⁴⁰

Through the special revelation in Christ's Atonement, God as Redeemer is fully revealed. The conflict between God's wrath—the result of man's immorality—and God's mercy is resolved in the Atonement through Christ. In the presence of God all men are sinners, so before God there is no distinction between the righteousness and unrighteousness of human standards. Niebuhr observes the character of God in Jesus Christ:

The *wisdom* apprehended in Christ finally clarifies the character of God. He has a resource of mercy beyond His law and judgment but He can make it effective only as He takes the consequences of His wrath and judgment, upon and into Himself.⁴¹

Only by faith in receiving this revelation can man escape from his fruitless and endless endeavor and complete the meaning of history. This revelation alone gives man the knowledge that he cannot realize the meaning of life and history on earth in history but he has hope in God.

The fulfillment of this hope in Christ has to be "beyond tragedy," "beyond history," not in history.⁴² Here we can observe Niebuhr's strong conviction of the discontinuity of the dialectic of eternity and time, as well as his seeking of continuity by putting "hope" in history.

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 30.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 55.

⁴² It is important to understand that because of Niebuhr's strong conviction of dialecticism he cannot admit the fulfillment of the meaning of history in history.

CHAPTER 2

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Niebuhr's thorough analysis of man's historical views is based on the twin standards of the dialectic in human nature and the dialectic of eternity and time.¹ In a word, it is his utmost concern to understand how man, who has both spiritual freedom and the boundaries of nature, reacts to the dialectic of eternity and time. The thoughts and achievements of man are squarely evaluated from this perspective. Niebuhr, however, did not adopt his dialectic perspective simply for elucidating them. In fact, he needed an anthropology to clearly present man as a sinner.² As can clearly be seen in his works, the sin that concerns him the most is social or collective man's sin. In his treatment of sin, he starts with a precise psychological and theological study of sin at a personal level, then develops it from there to the collective level.

Thus Niebuhr's anthropology is the key to comprehend his doctrine of sin. Niebuhr's anthropology consists of two essential parts: man as the image of God and man as creature. Niebuhr seeks to develop both of these parts Biblically through a discussion of classical Christian thought on these issues. This means that Niebuhr seeks a true biblical view of man by examining Hellenistic influences in classical Christianity.

¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, chapters 1-5.

² See the concern of Christian Realism to explain "man as sinner" in chapter 1.

Imago Dei

Niebuhr briefly examines the biblical use of *ruach* and *nephesh* of the Old Testament, and πνεῦμα and ψυχή of the New Testament. He concludes that *ruach* and πνεῦμα mean “spirit,” and that *nephesh* and ψυχή mean “soul.” However, Niebuhr takes care to note that in the Old Testament context, though there is a distinction between *ruach* and *nephesh*, they are never separated from each other as soul and body. Moreover, in the New Testament context πνεῦμα is used exclusively to mean spirit in distinction from the more rationalistic νοῦς of Greek philosophy.³ Succinctly in one sentence, Niebuhr summarizes the biblical view of spirit and body:

The Hebraic sense of the unity of body and soul is not destroyed while, on the other hand, spirit is conceived of as primarily a capacity for and affinity with the divine.⁴

In Christian theology, “image of God” has developed into the explicit “spirit is conceived of as primarily a capacity for and affinity with the divine.” Observing the history of Christian theology, Niebuhr perceives the strong influence of Hellenistic philosophy, specifically of Platonism and of the Aristotelian concept of man as a rational creature, in its definition of the image of God, along with a slight recognition of self-transcendental character of man.⁵ Niebuhr then praises Augustine very highly because he

³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 151-52.

⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 152.

⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 153. Niebuhr describes various theologians’ understandings throughout history of the image of God in two

is the first Christian theologian who presented the right apprehension of the Christian doctrine of man. Niebuhr accepts almost fully Augustine's doctrine of man. He basically presented his doctrine of man through that of Augustine.

Augustine describes the image of God as follows:

"It is in the soul of man, that is, in his rational or intellectual soul, that we must find that image of the Creator which is immortally implanted in its immortality . . ."6

Although this expression itself seems to resonate the Hellenistic influence of the idea of man as rational animal, the phrase "rational or intellectual soul" in Augustine's thought is different from the rational ability to form general concepts. Rather, it means the capacity of transcendence to the point of self-transcendence in the human spirit.⁷

Reason is a faculty that distinguishes man from other animals. At the same time, while this rational capacity helps man to understand the temporal world better in a systematic way, such a work of reason still belongs to nature. Kierkegaard's strong conviction that an "existential

pages of footnotes.

⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 154. Quotation from Augustine, *De trin.*, XIV,4,6. (ellipses original).

⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 155. Niebuhr sees the important influence of neo-Platonism in Augustine on self-transcendence by mentioning that Plotinus understands *νοῦς* as the capacity for self-knowledge and introspection.

system cannot grasp the reality of existence” is at issue here.⁸ Reason in the sense of Greek philosophy is not good enough to reach eternity, the relationship of man with God.⁹

Niebuhr further investigates Augustine’s concept of the self-transcendence of man as the image of God through observing his understanding of memory. Memory is the capacity of man to transcend both time and himself.

“When I enter there [the place of memory] I require what I will to be brought forth and something instantly comes; others must be longer sought after, which are fetched as it were out of some inner receptacle. . . . Nor yet do the things themselves enter in; only the images of the things perceived are there in readiness, for thought to recall. . . . For even while I dwell in darkness and silence, in my memory I can produce colours if I will ... yea I discern the breath of lilies from violets, though smelling nothing. . . . These things I do in the vast court of my memory. . . . There also I meet with myself, and recall myself and when and where and what I have done and under what feelings. . . . Out of the same store do I myself with the past continually combine fresh likenesses of things, which I have experienced, have believed; and thence again infer future actions, events and hopes, and all these again I reflect on, as present. I will do this or that, say I to myself, in that great receptacle of my mind, stored with images of things so many and so great, and this or that might be.”¹⁰

Thus Augustine is amazed with the indeterminate freedom of the

⁸ See *Dialecticism* in chapter 1, 8ff.

⁹ Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt : A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Wyon Olive (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947), 109, explains the work of reason as the image of God “in a relative sense”.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 155. No reference for the quotation.

self-transcendental power of the spirit of man which appears in memory. Mentioning Augustine's recognition of the possibility of self-transcendental spirit of man in mysticism, as well as Christianity, Niebuhr describes the distinction and relation between self-transcendental spirit and reason:

Augustine's interest in, and emphasis upon, the mysteries and majesties of the human spirit are not derived solely from the insights of the Christian religion. They are so remarkable because he was able to exploit what mysticism and Christianity, at their best, have in common: their understanding that the human spirit in its depth and height reaches into eternity and that this vertical dimension is more important for the understanding of man than merely his rational capacity for forming general concepts. This latter capacity is derived from the former. It is, as it were, a capacity for horizontal perspectives over the wide world, made possible by the height at which the human spirit is able to survey the scene.¹¹

Here, the spirit functions in a vertical direction, and reason functions horizontally. The capacity of reason to form general concepts is derived from the spirit.

Niebuhr emphasized another facet of Augustine's doctrine of the image of God:

However, Augustine's Biblical faith always prompts him finally to stop short of the mystic deification of self-consciousness. Man's powers point to God; but they cannot comprehend him: "Insofar as concerns the nature of man there is in him nothing better than the mind or reason. But he who would live blessedly ought not to live according to them; for then he would live according to man, whereas he ought to live according to God." Or again: "We are speaking of God. Is it any wonder that Thou dost not comprehend? For if Thou dost comprehend, He

¹¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 157.

is not God. . . . To reach God by the mind in any measure is a great blessedness; but to comprehend Him is altogether impossible.”¹²

Augustine’s apparent departure from the mysticism of neo-Platonism is seen in the above quotation. He succeeded in escaping from the deification of the spiritual profundity of the human spirit. Mysticism presupposes the divine nature in man and expands until the assimilation of himself with the divine. “He who would live blessedly ought not to live according to them; for then he would live according to man, whereas he ought to live according to God” means that man should live according to the revelation of God. Man can reach or know God, but he cannot fully comprehend Him. Human finiteness is inevitable even in the most profound capability of the transcendent spirit of man. True knowledge of God is only possible from His own revelation given to man. Although Niebuhr does not clearly express this point, this conviction of Augustine is crucial in the way it is reflected in the exclusive importance of the special revelation of Christ for salvation in Niebuhr’s theology.¹³ Right understanding of character of God is of him who is merciful and at the same time righteous on the final judgement of man. Even the transcendent spirit of man cannot reach this truth, but only the revelation of Christ on the Cross revealed it to man.

¹² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 157-58. (ellipses original). Quotations are from his quotation from Przywara, *Augustine Synthesis*, p. 23, of *Retract.*, I, i, 2 and Niebuhr’s is from *Serm. (de script. N. T.)*, CXVII, iii, 5.

¹³ See Revelation and History in chapter 1, 14ff, 19ff.

In sum, Niebuhr took the following points from Augustine's understanding of the image of God: self-determination and self-transcendence of the human spirit, reason not in the Hellenistic sense of forming concepts, and the spirit's capability to reach God but incapability to comprehend Him.

Niebuhr ascribes the consistent interpretation of spiritual transcendence as the essential part of the image of God in man in Christian theology to Augustine's doctrine of the image of God. Niebuhr cites Calvin's understanding of the image of God and pointed out its succession of Augustine's doctrine:

Calvin makes clear that by the reason of the soul he means capacities which include the self-determination of the will and the quality of transcendence which Augustine has analysed: "God hath furnished the soul of man with a mind capable of discerning good from evil, just from unjust; and of discovering by the light of reason what ought to be pursued and avoided. . . . To this He hath annexed the will on which depends the choice. The primitive condition of man was ennobled with those eminent faculties; he possessed reason, understanding, prudence and judgment not only for the government of his life upon earth but to enable him to ascend even to God and eternal felicity."¹⁴

Such an understanding of self-transcendence of the human spirit as the image of God, articulated by Augustine and his tradition, gives Niebuhr

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 159. (ellipses original). The quotation is from the *Institutes*, Book I, ch. 15, par. 8. Niebuhr regards Calvin as an Augustinian at the time of the Reformation. By contrast, the other major figure of the Reformation, Martin Luther, is not presented as an Augustinian with respect to his view of the image of God. The image of God having been lost was so strongly emphasised in Luther's thought that the image of God is described mostly to express the opposite of the sinful and miserable nature of man.

the theological core around which to establish his persuasive and total cohesion between other doctrines in his theological system (for example, anthropology and the doctrine of sin, anthropology and the doctrine of history, anthropology and the doctrine of ethics). In this sense, his theology is an anthropological theology.

In terms of the controversial issue of dialecticism with respect to the continuity or discontinuity between the eternal and the temporal, identifying the self-transcendental character of the spirit as the image of God is crucial. This is because those like Niebuhr who seek a balance of continuity and discontinuity on the one hand can criticize neo-orthodoxy's emphasis on discontinuity, and on the other gain a foundation to stress continuity. Naturally Barth, who following Kierkegaard agrees with the self-transcendence of the human spirit, disagrees with identifying the spirit with image of God. Indeed, he severely criticizes Augustine's understanding of the image of God.¹⁵ In Barth's case, his conviction of the discontinuity between God and man is so firm that even the amazing profundity of man's spirit, which he himself cannot comprehend, is still in finite man. In Niebuhr's case, this profundity of the incomprehensible spirit of man is attributed to God.

Next, Niebuhr brings forward the insightful understanding of the self-determination and self-transcendence of human nature by Max

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 158, footnote 14.

Scheler (1874-1928), German social and religious philosopher, and comments on it.

“The nature of man,” he declares, “and that which could be termed his unique quality transcend that which is usually called intelligence and freedom of choice and would not be reached if his intelligence and freedom could conceivably be raised to the *n*th degree. . . . Between an intelligent monkey and an Edison, merely as technical intelligence, only a difference of degree, though a great degree, exists. It is the quality of the human spirit on the other hand to lift itself above itself as living organism and to make the whole temporal and spatial world, including itself, the object of its knowledge.”

The freedom of which Scheler speaks is something more (and in a sense also something less) than the usual “freedom of choice” so important in philosophical and theological theory. Man is self-determining not only in the sense that he transcends natural process in such a way as to be able to choose between various alternatives presented to him by the processes of nature but also in the sense that he transcends himself in such a way that he must choose his total end. In this task of self-determination he is confronted with endless potentialities and he can set no limit to what he ought to be, short of the character of ultimate reality. Yet this same man is a creature whose life is definitely limited by nature and he is unable to choose anything beyond the bounds set by the creation in which he stands.¹⁶

In these words, Niebuhr focuses on the issue of man’s freedom and limitation. Because of spiritual transcendence, not only can man stand above the flux of natural process, but he can also transcend himself. To be the man who he should be, man faces the existential challenge with his unlimited possibility. While the relationship between the limitation of man as creature and nature will be treated in the next section, Niebuhr’s

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 162-63. Quotation from Max Scheler, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos*, 46-47. Cf. Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 92.

concern here is the problem of limitation of man's freedom and transcendence.

Implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man's capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. The problem of meaning, which is the basic problem of religion, transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other as the freedom of man's spirit transcends his rational faculties.¹⁷

It is very true that transcendental man can stand in a higher world of meaning over himself, but he does not have a principle of meaning which stands over that world of meaning to interpret it. Man can stand over himself, but does not know whether the sense he makes by his self-determination for the fulfillment of life is right or wrong. The supposed principles available for man to use in interpreting the world of meaning are only those which he rationally conceives; otherwise man just follows his own natural vitality. But these are not the ultimate principle of coherence and meaning. For example, the effort to identify meaning with rationality is a deification of reason.¹⁸ This is the inevitable condition of man who is spiritually infinite and, at the same time, finite. Niebuhr sees a strong possibility for man to fall into idolatry in such a situation.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 164. Man is incapable of gaining the vantage point of comprehending the meaning of history, Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 116.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 164-65.

Though the religious faith through which God is apprehended cannot be in contradiction to reason in the sense that the ultimate principle of meaning cannot be in contradiction to the subordinate principle of meaning which is found in rational coherence yet, on the other hand religious faith cannot be simply subordinated to reason or made to stand under its judgment. When this is done the reason which asks the question whether the God of religious faith is plausible has already implied a negative answer in the question because it has made itself God and naturally cannot tolerate another.¹⁹

Man is tempted and falls into the sin of idolatry in his self-transcendence and finiteness. Niebuhr thinks that man has to navigate between the Charybdis of life-denial and acosmism in the effort to escape the Scylla of idolatry.²⁰ Man can make only one of two choices: the idolatry of putting contingent human thought or vitality on the throne of unconditional principle of meaning, or a denial of whole temporal existence.

According to Niebuhr, man in the image of God has such a spiritual infiniteness, but it comes with the finiteness of man as creature. The tension which exists in this dialectic situation of man's spiritual infiniteness as the image of God and his creaturely finiteness is the location of sin in man. In other words, without the image of God in man, he could not sin because without the image man does not have any thing upon which to rely to see the spiritual reality of God and his own relationship with Him.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 165-66.

²⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 166.

Niebuhr's conviction is that a Christian paradoxical approach to the problem of the freedom and finiteness of man is the only resolution. For that resolution he believes that it is necessary to set the doctrine of man as creature in juxtaposition to the doctrine of man as image of God.²¹

Man as creature

In the previous section, the counterpart of spiritual transcendence, namely the finiteness of creatureliness, was briefly discussed. Without a right comprehension of the finiteness of man there is no right understanding of sin.

Niebuhr proclaims the Christian view of the goodness of God's creation and surveys it through citations of Scripture, along with his comments.

The goodness of creation by God is clearly stated in Gen. 1:31 and other passages. In the biblical interpretation, the created world, which is dependent and contingent, is finite but not evil. In Hellenistic thought and other religions, the world, physical and temporal, is finite and thus is evil. Such a view of the world is foreign to the biblical teaching. The physical and temporal body is finite but not evil nor the source of sin in man. The lack of human comprehension of the totality of the world at an unconditional interpretation level is not because man's finite individuality is evil.

²¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 166, Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 64.

The finiteness, dependence, and insufficiency of mortal man are ordained by the holy God's plan and providence, so they should be received humbly. In the Bible, man's brevity and finiteness are for glorifying the majesty and eternity of God.²²

Evil appears when the fragmented or finite existence of man seeks to comprehend the whole by his wisdom or pretends to realize it. Concerning this problem of evil, the Bible testifies that God's will and wisdom transcend human interpretation of the meaning of the world and of life. And besides being beyond human abilities of comprehension, God's will and wisdom comprehend and reign over the world in perfect harmony.²³

Niebuhr also pointed out the relationship between the dependent, finite character of man and of sin, quoting one of his key passages from the Bible to understand sin, "Therefore I say unto you be not anxious." He thinks that this passage means that the finiteness and weakness of man does not lead to sin, but that man's anxiety does.²⁴

Thus after surveying the Biblical teaching of the finiteness of man, Niebuhr summarizes it as follows:

It is important to recognize how basic the Christian doctrine of

²² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 167-68. Isa. 40 is cited for the contrast between man's brevity and God's majesty.

²³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 168. Job 42 is cited for man's inability to comprehend God's comprehension of the whole with his wisdom.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 168. Mt. 6:25. The relationship between anxiety and sin will be fully considered in chapter 3.

the goodness of creation is for a conception of man in which human finiteness is emphasized but not deprecated. In the Biblical view the contrast between the created world and the Creator, between its dependent and insufficient existence and His freedom and self-sufficiency, is absolute. But this contrast never means that the created world is evil by reason of the particularization and individualization of its various types of existence. It is never a corruption of an original divine unity and eternity, as in neo-Platonism; nor is it evil because of the desire and pain which characterize all insufficient and dependent life, as in Buddhism.²⁵

Clarifying the general understanding of the goodness of the creature, Niebuhr focuses on the Christian concept of individuality.

The individual is conceived of as a creature of infinite possibilities which cannot be fulfilled within terms of this temporal existence. But his salvation never means the complete destruction of his creatureliness and absorption into the divine. On the other hand, though finite individuality is never regarded as of itself evil, its finiteness, including the finiteness of the mind, is never obscured.²⁶

In the Christian concept of individuality, the presupposition of faith is key to living with the paradoxical or dialectical situation of man. For navigating between Charybdis and Scylla, man needs faith. Man as an existential individual has to live “here and now” to seek the highest realization of his self by faith. Niebuhr quotes Kierkegaard’s description of the existential life of the individual self as the most accurate one of the true meaning of human selfhood.

“The determining factor in the self is consciousness, i.e. self-

²⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 169.

²⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 170.

consciousness. The more consciousness, the more self; the more consciousness the more will; the more will, the more self. . . . The self is the conscious synthesis of the limited and the unlimited which is related to itself and the task of which is to become a self, a task which can be realized only in relation to God. To become a self means to become concrete. But to become concrete means to be neither limited nor unlimited, for that which must become concrete is a synthesis. Therefore development consists in this: that in the eternalization of the self one escapes the self endlessly and in the temporalization of the self one endlessly returns to the self."²⁷

Niebuhr adopts Kierkegaard's existential condition of man who unceasingly seeks the highest self or fulfills his life in the process of history with the faith of hope. In the dialectic condition of humans' infinite freedom and finite creatureliness as elucidated by Niebuhr, unceasing endeavor is inevitable because Niebuhr presupposes the discontinuity of eternity and time. According to this discontinuity, even the omnipotent and omniscient God could not realize the individual self in history because the discontinuity of the eternal and the temporal is absolute. Only faith in God gives man the hope in God who will complete man's unceasing endeavor for realization of the highest self beyond history.

Adding to his presentation of the Biblical teaching of the goodness of creation, Niebuhr gives historical examples of inconsistencies of this teaching in church history.

One must not claim that Christian thought and life have consistently preserved the Biblical insights on the basic

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 171. (ellipses original). The quotation is from Kierkegaard's *Die Krankheit zum Tode* (Diederich Verlag), 27.

character and the essential goodness of the finiteness, dependence and insufficiency of the self. On the contrary Christianity from the very beginning incorporated some of the errors of idealism and mysticism, including their mistaken estimates of the human situation, into its own thought; and has never completely expelled them.²⁸

Pre-Augustine theologians, especially the Platonist Origen, thought the preexistent deficiency of man was judged by God with the judgement of mutability and finiteness. Sex was a particular symbol of sin, because it indicates the incompleteness of man without others. The influence of this interpretation of man's finiteness as sin still exists in Greek theology.²⁹

The identification of sin and evil with the mutability of the temporal world and with the ignorance of the finite mind is very general in the pre-Augustinian period of Christianity.³⁰

Niebuhr cites the examples of Justin Martyr, Clement, Gregory of Nyssa and Irenaeus the show the strong influence of Hellenism in their theology on man and says:

On its Hellenistic side, Christianity exhibits many similarities with the Greek cults of immortality and the mystery religions. Salvation is frequently defined as the ultimate deification of man, through Christ's conquest of human mortality.³¹

Niebuhr responds to the influence of the Hellenistic idea of finiteness and mortality as sin with the Biblical teaching. He admits the relation of

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 171.

²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 171-72.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 172.

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 173.

mortality and sin. But it is in the sense of “death came by sin,” or death as the result of sin, not sin as the result of death. In Pauline usage of death, it does not always denote physical death but often symbolizes spiritual death (Eph. 2:1). Furthermore, “the sting of death” (1 Cor. 15:56) does not make sense as physical death. So the Hellenistic idea of sin as a result of mortality is not supported by the Biblical usage. On the contrary, the Biblical view of the relation of sin to mortality accords with these uses:

In this view mortality, insecurity and dependence are not of themselves evil but become the occasion of evil when man seeks in his pride to hide his mortality, to overcome his insecurity by his own power and to establish his independence. The ideal possibility would be that a man of perfect faith would not fear death because of his confidence that “neither life nor death . . . shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” But since unbelief is the very basis of sin, it is impossible for sinful man to anticipate his end with equanimity. Thus sin is “the sting of death”; and the obvious mark of that sting is fear.³²

Niebuhr believes that the best interpretation is to see the finiteness of man, mortality, insecurity and dependence as the occasion of sin.

Returning to the Pauline usage of “death,” first Niebuhr presents Paul’s understanding of death (physical death) as a consequence of Adam’s sin.³³ Niebuhr explains that, according to one understanding of Paul, God’s words of curse on Adam, “for dust thou art,” is a statement of fact, not a promise of future punishment, whereas the concluding words, “and to dust

³² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 174. (ellipses original).

³³ Niebuhr thinks that Paul’s interpretation on this was influenced by the

shalt thou return,” carry an implication of future punishment. This means that mortal man (originally) would have not returned to dust if Adam had not sinned, but because of his sin he received the fate of physical death. Therefore, the mortal life of Adam was supposed to be a transcendent mortal life.³⁴ This interpretation is dominant in orthodox Christianity. Niebuhr, however, considers this interpretation to contain serious problems with regard to the relationship between finiteness and sin in man.

Such an interpretation obscures man’s organic relation to nature and could be made meaningful only if it were assumed that sin had introduced death into the whole of nature. But such an assumption becomes almost identical with the Hellenistic belief that nature and finiteness are themselves evil. The orthodox doctrine, rooted in Pauline theology, therefore has affinities with Hellenistic dualism, despite the important distinction that it regards death as the consequence of sin and not sin as the consequence of death.³⁵

Thus Niebuhr makes the point that, even though orthodoxy’s understanding of the relationship between sin and death is the opposite of Hellenism, orthodoxy’s understanding of the character of physical death, of mortality, and of the destruction of man’s original transcendence of mortality as realities that were not originally supposed to exist expresses a sinfulness inherent to them, which is an understanding of mortality as

rabbinic teaching of his day. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 174.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 174-75.

³⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 175-76. Niebuhr cited examples of transcendental mortality of various theologians in Christian history. *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 176, footnote 14.

sinful that resembles a Hellenistic position. This orthodox interpretation of physical death seriously jeopardizes the Biblical teaching of finiteness that illustrates God's majesty by contrasting it with the weakness and dependence of man as creature.

From our observation of his contention with orthodox interpretation, we can conclude that Niebuhr believes that the Biblical view of death is spiritual death instead of a physical death that shares the Hellenistic idea of sinful finiteness. Sin should not be ascribed to temporality but to the willful refusal of man to know the finite and determined situation of his existence.

We can thus summarize Niebuhr's understanding of the Biblical view of man that has been discussed in this chapter. The image of God in man is the height of self-transcendence in man's spirituality. Man as creature is involved in the necessities and contingencies of the natural world, but his finiteness is not the source of sin in him. Put more positively, man is a synthesis of the image of God and of creature.

In its purest form the Christian view of man regards man as a unity of God-likeness and creatureliness, in which unity he remains a creature even in the highest spiritual dimensions of his existence, and also may reveal elements of the image of God even in the lowliest aspects of his natural life.³⁶

³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 150.

CHAPTER 3
THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

The importance of the doctrine of sin in Niebuhr's thought is well known.¹ It can be considered that the doctrine of sin is the center of Niebuhr's theology. However, it is also true that his doctrine of sin does not stand by itself. The tightness of the relationship between the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of man is more than that between the doctrine of sin and the doctrine of salvation in his thought. The relation between sin and salvation is natural: the logical flow is to talk about salvation after the clarification of sin, and the content of the former is the opposite of the latter. But in the case of the doctrine of man and that of sin, the doctrine of man is foundational to that of sin. Without a proper understanding of man, it is impossible to grasp the right understanding of human sin. Therefore, anthropology and the doctrine of sin are to be considered as a set, especially for the doctrine of sin, in Niebuhr's theology. Indeed, Niebuhr attempts to interpret the origin of sin by looking psychologically at actual sin from the anthropology described above.

¹ Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 247, Whitney Jennings Oates, *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1948), xii, John Leo Flynn, *Justification: A Comparison of the Doctrine of Reinhold Niebuhr with the Doctrine of the Council of Trent* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1970), 7-8, and so forth.

Sin

Even though Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is the main theme in most of his works, his concern is not the sin of individual men, but rather social sin. However, in seeing the relationship between individual and collective sin, Niebuhr started with study of individual sin as the origin of collective sin.² Another characteristic of his treatment of the doctrine of sin should be mentioned here. Like Kierkegaard and Barth, Niebuhr does not approach human sin from either an ontological-philosophical or an ontological-theological perspective. Instead of these, he approaches it with a psychological analysis. In other words, Niebuhr's theological interest is not "what is sin or the origin of sin?" but "how is sin related to man's spirit or conscience?"³

From his writings, it is very clear that, as an accepted definition, Niebuhr shares a theologically orthodox understanding of human sin.

The religious dimension of sin is man's rebellion against God, his effort to usurp the place of God. The moral and social dimension of sin is injustice.⁴

Similarly,

Sin is, in short, the consequence of man's inclination to usurp the prerogatives of God, to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, thus making destructive use of his freedom by not observing the limits to which a creaturely freedom is

² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 208.

³ Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 187.

⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 179.

bound.⁵

Sin is confessed rebellion against God and usurpation of the place of God, in other words the self-centeredness of man. Though such an authentic theological definition or similar kinds often appear in his works, Niebuhr does not develop them any further. For Niebuhr, the theological confessional stance regarding the nature of sin by traditional Christianity is presupposed, though he often criticizes and reconstructs traditional doctrines.

To grasp the fact of Niebuhr's confession of the basic understanding of sin as man's rebellion against God is crucial. In liberalism, sin is not seriously considered, but instead is eliminated by an optimistic view of man as essentially good. They see the problem of evil in events in history.⁶ The immanent theology of liberalism finds the divine in man, so it only seeks the cause of evil outside of man. Also, a liberalism which presupposes the radical freedom of man cannot assume a radical defect in man.⁷ As a Christian Realist, Niebuhr accepts the confession of man as sinner, which

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), 121.

⁶ Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972), 95.

⁷ Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 100, describes Niebuhr's approach to keeping man's radical spiritual freedom as avoiding a consistent understanding of Augustinianism and Plagianism.

explains the reality of man and society.⁸ Now he asks his pragmatic question, How does sin affect the human heart and conscience?

Anxiety as precondition of sin

In this section, Niebuhr's unique doctrine of sin will be examined. He utilizes the Fall story in Genesis 3 to analyze how sin occurs in man psychologically.

In the Fall story, Niebuhr first points out that the serpent tempted man with its false interpretation of the human situation. The serpent offered the interpretation that God as a jealous God and feared man to be like Him through eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. The temptation lies in man's situation of finiteness and freedom.⁹

There are two elements in this point. The one is temptation and the other is the human situation. The occurrence of sin needs a false interpretation—or more basically there is the devil who tempted man. Niebuhr summarizes the two points of Biblical satanology.

(1) the devil is not thought of as having been created evil. Rather his evil arises from his effort to transgress the bounds set for his life, an effort which places him in rebellion against

⁸ It is interesting that in Niebuhr's thought we see the minimum presupposition of ontology, namely, man (his spirit and body) and God. But the case of Satan, or the devil, is ambiguous. Niebuhr is concerned with the seriousness of sin and evil in the human will or heart, but he does not discuss the devil as an angelic figure in reality. This is deeply related to his understanding of the Scriptures as myths or symbols. See his treatment of the Fall story in Genesis. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 179-86, 253-54.

⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 180.

God. (2) The devil fell before man fell, which is to say that man's rebellion against God is not an act of sheer perversity, nor does it follow inevitably from the situation in which he stands.¹⁰

Here Niebuhr indicates that there was a tempter, the devil, who sinned against God before his temptation of man; hence, the very beginning of man's sin was not in him. On the side of man, there was a source which reacted to the temptation. That is the dialectical situation of man's finiteness and freedom.¹¹

It [false interpretation] is suggested to man by a force of evil which precedes his own sin. Perhaps the best description or definition of this mystery is the statement that sin posits itself, that there is no situation in which it is possible to say that sin is either an inevitable consequence of the situation nor yet that it is an act of sheer and perverse individual defiance of God.¹²

The necessity of sin before sin and the reaction of man who was in a unique spiritual condition both need to be considered to interpret the Fall story properly.

Insofar as human nature is characterized by physical finiteness, it belongs to the temporal realm. However, man also has his spiritual freedom and the possibility to be transcendent as the image of God.

Niebuhr describes the situation of anxiety in the dialectical condition with a metaphor.

¹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 180.

¹¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 180.

¹² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 181. The idea of "sin posits itself" is obviously from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans Reidar Thomte (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 113.

It [anxiety] is the condition of the sailor, climbing the mast (to use a simile), with the abyss of the waves beneath him and the "crow's nest" above him. He is anxious about both the end toward which he strives and the abyss of nothingness into which he may fall.¹³

In such a psychological situation man is tempted to sin. Although man endeavors as much as possible to fulfill the self-transcendent character, he always has to face the fact that his capability is limited and bound as a creature. At such a moment, there is a chance for temptation to insinuate into man's heart to lead him to sin. When man thinks of himself within nature and history, he seems to be capable of expanding his life with spiritual transcendence, escaping from the bonds of the contingencies of nature. To secure his life of spiritual freedom, he needs to ignore the bonds of nature and pretend that he can be infinite and spiritual—although he really has limits as a creature. Man's synthesis of his infinite, free spirit and his finite body is not static but inherently possesses a dynamic and contradicting tension. The condition of this human situation is expressed by Niebuhr as follows:

In short, man, being both free and bound, both limited and limitless, is anxious. Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved. Anxiety is the internal precondition of sin. It is the inevitable spiritual state of man, standing in the paradoxical situation of freedom and finite-ness.¹⁴

¹³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 185.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 182.

The human condition of anxiety is concomitant to the dialectical human condition and internal precondition of sin. Anxiety is the source that has the possibility to react to temptation, or even becomes temptation. Anxiety itself is not sin.

In that Niebuhr saw temptation as the only inclination of man to be led to sin, he saw the line of anxiety, temptation, and sin as the process of sinning. There is thus always for man a choice of faith to purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion.

The ideal possibility is that faith in the ultimate security of God's love would overcome all immediate insecurities of nature and history. That is why Christian orthodoxy has consistently defined unbelief as the root of sin, or as the sin which precedes pride. It is significant that Jesus justifies his injunction, "Be not anxious" with the observation, "For your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of these things." The freedom from anxiety which he enjoins is a possibility only if perfect trust in divine security has been achieved.¹⁵

Trust in God's love and perfect security by faith is the only right way for man. In the case of Eve in the Fall story, she was in anxiety over the dialectic situation and was tempted by the false interpretation which encouraged her to pretend to be able to be infinite and secure her life by becoming like God.

Thus, according to Niebuhr, the cause of sin is anxiety, which in turn is attributed to the paradoxical condition of man: the possibility of being

¹⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 183. See also Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 97.

spiritual-infinite and man's finiteness as creature. Only when sin is posited before the sin which man commits, the anxiety turns to be a temptation. In other words, the decision of man in anxiety accuses his responsibility, and the fact of his being tempted does not agree fully with the idea of man's sinful nature underlying his actions.¹⁶

In Niebuhr's theology of sin, the concept of anxiety is indispensable. With the understanding of anxiety as a concomitant reality to the dialectical human structure, capturing the reality of the human struggle through a psychological analysis of the swaying of the human heart is given more light for its understanding. This way of analyzing human sin is unique and gives additional understanding to the conventional theology regarding sin.

Niebuhr's analysis of anxiety is basically done in the context of the Fall story in Genesis. According to his interpretation, Adam had anxiety in the Garden of Eden. It seems that this position is very different from the traditional Christian understanding. It is thus hard to believe that Adam was beset by a spiritually unstable anxiety in his perfection. For this difficulty it should be recognized that Niebuhr utilizes the Fall story of Adam to explain the anxiety of man in general. In other words, Niebuhr does not see any difference between the psychological condition of Adam and that of man in general. This identification of man in general and Adam

¹⁶ This issue will be discussed more fully later.

is derived from Niebuhr's understanding of the Fall story as a myth.

The myth of the Fall of Adam universalizes, as well as individualizes, this theme of man's revolt against God. The influence of this myth upon the Christian imagination is not primarily due to any literalistic illusions of Christian orthodoxy. The myth accurately symbolizes the consistent Biblical diagnosis of moral and historical evil. Adam and, together with him, all men seek to overstep the bounds which are set by the Creator for man as creature.¹⁷

Thus, Niebuhr's elucidation of anxiety and sin are for general man.¹⁸

In addition to a description of Niebuhr's understanding of the relation between anxiety and sin, it should be mentioned that this theological approach to sin is not Niebuhr's own original one. He himself admits that the idea of anxiety as a psychological condition of sin is from Kierkegaard. In fact, he refers to and cites Kierkegaard's work and praises his analysis of the relation of anxiety to sin as the most profound in Christian thought.¹⁹

Kierkegaard sees man as a synthesis of two elements which contradict each other.

The synthesis of the temporal and the eternal is not another synthesis but is the expression for the first synthesis, according to which man is a synthesis of psyche and body that is sustained by spirit. As soon as the spirit is posited, the moment is present.²⁰

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 121-22, cf. *Beyond Tragedy*, 10, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 279.

¹⁸ His understanding of the original condition of man will be discussed later in this chapter.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 182, footnote 2.

²⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 88.

In Kierkegaard's thought, man is a synthesis of the eternal and the temporal, namely, psyche and body with the sustenance of spirit. The interesting thing is that there is spirit as the third factor, which plays a significant role for the unity of the dialectic poles. If spirit is not closely related to the dialectical relationship, an immediate unity within man's natural condition becomes possible.²¹ Niebuhr changes Kierkegaard's trichotomical treatment of man into a dichotomical one. This is because of Niebuhr's conviction of the Biblical view of man as a unity of spirit and body.²² At a glance, in Kierkegaard's thought, although it is ambiguous which factor of man is related with eternity, the spirit is attributed to the eternal element. So Niebuhr's assimilation of psyche into spirit is justified by keeping the significance of spirit in his use of "spirit," which has the capability of a super-rational reality for man's spirituality. Thus Niebuhr's basic structure of anthropology drew heavily from Kierkegaard's.

As already mentioned above, the idea of the relation of anxiety to sin is also from Kierkegaard. The related understandings of the role of anxiety in sin, "sin posits itself" and "sin as qualitative leap,"²³ were also accepted and utilized. Even so, Kierkegaard's psychological analysis of anxiety is much more thorough than Niebuhr's. Kierkegaard's existential concern

²¹ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 41.

²² See chapter 2.

²³ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 33. See also Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 254.

makes his search into the human heart profoundly deep. On the other hand, Niebuhr's concern over social sin makes him apply the insight of the relation of anxiety to sin in the individual to the collective level. Precisely at this point lies the uniqueness and significance of Niebuhr's theology.

In addition, with such a difference in direction of theological concern between them, Niebuhr came to have a broader view of anxiety than Kierkegaard. Within Kierkegaard's analysis, anxiety is only related to sin in a destructive sense, such as in the following:

(c) The posited sin is an unwarranted actuality. It is actuality, and it is posited by the individual as actuality in repentance, but repentance does not become the individual's freedom. Repentance is reduced to a possibility in relation to sin; in other words, repentance cannot cancel sin, it can only sorrow over it. Sin advances in its consequence; repentance follows it step by step, but always a moment too late. It forces itself to look at the dreadful, but like the mad King Lear (*O du zertrümmert Meisterstück der Schöpfung* [O thou ruined masterpiece of nature]) it has lost the reins of government, and it has retained only the power to grieve. At this point, anxiety is at its highest. Repentance has lost its mind, and anxiety is potentiated into repentance. The consequence of sin moves on; it drags the individual along like a woman whom the executioner drags by the hair while she screams in despair. Anxiety is ahead; it discovers the consequence before it comes, as one feels in one's bones that a storm is approaching. The consequence comes closer; the individual trembles like a horse that gasps as it comes to a halt at the place where once it had been frightened. Sin conquers.²⁴

Niebuhr agrees with Kierkegaard's description of anxiety's destructive relation to sin. But he discerns anxiety as the mother of

²⁴ Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 115.

cultural creativity as well.²⁵ This emphasis of another facet of anxiety is crucial for Niebuhr to develop in order to understand and judge history as the self-redemptive work of man.²⁶ Niebuhr says:

Yet anxiety is not sin. It must be distinguished from sin partly because it is its precondition and not its actuality, and partly because it is the basis of all human creativity as well as the precondition of sin. Man is anxious not only because his life is limited and dependent and yet not so limited that he does not know of his limitations. He is also anxious because he does not know the limits of his possibilities. He can do nothing and regard it perfectly done, because higher possibilities are revealed in each achievement. All human actions stand under seemingly limitless possibilities. There are, of course, limits but it is difficult to gauge them from any immediate perspective. There is therefore no limit of achievement in any sphere of activity in which human history can rest with equanimity.²⁷

Anxiety comes from the fact that man is not aware of the limits of his possibilities, which drives him to unceasing endeavor to reach the higher level of perfection. This existential understanding of anxiety as the driving force of human self-realization is from Martin Heidegger.²⁸

To sum up, Niebuhr clarified the unstable spiritual condition of anxiety as the inevitable concomitant of the dialectic of man's spiritual

²⁵ William J. Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley & Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 239.

²⁶ Cultures and civilizations as achievements of human creativity will be examined later in this chapter.

²⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 183.

²⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 183, footnote 4. See also Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 96.

transcendence and creaturely finiteness. As the locus of man's sin, anxiety turns to sin when it is tempted with a false interpretation, or when sin is presupposed. This analysis of the core concept of sin's occurrence becomes the key to explain two types of sin which man commits.

Sin as pride and sensuality

Alongside his understanding of the anxiety of man, Niebuhr defines sin.

When anxiety has conceived it brings forth both pride and sensuality. Man falls into pride, when he seeks to raise his contingent existence to unconditioned significance; he falls into sensuality, when he seeks to escape from his unlimited possibilities of freedom, from the perils and responsibilities of self-determination, by immersing himself into a "mutable good," by losing himself in some natural vitality.²⁹

According to Niebuhr, there are two directions for sin to take within the dialectical condition of man. One is the way of pride, which is derived from excessive confidence in man's transcendence. In this instance of sin, man frantically pursues the unlimited capability to exalt himself into perfection. Niebuhr, however, reminds us that man pursues perfection only while ignoring the fact of his limited capabilities.³⁰ He needs to obscure the limitedness or finiteness of his capability. He pretends that he possesses infinite capability. This raising of himself to the level of a false, ultimate

²⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 186.

³⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 195, 196.

power is the sin of pride.

Niebuhr examines three kinds of sinful pride: the pride of power, the pride of knowledge, and the pride of virtue. This application of his theology in practical form to the analysis of sins in society is Niebuhr's uniqueness and the reason he is held in such high regard by theologians, secular intellectuals, and politicians.

Regarding the pride of power, Niebuhr says:

Since man's insecurity arises not merely from the vicissitudes of nature but from the uncertainties of society and history, it is natural that the ego should seek to overcome social as well as natural insecurity and should express the impulse of "power over men" as well as "power over matter." The peril of a competing human will is overcome by subordinating that will to the ego and by using the power of many subordinated wills to ward off the enmity which such subordination creates. The will-to-power is thus inevitably involved in the vicious circle of accentuating the insecurity which it intends to eliminate.³¹

Here one can see Niebuhr's insightful understanding of sins and their destructive results in modern technology and governmental authority.

With respect to the pride of knowledge, Niebuhr says:

All human knowledge is tainted with an "ideological" taint. It pretends to be more true than it is. It is finite knowledge, gained from a particular perspective; but it pretends to be final and ultimate knowledge. Exactly analogous to the cruder pride of power, the pride of intellect is derived on the one hand from ignorance of the finiteness of the human mind and on the other hand from an attempt to obscure the known conditioned character of human knowledge and the taint of self-interest in

³¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 191-192.

human truth.³²

Also,

Intellectual pride is thus the pride of reason which forgets that it is involved in a temporal process and imagines itself in complete transcendence over history.³³

Philosophers and all kinds of scientists could be included in this analysis.

Regarding the pride of virtue, Niebuhr says:

(c) All elements of moral pride are involved in the intellectual pride which we have sought to analyse. In all but the most abstract philosophical debates the pretension of possessing an unconditioned truth is meant primarily to establish "my good" as unconditioned moral value. Moral pride is revealed in all "self-righteous" judgments in which the other is condemned because he fails to conform to the highly arbitrary standards of the self. Since the self judges itself by its own standards it finds itself good. It judges others by its own standards and finds them evil, when their standards fail to conform to its own. This is the secret of the relationship between cruelty and self-righteousness. . . . Moral pride is the pretension of finite man that his highly conditioned virtue is the final righteousness and that his very relative moral standards are absolute.³⁴

This sinful pride can be found not only in all ethical systems and religions, but also in all human actions and thoughts.

Niebuhr's analysis of human history as the accumulation of man's achievements is thoroughly informed by the perspective of pride as sin.

³² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 194-95.

³³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 195.

³⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 199 (ellipses added).

Because of his interest of social or cultural sin, the sin of pride is emphasized and utilized more than the sin of sensuality, which is described next.

Niebuhr succinctly presents the sin of sensuality, comparing it with the sin of pride as follows:

Sometimes man seeks to solve the problem of the contradiction of finiteness and freedom, not by seeking to hide his finiteness and comprehending the world into himself, but by seeking to hide his freedom and by losing himself in some aspect of the world's vitalities. In that case his sin may be defined as sensuality rather than pride. Sensuality is never the mere expression of natural impulse in man. It always betrays some aspect of his abortive effort to solve the problem of finiteness and freedom. Human passions are always characterized by unlimited and demonic potencies of which animal life is innocent.³⁵

It is significant to realize that Niebuhr defines the sin of sensuality in the context of losing oneself, corresponding to establishing oneself as the sin of pride. Niebuhr came to this definition through reviewing and contenting with the understanding of sensuality in Christian theology.

First, Niebuhr starts with the fact that the understanding of sensuality in Hellenistic theology is different from that of traditional Western theology.

As represented by Origen's understanding of original sin, Hellenistic

³⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 179. Niebuhr's term "vitalities" is used in a naturalist sense, like Nietzsche's. Vitalities are Dionysian irrational dynamisms of reality in nature, as opposed to Apollonian static rationality of the world of truth in Ancient Greek tragedy. Thus "sensuality," which is related to natural matter and contrasts itself with heavenly truth, can be identified with the Biblical term "worldly matter."

theologians understand original sin to be a physical infection of Eve by the serpent, which became the origin of all actual sins of man. Under the influence of Greek thought, Hellenistic Christianity has had the inclination to see love of pleasure as original sin, and this inherited corruption of man became his nature.³⁶ Hence sin as sensuality is the nature of man. Niebuhr does not agree with this understanding. Instead, he positively appraises the understanding of sensuality within Western tradition.

In Western tradition, sensuality is understood to be the result of man's rebellious disobedience of God. Even though the term *concupiscent* is used, this is the result of the more primal sin of self-love. "Sensuality represents a further confusion consequent upon the original confusion of substituting the self for God as the centre of existence."³⁷ Sensuality is not from the natural inclinations of the physical life.

While Niebuhr supports the side of Western tradition that denies the idea of sensuality as primary sin and is man's natural inclination, he still is not satisfied with the relation between sensuality and self-love. To him sensuality seems to be not the only sin caused by self-love.

Is sensuality, in other words, a form of idolatry which makes the self god; or is it an alternative idolatry in which the self, conscious of the inadequacy of its self-worship, seeks escape by finding some other god?³⁸

³⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 229-30.

³⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 233.

³⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 233.

In this question he senses the difficulty of seeing sensuality as the apparent sin of self-love or self-centeredness of man as the Western Christian tradition thinks. For Niebuhr this sin is not only something that comes from without to man, but also a sin which man commits, directed outward from himself to something else. This mutual direction between man and the object of his sinful desire is important for Niebuhr. He believes that his understanding of the dialectic condition of man will provide a much clearer picture of the meaning of sin as sensuality.

The sexual, as every other physical, impulse in man is subject to and compounded with the freedom of man's spirit. It is not something which man could conceivably leave imbedded in some natural harmony of animal impulses. Its force reaches up into the highest pinnacles of human spirituality; and the insecurity of man in the heights of his freedom reaches down to the sex impulse as an instrument of compensation and as an avenue of escape.³⁹

Here the positive meaning of sex and man's other physical impulses, together with his spiritual freedom, is discerned from the sexual passions of animal nature. The sinfulness involved in this act of man consists of using the sexual impulse as a way of escaping his insecurity, instead of the possibility of reaching his spiritual highest point. The formula of sin presented above is effectively applied here, too.

His generalized sinful characteristics of sensuality are:

(1) an extension of self-love to the point where it defeats its own ends; (2) an effort to escape the prison house of self by

³⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 236.

finding a god in a process or person outside the self; and (3) finally an effort to escape from the confusion which sin has created into some form of subconscious existence.⁴⁰

Niebuhr's understanding of sin has been focused on sin in individuals. He does not describe in much detail the relationship between individual sin and social sin. There are some important ideas that he offers to think about the relationship. Though he thinks that individuals are moral agents and that group pride or will occurs by the claims of individuals, he insists on the necessity of the distinction between the behavior of group and individuals.

Nevertheless some distinctions must be made between the collective behaviour of men and their individual attitudes. This is necessary in part because group pride, though having its source in individual attitudes, actually achieves a certain authority over the individual and results in unconditioned demands by the group upon the individual. Whenever the group develops organs of will, as in the apparatus of the state, it seems to the individual to have become an independent centre of moral life. He will be inclined to bow to its pretensions and to acquiesce in its claims of authority, even when these do not coincide with his moral scruples or inclinations.⁴¹

It is interesting to see that here the deification of the ruler or officer who is given authority from a nation for the sake of overcoming finiteness, as well as a nation's giving up of its freedom to the deified authority, are equivalent to anxiety and the sins of pride and sensuality in an individuals'

⁴⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 240.

⁴¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 208. See also Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 190.

case.

The collective self can gather enormous power and authority that is far greater than that of individuals. Hence much more rebellious pride could be realized in the organ of the will of the state.

We can thus summarize Niebuhr's understanding of sin as follows: For man to escape from his anxiety that is concomitant with his own dialectical structure, he commits sin in either of two directions—the sin of pride or the sin of sensuality. In the sin of pride, man pretends to possess a limitless spiritual possibility to realize the higher self. In the sin of sensuality, man loses himself to rely on or deify some person or matter in the world.⁴²

Reconstruction of the doctrine of original sin

After completing his psychological analysis of human sin, Niebuhr deliberates the problem of “inevitable but not necessary” in the doctrine of original sin.

The Christian doctrine of sin in its classical form offends both rationalists and moralists by maintaining the seemingly absurd position that man sins inevitably and by a fateful necessity but that he is nevertheless to be held responsible for

⁴² Even though Niebuhr presented his doctrine of sin as both pride and sensuality, his total treatment of social sin and history is based on his analysis of sin as pride. Regarding this point, feminist theologians contend that Niebuhr's overemphasis on the sin of pride is wrong because a woman tends to commit the sin of sensuality in which she loses her self. Some of those feminist theologians are Valerie Saiving Goldstein, Judith Plaskow, and Judith Vaughan.

actions which are prompted by an ineluctable fate.⁴³

If the sinful inclination of man is derived from man's sinful nature, his sin is a necessary result from his nature, so there is no responsibility for his sin. Hellenistic Christianity sees the root of sin in human physical nature and that the spirit of man is bound within a sinful body. But Western classical Christianity sees that the locus of sin is in the human will. Niebuhr notes that the Pauline-Augustinian tradition never loses sight of either sin in the human will or the inheritance of the sinful nature of Adam's original sin. Augustine's words about the problem with this position are succinctly expressed.

Original sin, which is by definition an inherited corruption, or at least an inevitable one, is nevertheless not to be regarded as belonging to his essential nature and therefore is not outside the realm of his responsibility. Sin is natural for man in the sense that it is universal but not in the sense that it is necessary.⁴⁴

Niebuhr supports the classical form of the understanding of original sin, "sin as not necessary but inevitable and responsible," as the biblical one. He focuses the problem down further to that of human will.

Sin is to be regarded as neither a necessity of man's nature nor yet as a pure caprice of his will. It proceeds rather from a defect of the will, for which reason it is not 'completely deliberate,' but since it is the will in which the defect is found and the will presupposes freedom the defect cannot be

⁴³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 241.

⁴⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 242.

attributed to a taint in man's nature.⁴⁵

Free-will is emphasized, on the one hand, to indicate the responsibility of man, but enslaved-will is emphasized at the same time to indicate his corrupted will to choose that which is evil.

It is logically impossible to reconcile this logical absurdity. If one follows the logic, he can say either that man sins with his free-will and is thus responsible for his sinful action or that man sins with his enslaved will, inherited by nature, so he could not have any choice but to sin and hence cannot be charged for his sinful action.

Niebuhr offers his new approach to get a better understanding of the logical absurdity of original sin. He offers a psychological approach instead of the logical one. In his view of man's condition studied above, anxiety with the dialectical condition of finiteness and freedom of man is neither itself sin nor does it make for a sinful condition, but it can become a temptation when some evil element or sin comes along with it.

Sin can never be traced merely to the temptation arising from a particular situation or condition in which man as man finds himself or in which particular men find themselves. Nor can the temptation which is compounded of a situation of finiteness and freedom, plus the fact of sin, be regarded as leading necessarily to sin in the life of each individual, if again sin is not first presupposed in that life. For this reason even the knowledge of inevitability does not extinguish the sense of responsibility.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 242.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 254.

In this psychological interpretation of sin, free-will is still found in the self-determining, free-will holder of the self, so the self is responsible for his action. Inevitability is transformed into the presupposed sin with anxiety of the insecurity of man's dialectical condition. Anxiety is neither stable nor a peaceful condition, but still itself has a neutral condition.⁴⁷ Furthermore, inevitability seems to be transformed into presupposing the existence of sin for sinful action to make anxiety into temptation.

Thus, this psychological analysis of presupposed sin with the anxiety of man gives a better explanation of "inevitable but responsible."

Niebuhr now returns to the classical interpretation of the doctrine of original sin. He sees the real problem of its interpretation in identifying original sin with inherited taint.

In countering the simple moralism of the Pelagians they [Augustinians] insisted on interpreting original sin as an inherited taint. Thus they converted the doctrine of the inevitability of sin into a dogma which asserted that sin had a

⁴⁷ Niebuhr's interpretation of the doctrine of original sin is definitely taken from Kierkegaard's understanding of Adam's fall, but there is one crucial difference here between Niebuhr and Keirkegaard. In Kierkegaard's trichotomical interpretation, he assumes the state of innocence of Adam whereby Adam's spirit was sleeping or dreaming. When Adam sinned, his spirit was awoken by temptation and posited the actuality of man to be and will to be. In Niebuhr's case, he does not develop his interpretation of Adam's state of innocence. Theoretically at least, Kierkegaard develops his interpretation of Adam's fall in chronological basis. He attempts to establish the identity of the qualitative leap of sin by Adam with that of man in later generations. These facts allow us to think that he treated Adam's fall in historical context. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 41-46, 60-73. For Niebuhr, the Fall story itself is a myth. Any chronological succession of sin from Adam to succeeding generations is unnecessary because the Fall story is the existential analysis of the sin of man in general.

natural history.⁴⁸

The Augustinian interpretation of original sin as an inherited taint is a literal interpretation of the Fall story. Niebuhr strongly criticized this literal interpretation which aggravates the absurdity of “inevitable but not necessary.”

It is obviously necessary to eliminate the literalistic illusions in the doctrine of original sin if the paradox of inevitability and responsibility is to be fully understood; for the theory of an inherited second nature is as clearly destructive of the idea of responsibility for sin as rationalistic and dualistic theories which attribute human evil to the inertia of nature. When this literalistic confusion is eliminated the truth of the doctrine of original sin is more clearly revealed; but it must be understood that even in this form the doctrine remains absurd from the standpoint of a pure rationalism, for it expresses a relation between fate and freedom which cannot be fully rationalized, unless the paradox be accepted as a rational understanding of the limits of rationality and as an expression of faith that a rationally irresolvable contradiction may point to a truth which logic cannot contain.⁴⁹

From his conviction of Kierkegaard’s dialecticism, Niebuhr agrees with the necessity of the rationally absurd “inevitability and responsibility” set forth by classical theology in the doctrine of original sin. But Niebuhr points out that a literalistic interpretation of original sin as inherited sinful nature goes back to the Hellenistic mistake of seeing the origin of sin in historical events and in nature. The true paradox or dialectic has to escape from this error. According to Niebuhr, the final paradox of “inevitable but

⁴⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 260.

⁴⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 262.

responsible” should be as follows:

The Christian doctrine of original sin with its seemingly contradictory assertions about the inevitability of sin and man's responsibility for sin is a dialectical truth which does justice to the fact that man's self-love and self-centredness is inevitable, but not in such a way as to fit into the [sic] the category of natural necessity. It is within and by his freedom that man sins. The final paradox is that the discovery of the inevitability of sin is man's highest assertion of freedom.⁵⁰

Man inevitably sins in his highest assertion of freedom. The explanation with psychological analysis is as far as possible to go. Niebuhr sees that only by faith the absurdity of the dialectic of “inevitable but responsible” can be accepted.

Thus, Niebuhr keeps the truer dialecticism, rejecting the literalistic interpretation of the Fall story and identity of original sin with inherited inertia. Niebuhr believes a mythical interpretation of the story.

The myth of the Fall of Adam universalizes, as well as individualizes, this theme of man's revolt against God. The influence of this myth upon the Christian imagination is not primarily due to any literalistic illusions of Christian orthodoxy. The myth accurately symbolizes the consistent Biblical diagnosis of moral and historical evil. Adam and, together with him, all men seek to overstep the bounds which are set by the Creator for man as creature.⁵¹

Things that happened to Adam actually happen to all individuals in

⁵⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 263. See also Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 195.

⁵¹ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 120-21.

the world. Adam's fall is an existential analysis of man.⁵² This myth does not testify to the origin of sin in the first man of history.

The metaphysical connotations of the myth of the Fall are, however, less important for our purposes than the psychological and moral ones. It is in its interpretations of the facts of human nature, rather than in its oblique insights into the relation of order and chaos as such, that the myth of the Fall makes its profoundest contribution to moral and religious theory. The most basic and fruitful conception flowing from this ancient myth is the idea that evil lies at the juncture of nature and spirit.⁵³

According to this statement, Niebuhr thinks that concern over whether Adam and his fall historically existed or not is not the right one expected from the myth.⁵⁴

Reconstruction of the doctrine of original righteousness

Observing that the error of classical Christian theology on the doctrine of original sin is its literal-chronological identification of Adam's

⁵² Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 172.

⁵³ Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935), 79.

⁵⁴ Niebuhr identifies the fall of Adam with man's sinning. By doing so he escapes the problem that orthodoxy has of defining original sin as the inherited sinful nature. It should also be mentioned that Niebuhr is heavily indebted to Kierkegaard for this way of escaping the problem. Kierkegaard's interpretation of Adam's fall is utilized by Niebuhr in basically the same form. Kierkegaard's concern is the difference of the quality of sin between Adam and later individuals within the orthodox understanding of original sin. Similar to Niebuhr, Kierkegaard denies the idea of original sin as inherited sinful nature. Kierkegaard thinks that, as in Adam's fall, the qualitative leap from innocence to guilt has to happen in later individuals. This idea comes close to Pelagianism. Kierkegaard added the idea of quantitative accumulation of sinfulness in the world in history to the criticism of Pelagianism. Kierkegaard, *Concept of Anxiety*, 30-50.

fall with an historical event, Niebuhr interprets the Fall story as a universal symbol of the condition of sinful man in general. Related to this interpretation, he has to deal with the natural question accompanying it, How should we understand original righteousness which is supposed to be lost through the Fall?

In Catholic theology, man lost only *donum supernaturale* or supernatural gifts from God, namely faith, hope, and love; he never lost *justitia originalis*, which belongs to human nature. In other words, by the fall man lost only something which is not essential to man and he still keeps original righteousness. By contrast, Protestantism understands that the image of God is destroyed, and while man's original righteousness is lost there is some possibility of its remnant in insignificant aspects of human behavior.⁵⁵ Niebuhr briefly summarizes the problem of such chronological interpretations in relation to original righteousness.

The relation of man's essential nature to his sinful state cannot be solved within terms of the chronological version of the perfection before the Fall. It is, as it were, a vertical rather than horizontal relation. When the Fall is made an event in history rather than a symbol of an aspect of every historical moment in the life of man, the relation of evil to goodness in that moment is obscured.⁵⁶

In Niebuhr's reconstruction of original righteousness, the distinction between what is not and is lost is not in chronological or horizontal sense,

⁵⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 269.

⁵⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 269.

but in vertical or ethical sense of high and low at any moment. More precisely, it is the dialectical dynamic between original righteousness and sinfulness in man.

To the essential nature of man belong, on the one hand, all his natural endowments, and determinations, his physical and social impulses, his sexual and racial differentiations, in short his character as a creature imbedded in the natural order. On the other hand, his essential nature also includes the freedom of his spirit, his transcendence over natural process and finally his self-transcendence.

The virtue and perfection which corresponds to the first element of his nature is usually designated as the natural law. It is the law which defines the proper performance of his functions, the normal harmony of his impulses and the normal social relation between himself and his fellows within the limitations of the natural order. . . .

The virtues which correspond to the second element in his nature, that is, to the freedom of his spirit, are analogous to the "theological virtues" of Catholic thought, namely faith, hope and love.⁵⁷

Niebuhr defines two kinds of virtue that accompany the anthropology studied in chapter 2. Natural law is a virtue necessary for man as creature. The virtues of faith, hope, and love are not *donum supernaturale*, special gifts from God, but requirements of man's natural freedom of spirit to relate with God and fellow individuals.⁵⁸ Man's freedom requires faith in God's providence, because without it man seeks an impossible self-sufficiency to control his fate in the temptation of anxiety. It also requires hope in future, which is a realm of terror if man does not have hope in the providence of

⁵⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 270-71 (ellipses added).

⁵⁸ Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," 240.

God. Finally, it requires love to relate his spirit to other spirits more than at the level of natural cohesion. Man's social nature makes him live in community.

Since men are separated from one another by the uniqueness and individuality of each spirit, however closely they may be bound together by ties of nature, they cannot relate themselves to one another in terms which will do justice to both the bonds of nature and the freedom of their spirit if they are not related in terms of love.⁵⁹

In this context of love, the self can relate with the other as a subject not an object. The relation is that of I and Thou, not that of I and it.⁶⁰

When Niebuhr says vertical contrasts, he does not mean the contrast between a higher virtue of spiritual freedom and a lower virtue of natural law. Rather, he means the ideal condition of both virtues and their empirical sinful condition. Niebuhr says, "Both are corrupted by sin: but both are still with man, not indeed as realizations but requirements."⁶¹ Niebuhr's position, in terms of original justice, is not optimistic like Catholicism, but not pessimistic like Protestantism, either.⁶²

According to Niebuhr, the relation between original righteousness and sin is like health and illness. When man becomes sick, he loses his health, but it is still discerned as the law of his body. Similarly, by the fall

⁵⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 271.

⁶⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 272.

⁶¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 277.

⁶² Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 108.

original righteousness ceases to be man's possession but is still law.

This analysis of the matter leads to the conclusion that sin neither destroys the structure by virtue of which man is man nor yet eliminates the sense of obligation toward the essential nature of man, which is the remnant of his perfection. This sense of obligation is, in fact, the claim which the essential nature of man makes upon him in his present sinful state. The virtue which corresponds to the true nature of man therefore appears to sinful man in the form of law.⁶³

In other words, when man sins, he always faces original righteousness in the form of law. Man does not possess it but is required to fulfill it.

The self in the moment of transcending itself exercises the self's capacity for infinite regression and makes the previous concretion of will its object. It is in this moment of self-transcendence that the consciousness and memory of original perfection arise. For in this moment the self knows itself as merely a finite creature among many others and realizes that the undue claims which the anxious self in action makes, result in injustices to its fellows.⁶⁴

This psychological analysis of the transcendent man in the moment of infinite possibility shows his encounter with original righteousness as he knows the reality of sinful intention of the anxious self before its action. The transcendent-self can come to a recognition of sinfulness and realize "right general intention" in its contemplation, but the self is betrayed by anxieties and fears to carry it out in a specific action.⁶⁵ "Perfection before the fall is

⁶³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 272. See also Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 159.

⁶⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 277.

⁶⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 293.

perfection before the act.”⁶⁶ Niebuhr thinks that the Fall story reflects this fact. “Adam was sinless before he acted and sinful in his first recorded act.”⁶⁷ This fall of Adam is the experience of every man each time he commits sin. In each committing of sin, man, in a moment of transcendence, realizes the contradiction between his sinful condition and the state of harmony of relationship between himself, God and his neighbor. Original righteousness is this human awareness of the tension between his sinful reality and what he has to be as required by law. Original righteousness is in the memory and knowledge of the required law.⁶⁸

Salvation from sin

Grace

To take up the challenge of understanding human history from a soteriological perspective, Niebuhr naturally utilized the idea of analogy with soteriology for individuals. Before coming to this perspective, he examined the doctrine of grace, which is closely related to soteriology for the individual.

Niebuhr started with the meaning of grace in the New Testament:

The two emphases are contained in the double connotation of

⁶⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 294.

⁶⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 294.

⁶⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 294.

the word "grace" in the New Testament. Grace represents on the one hand the mercy and forgiveness of God by which He completes what man cannot complete and overcomes the sinful elements in all of man's achievements. Grace is the power of God over man. Grace is on the other hand the power of God in man; it represents an accession of resources, which man does not have of himself, enabling him to become what he truly ought to be.⁶⁹

Grace has two facets, as the power of God over man and as the power of God in man. The relation of these two meanings of grace in soteriology is very important. Niebuhr criticized the Catholic belief of the subordination of justification (the power of God over man) to sanctification (the power of God in man), or of justification as the prelude to sanctification. According to this theory,

the divine mercy, mediated through Christ, destroys the sinful contradiction between man and God, and turns the soul from self-love to obedience; whereupon it may grow in grace and achieve constantly higher stages of sanctification. This subordination of justification to sanctification becomes definitive for the whole Catholic conception of life and history.⁷⁰

Through producing good works in history, man can reach the goal of life; this would also be another new source for sinful pride. In the stage of sanctification, basically the problem of spiritual sin is resolved and only man's finiteness remains.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, pp. 98-99.

⁷⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 135.

⁷¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 144. Niebuhr thinks that good works are the fruit of grace in man, but that they do not contribute to man's salvation. Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 125.

In its polemic concerning spiritual sin against the Catholics, the Protestant Reformation asserted the impossibility of Catholic sanctification as merit for man's salvation by emphasizing justification by grace.

The Reformation understands that therefore we are "justified by faith" and "saved in hope"; that we must look forward to a completion of life which is not in our power and even beyond our comprehension. It realizes that the unity of human existence, despite its involvement in, and freedom from, natural process, is such that it cannot be "saved" either by disavowing its freedom in order to return to nature, or by sloughing off its creaturely character so that it may rise to the "eternal." This is a final enigma of human existence for which there is no answer except by faith and hope.⁷²

Although Niebuhr highly prizes the recognition of man's radical sinfulness and of the mistake of Catholicism's new sin of pride through sanctification, two aspects of grace become obscured.

Niebuhr thinks that the relationship of the two aspects of grace is very delicate and paradoxical and suggests the correct understanding:

The real situation is that both affirmations—that only God in Christ can break and reconstruct the sinful self, and that the self must "open the door" and is capable of doing so—are equally true; and they are both unqualifiedly true, each on its own level. Yet either affirmation becomes false if it is made without reference to the other.⁷³

Thus Niebuhr believes that these two inseparably related meanings of grace are crucial to understand man's salvation. After the synthesis of two aspects of grace of Catholicism was denied, however, historically the

⁷² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 149.

⁷³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 118.

emphasis on justification (the power of grace over man) was made by the Reformation, and the emphasis on sanctification (the power of grace in man) was made by the Renaissance—but without the understanding of grace from God.⁷⁴

The Reformation on the other hand represents a more complete break with the medieval tradition; for it interprets “grace” primarily, not as the “power of God” in man; but as the power (forgiveness) of God towards man.⁷⁵

And

The Renaissance is, when considered from the standpoint of Christian doctrine, “sanctificationist” in principle. In it all the reservations upon the hope of fulfilling life and realizing its highest possibilities, expressed in the prophetic-Christian consciousness, are brushed aside.⁷⁶

Niebuhr claims that the Reformation invited cultural obscurantism by its indifference towards the relative distinctions of truth and falsehood.⁷⁷ Observing church history, Niebuhr judges that neither the Catholic nor Reformation churches conceive and relate to worldly authority, society, truth, and the like outside of spiritual matters, according to a proper understanding of grace. The medieval Catholic church declared her possession of infallible authority and truth, which is the same sin of pride

⁷⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 150-53, 226.

⁷⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 150.

⁷⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 153.

⁷⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 191. See also Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 167.

and pretension that the world makes. The Reformation churches are charged more with laziness in applying their understanding of the doctrines of sin and grace to cultural matters and truth in a context of brotherhood.

After considering the insufficient and partial understanding of grace in the Reformation and Renaissance, Niebuhr presents a new synthesis of grace:

A new synthesis is therefore called for. It must be a synthesis which incorporates the twofold aspects of grace of Biblical religion, and adds the light which modern history, and the Renaissance and Reformation interpretations of history, have thrown upon the paradox of grace. Briefly this means that on the one hand life in history must be recognized as filled with indeterminate possibilities. There is no individual or interior spiritual situation, no cultural or scientific task, and no social or political problem in which men do not face new possibilities of the good and the obligation to realize them. It means on the other hand that every effort and pretension to complete life, whether in collective or individual terms, that every desire to stand beyond the contradictions of history, or to eliminate the final corruptions of history must be disavowed.⁷⁸

According to Niebuhr, the reformers thought that salvation and justification are gifts of grace, but that salvation and justification do not change the reality of the sinfulness of sinners. Niebuhr thought that this understanding of the reformers would have been the right perspective for avoiding the church's involvement in the same sin of pride as the world commits, as well as for understanding cultural endeavors in a soteriological

⁷⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 207.

context, if it had been applied. This humble self-understanding would have prevented the church from boasting of possessing absolute authority or truth on earth.

The truth remains subject to the paradox of grace. We may have it; and yet we do not have it. And we will have it the more purely in fact if we know that we have it only in principle. Our toleration of truths opposed to those which we confess is an expression of the spirit of forgiveness in the realm of culture. Like all forgiveness, it is possible only if we are not too sure of our own virtue.⁷⁹

In such an understanding of grace, the Reformation's humble recognition of salvation by grace and continuous sinfulness and nonpossession of absolute truth is indispensable, as is the recognition of the importance of cultural and historical endeavors carried out from the perspective of grace in man. This is only possible in Niebuhr's synthesis of grace for man (justification) and grace in man (sanctification).

Salvation of the individuals

As we have seen early in this chapter, Niebuhr defines sin from a dialectic anthropological perspective as man's pride. Man attempts to complete his life by himself, depending on his transcendent spirituality, ignoring his finiteness as a creature. Because of his pretension of perfect infiniteness or transcendence of his freedom, he takes the place of God Almighty.

⁷⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 243.

Man is constantly tempted to the sin of idolatry and constantly succumbs to it because in contemplating the power and dignity of his freedom he forgets the degree of his limitations.⁸⁰

Niebuhr does not talk much about individual salvation. But we can summarize it as simply that at the moment of temptation through anxiety, there is a way for man to avoid sin by faith in God, instead of plunging into deeper sin with his pretension of self-sufficiency.⁸¹ Niebuhr praises the doctrine of “salvation by grace through faith” of the Reformation. Even though he does not discuss the matter in classical theological language, he accepts the principle of salvation by grace through faith. In his own words,

The Reformation understands that therefore we are “justified by faith” and “saved in hope”; that we must look forward to a completion of life which is not in our power and even beyond our comprehension. It realizes that the unity of human existence, despite its involvement in, and freedom from, natural process, is such that it cannot be “saved” either by disavowing its freedom in order to return to nature, or by sloughing off its creaturely character so that it may rise to the “eternal.” This is a final enigma of human existence for which there is no answer except by faith and hope.⁸²

In the process of believing, man needs to come to the spiritual stage of contrition. At this stage, man realizes the guilt of his efforts to overcome the limitation of freedom and to fulfill the self-completion of his life.⁸³ With this preparation, the Gospel makes contact with the contrite to lead him to

⁸⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 166.

⁸¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 182.

⁸² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 149.

⁸³ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 57.

the faith in which he recognizes God is the only possible person to fulfill his life.

Basically, this is a form of salvation for the individual. Niebuhr seldom mentions judgment as punishment, because his understanding of the message of special revelation eases the fear of judgment. According to him, one of the messages is that, at the time of the last judgment, before God there is no one righteous.⁸⁴ Finally in the revelation of the Cross, the message is

the assurance that judgment is not the final word of God to man; but it does not regard the mercy of God as a forgiveness which wipes out the distinctions of good and evil in history and makes judgment meaningless.⁸⁵

Salvation of the collectives

The theme that Niebuhr continually pursued was history as man's drama (man as subject), so his concern was obviously more on the social, political, and cultural enterprises in the temporal world. In such contexts, he treats the problem of sin in society, politics, cultures, and so forth. He believes that the very origin of sin of the collective-self is in the sin of the individual-self, but the collective-self, like the state, has such enormous

⁸⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 149, 44.

⁸⁵ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1, 142. It is not clear whether or not Niebuhr believed in a universal salvation, a possible interpretation of this particular message of biblical revelation. If he did, that fact would help to make sense for his infrequent mention of judgement and punishment in his *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

power and possibility of freedom that individuals learn to realize the end of their lives through the collective-self. Through these processes, the collective-self comes to have an organ of will. The guilt of the collective-self, which has a larger transcendental possibility, is more serious than the individuals'.

One of Niebuhr's achievements is the accusation of social sins and evils based on his dialectic anthropology, in contrast to the sentimentalism of liberal Protestantism's belief in human possibility. While he analyzes social sins and evils in their various forms in history, he does not see salvation of the collective-self through a simple confession of faith. Niebuhr observes human history itself as the history of human endeavor for redemption. Because of the human structure of possessing spiritual transcendence and freedom, man tries to fulfill his life either in the eternal or in nature. Human history, in this sense, is a history of self-redemption. In a broader sense, human history as human endeavors will be judged in the end. Niebuhr's concern is this self-redeeming effort in human history and how we should understand it from the teaching of the Bible. Hence in his treatment not only social sin and evil but also various ideas of justice and truth as human good works are considered.⁸⁶ For the judgement of the task, the way Niebuhr takes is the application of his understanding of grace to culture and truth, the history of self-redemptive endeavor. Application of

⁸⁶ Especially chapter 9 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2.

the doctrine of grace to redemption in truth and culture is explained.

For it is not possible to remain fully conscious of the egoistic corruption in the truth, while we seek to establish and advance it in our thought and action. But it is possible in moments of prayerful transcendence over the sphere of interested thought and action to be conscious of the corruption; and it is also possible to carry this insight into our interested thoughts and actions so that it creates some sense of pity and forgiveness for those who contend against our truth and oppose our action. But “grace” enters and purifies our thought and action fully only if the contradiction between it and “nature” (in this case corrupted truth) is understood. Here lies the secret of forgiveness. Mercy to the foe is possible only to those who know themselves to be sinners.⁸⁷

This is how Christians live in the cultural world in accordance with the application of the doctrine of grace. By doing so, the gospel will penetrate culture and truth, then self-redeeming history as a whole. Here merciful love, the law of love as the revelation of Christ commands, is exercised with humble recognition of no possession of absolute truth, through grace for man, and recognition of one’s foe who has his own belief of truth as a fruit of grace in man.

As examined earlier, according to Niebuhr without special revelation the sense of judgement by the Creator on history as the works of creature is the universal recognition of man gained through general revelation. In this context, Niebuhr thinks that the double aspect of grace is the way of salvation as the possibility of the fulfillment of human history.

⁸⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 217. Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 238, summarizes Niebuhr’s understanding of the Christian attitude toward the secular world as embodying both relatedness and separatedness.

The double aspect of grace, the twofold emphasis upon the obligation to fulfill the possibilities of life and upon the limitations and corruptions in all historic realizations, implies that history is a meaningful process but is incapable of fulfilling itself and therefore points beyond itself to the judgment and mercy of God for its fulfillment.⁸⁸

Moreover, using Paul Tillich's similar understanding of the work of grace in truth, Niebuhr presents how grace works in man when the gospel encounters him:

Professor Tillich's analysis of the thought which transcends all conditioned and finite thought, and proves its transcendence by its realization of the finiteness of thought, is a precise formulation of the ultimate self-transcendence of the human spirit, revealed in its capacity to understand its own finiteness. It is a philosophical formulation of this reality, and therefore deals with the problem of finiteness and not of sin. Sin is the refusal to admit finiteness. This refusal is sinful precisely because spirit has the capacity to recognize its finiteness. But when it refuses to do so its sinful self-glorification must be broken by the power of "grace." What Professor Tillich describes could therefore be equated with what I have defined at another point (Vol. I, Ch. X) as "perfection before the fall," the perfection which hovers as possibility but not as actuality over all action. *If this possibility is realized at all, it belongs to the realm of "grace" and cannot be merely ascribed to the native endowment of spirit: that is its capacity for self-transcendence. Without such a capacity there would indeed be no "point of contact" for "grace,"* that is, without a shattering of the false sense of self-sufficiency and universality of spirit, the effort would be made (as it is made in idealistic philosophy) to extend the pinnacle of self-transcendence in the human spirit until it becomes universal spirit, that is God.⁸⁹

Recognition of the limitation of transcendence or freedom of man is

⁸⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 211.

⁸⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 218, footnote 4 (emphasis added).

understood to be the work of God through grace. With this prerequisite preparation of man's heart, that is contrition, the gospel has "a point of contact" with the heart; then the recognition is possible that only God can fulfill the absolute truth and meaning of history. Niebuhr expresses this grace in the collective context as well.

If we examine any individual life, or any social achievement in history, it becomes apparent that there are infinite possibilities of organizing life from beyond the centre of the self; and equally infinite possibilities of drawing the self back into the centre of the organization. The former possibilities are always fruits of grace (though frequently it is the "hidden Christ" and a grace which is not fully known which initiates the miracle). They are always the fruits of grace because any life which cannot "forget" itself and which merely makes brotherhood the instrument of its "happiness" or its "perfection" cannot really escape the vicious circle of egocentricity.⁹⁰

Grace makes man—whether individually or as a society—recognize his limitation, finiteness, or sinfulness; grace then leads him to contrition. The human spirit does not have the capacity to admit limits or sinfulness of the self, or untruthfulness in the context of culture and truth. These are given by grace. Although Niebuhr does not distinguish which aspect of grace this grace is, because contrition is beyond the capability of the spirit of the self (grace in man), it must be grace for man, unless Niebuhr has another category.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 123.

⁹¹ If grace for man is strictly defined as God's grace for man's salvation, the grace that is given for the self to have contrition—a grace beyond that which is already present in man—is neither kind of grace. Because the contrite self is a preparatory

According to Niebuhr, the message of final judgement is that God will separate good and evil, but there is no one righteous before God and He will take all guilt and sin on Himself to be punished. Even though Niebuhr seemingly advocates a universal salvation, his emphasis on the importance of the separation of good and evil is strong.

The Christian doctrine of the Atonement, with its paradoxical conception of the relation of the divine mercy to the divine wrath is therefore the final key to this historical interpretation. The wrath and the judgment of God are symbolic of the seriousness of history. The distinctions between good and evil are important and have ultimate significance. The realization of the good must be taken seriously; it is the wheat, separated from the tares, which is gathered "into my barn," which is to say that the good within the finite flux has significance beyond that flux.⁹²

While Niebuhr insists on the importance of the separation of good and evil, at the same time and with the same strength he insists that God as merciful Messiah overcame His wrath as Judge. The works of history as man's self-redeeming effort would be recognized as the work of evil because of self-redeeming thought—even there is a good spirit in a worldly sense. The merciful God takes those incomplete and insufficient works to make them complete beyond history.⁹³

condition in Niebuhr's thought, it is not certain that the contrite self surely comes to faith of salvation. It seems, rather, to belong to the category of "common grace" in reformed theology.

⁹² Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 211-12.

⁹³ It seems that Niebuhr thinks of redemption of secular endeavors as universalistic salvation. Hans Hofmann, in his *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 208-9, supports this idea by saying "God as Judge considered man's guilt heavy. He

Role of Jesus Christ in salvation

In Niebuhr's soteriology, the fulfillment of salvation is beyond history, and only hope of salvation is given by faith. In such a soteriology, the role of Jesus is fairly ambiguous and in need of clarification.

It is important to know that Niebuhr's soteriology is different from that of classical Christianity due to his unique understanding of sin from an anthropological and psychological perspective. It is logical to present salvation as the opposite of sin, and it is necessary to express salvation with words related to his understanding of sin. In this sense, his understanding of salvation is a psychological soteriology.

The most important role of Jesus Christ in the theology of Niebuhr is that of vessel of God's special revelation. According to his anthropology, man cannot fulfill his life and history with spiritual transcendence, because his transcendental ability is limited, not absolute. Man, with his sin of pride which leads him to a pretence of his absolute power, takes the place of God to fulfill his life and destiny.⁹⁴ Observing human history, Niebuhr shows that man struggles with his attempts to fulfill his life and history. With

did not blur the difference between good and evil. He did not declare a general amnesty which would leave guilt unexpiated. Yet God loves man and 'wills not the death of the sinner,' but rather that he repent. He sees man's heart and knows that sin is not merely the regrettable slip of an essentially good man, but a perversion of the will which deforms the whole man and distorts all his thoughts and deeds. God then takes upon Himself the guilt of sin and all its fatal consequences, in the atoning death of His Son on Golgotha. By His personal giving of Himself in the Holy Spirit to each individual man, He gives to men this redemption, so that every man becomes a new creature in inner communion with God." See also Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 181.

⁹⁴ See both "Sin as Pride and Sensuality" and Sin in this chapter.

general revelation and historical revelation, and without the revelation of Christ, man could arrive at the idea of judgement by the Creator God, prophetic warning and messianic hope, recognizing the incapability of self-redemption in history.⁹⁵ Niebuhr believes that Hebrew religion and Roman law are respectively the highest of human religion and moral rule within the sphere of general revelation and historical revelation without the revelation of Christ, but even so there is no way for the redemption of man with these highest of human achievements.⁹⁶

Special revelation in Christ is needed for the redemption of man.

According to Niebuhr that special revelation is as follows:

The self-disclosure of God in Christ is significantly regarded by Christian faith as the final “word” which God has spoken to man. The revelation of the Atonement is precisely a “final” word because it discloses a transcendent divine mercy which represents the “freedom” of God in quintessential terms: namely God’s freedom over His own law.⁹⁷

In the revelation in Christ, the character of God as a merciful God of love is revealed. This was the answer to the prophetic-messianic problem, namely how God’s mercy related to his justice (or wrath). With the limitation of general revelation and historical (or special) revelation, man rose to the idea of God as

Judge and Messiah, but without the special revelation of the Cross, he

⁹⁵ See Revelation in chapter 1, 14ff.

⁹⁶ Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, 20.

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 67.

could not reach the resolution of the problem.⁹⁸

Adding to the disclosure of God's merciful character regarding judgement, the revelation of Christ reveals the suffering love of Christ as the norm of love for man to fulfill the meaning of life.

Christ as the norm of human nature defines the final perfection of man in history. This perfection is not so much a sum total of various virtues or an absence of transgression of various laws; it is the perfection of sacrificial love.⁹⁹

Jesus Christ as the special revelation is both the "Son of God" to reveal God's character as the merciful judge and the "Second Adam" to show the norm of sacrificial love for man to fulfill his life. It is significant for Niebuhr to have these two facets of the revelation of Christ, because the revelation of God's love corresponds to his understanding of the grace for man that is God's work for man's salvation, and the revelation that is normative for man's life corresponds to the grace that works as a power in man.¹⁰⁰

According to Niebuhr's understanding, there is no fulfillment of the meaning of history (in other words, self-redemption) in history. Within general revelation and historical revelation, man cannot resolve the enigma

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 30.

⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 68.

¹⁰⁰ Wolf, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man," 237, points out that, while Niebuhr denies the classical doctrine of Christ's two natures in one person, he sees the revelation of both the *divine* will of God and the *human* norm of suffering love in Christ.

of the relationship between justice and mercy of God. Man cannot reach salvation by himself because of his limited transcendental capability. This is a fact of created human nature. Out of the struggle and confusion, man was able to see the impossibility of self-redemption, but he never found the right way or information to escape from this problem within himself and history. The only resolution of this problem is to be given from above by God in Christ's Cross. In this special revelation, God's redemptive love for man is shown. Thus the fear of judgement with which man has been threatened is mingled with the hope of mercy.¹⁰¹

The revelation of Christ as the Second Adam is normative for man to fulfill his life and collective history. Without revelation and grace, man can only achieve mutual love as his norm. Only by Christ's suffering and sacrificial love can the norm for man be shown.

The most direct relationship of love to the problems of community would seem to be the purifying effect of sacrificial love upon mutual love. Mutual love and loyalty are, in a sense, the highest possibilities of social life, rising above the rational calculations and the power-balances of its rough justice. The grace of sacrificial love prevents mutual love from degenerating into a mere calculation of mutual advantages. If mutual love is not constantly replenished by impulses of grace in which there are no calculation of mutual advantages, mutual relations degenerate first to the cool calculation of such advantages and finally to resentment over the inevitable lack of complete reciprocity in all actual relations.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 109.

¹⁰² Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 185.

Thus the importance of the special revelation of Christ is obvious. If there were not that special revelation, there would be no clue for man to be sure of the hope for merciful judgement and of the right way of fulfilling his life and history. Because special revelation is the indispensable key for human redemption, the life, and especially the cross, of Jesus Christ is important.

In Niebuhr's thought, man's apprehension and acceptance of the special revelation of Christ is almost the same as his salvation.

For God reveals both His mercy and His judgement in these disclosures. If the disclosure is therefore apprehended in repentance and faith it will also lead to a reformation of life. It can not be apprehended without repentance, because the God who stands against us, "whose thoughts are not our thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8) can not be known if we do not contritely abate the pretension of reaching God by our thought or of regarding His power as an extension of our power. Thus the faith which apprehends the disclosure of the divine mercy and will implies and requires a repentance which leads to a reformation and redemption of life.¹⁰³

The apprehension of the revelation is only possible by faith, accompanied by repentance and contrition. Niebuhr, furthermore, develops the process that starts with acceptance by faith and leads to redemption of life. For Niebuhr redemption definitely means God's merciful redemption or completion of history with his absolute sovereignty at the end of history, not in history.

The reason for the importance of apprehension of the revelation is

¹⁰³ Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 106.

derived from Niebuhr's understanding of the revelation itself. For him the biblical revelation must be mythologically or symbolically interpreted.

The Biblical symbols cannot be taken literally because it is not possible for finite minds to comprehend that which transcends and fulfills history. The finite mind can only use symbols and pointers of the character of the eternal. These pointers must be taken seriously nevertheless because they express the self-transcendent character of historical existence and point to its eternal ground. The symbols which point towards the consummation from within the temporal flux cannot be exact in the scientific sense of the word.¹⁰⁴

For Niebuhr, the fall of Adam, the virgin birth of Christ, Christ's resurrection, and the *eschata* (Christ's Second Coming, Last Judgement, general resurrection of body) are not understood literally.¹⁰⁵ The reason for his criticism of a literal interpretation of biblical revelation is that it breaks the dialectical relation of eternity and temporality. In this dialecticism, there cannot be continuity between eternity and time.

For apprehension and acceptance of special revelation, man needs a contrite heart and faith to accept it subjectively (existentially), because he needs to understand the deeper meaning of the revelation with its symbolism that does not accord with a rational thinking process.¹⁰⁶

Thus in Niebuhr's soteriology the role of Jesus Christ is very limited. For him the historical events themselves of Jesus' life are not important,

¹⁰⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 289.

¹⁰⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), 197-98.

¹⁰⁶ Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 23.

but the symbolic meaning of the events, especially the cross of Christ, are. Faith is required to apprehend the revelation. Concerning this point, the role of faith is very different from a conservative Christian belief. In that soteriology, faith is a gift from God to accept Jesus Christ as Savior, who has done the soteriological work of a substitutionary death for sinners, followed by his victorious resurrection and ascension.¹⁰⁷ There may be a similarity of usage of “faith” for both to mean accepting the truth which is not comprehensible with rational intelligence. But there is crucial difference between conservative faith, which confesses a realized salvation based on the historical fact of Jesus’ redemptive work, and Niebuhr’s redemptive hope at the end of history, which is confessed by faith. In Niebuhr’s soteriology, Jesus Christ was just a vessel of the final special revelation which gives hope of salvation (redemption of human history) for the repentant who has faith to accept the revelation and no more than that.

¹⁰⁷ Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 190.

CHAPTER 4

EVALUATION

The orthodox theologian John Edward Carnell appraises very highly Niebuhr's theological attempt as follows:

There is probably no side to the theological system of Niebuhr which strikes a truer note than this high and wholesome emphasis upon *agape* love as exhausting both the height of man's freedom and the outside revelation of God's law in Jesus Christ. One can only draw back and admire the magnificent way that Niebuhr has succeeded in relating the Christian doctrine of love to some of the most complex facets of the human situation. It is a rare individual who manages to remain true to so exalted a moral imperative throughout an entire system of thought.¹

Although Carnell's book, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, takes a critical posture towards Niebuhr, he admits the significance of Niebuhr's theology.

With the concern of Christian Realism, one of Niebuhr's main theological tasks was how he could elaborate on man as a sinner. Niebuhr's doctrine of sin succeeds in this purpose. In his theology, because of his understanding of the Fall story as a myth, Niebuhr makes the story a universal symbol of sinners in general. In other words, Niebuhr does not develop his study on an alleged first fall of man in history. Therefore, including the process of the occurrence of sin through anxiety in the dialectical condition of man, his doctrine of sin is precisely that of actual sin. In this sense, Niebuhr's anthropological and psychological doctrine of

¹ Carnell, *The Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 136-37.

sin is not only unique but also has appeal to man's heart.² Recognizing the limitation of ontological theology, Niebuhr pursued a psychological analysis of sin, which he thought was able to express sin closer to its reality. It is easier for man to agree with Niebuhr's analysis of sin as a description of a psychological expression of his sinfulness. His psychological approach to understand sin opened new directions for theology.

The importance of Niebuhr's doctrine of sin is its adaptation of psychological analysis of individual sin to a social and cultural level. Niebuhr does not doctrinally discuss much the relation between them, but a considerable amount of historical analysis is offered in his works to persuade readers. From an apologetic perspective, Niebuhr analyzes various kinds of thought, religions and culture, and he evaluates their mistakes from his belief of dialecticism, pointing out their error of attempting to find the goal of life, history or truth either in the eternal or the temporal.³ On that groundwork he explains a deeper understanding of his doctrine of sin and how man should live (history as man's achievement). Though, strictly speaking, the origin of his analysis of sin is from Kierkegaard, of the creativity of anxiety is from Heidegger, and of the dialectic of human structure is from Augustine and Scheler, to his credit

² Concerning the depth of development of psychological analysis, Kierkegaard's study which Niebuhr utilizes in his works is deeper. Cf. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*.

³ The first four chapters in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 1 develop this analysis.

Niebuhr's achievement is a total synthesis of them all in a way that evaluates the sinfulness of society and gives hope by faith in the future beyond history.

In a sense, this synthesis is his endeavor to establish the foundation of the balance between continuity and discontinuity. The discontinuity for which Niebuhr stands firm is apparent in his understanding of history. Following Kierkegaard, he does not allow any possibility of fulfillment of life either in the eternal or the temporal, so it was necessary for him to seek the realization of the goal of life and history "beyond history."

On the other hand, continuity is sought in revelation, especially in private (general) revelation. In actuality, this revelation in the human conscience and history depends on its recognition by the spirit of man.

Concerning this point Hamilton notes:

In place of the old division of revelation into 'general' and 'special', he proposes a division into 'personal-individual' or 'private' revelation and 'revelation in the context of social-historical experience'. The result of this change in terminology is to make all revelation the product of experience, i.e. that which issues from, and is guaranteed by, spirit in man.⁴

This idea of human experience as revelation of God is rooted in the emphasis on religious experience of liberal theology, which is based on a more immanent theology. Hamilton further declares:

Revelation, therefore, is spiritual recognition. God is accessible to man because man has the requisite endowment of spirit.

⁴ Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit," 30.

And this applies equally to both divisions of revelation, because revelation in history and society is founded upon universal private revelation. 'Without the private revelation of God,' writes Niebuhr, 'the public and historical revelation would not gain credence.' The importance of this admission should not be overlooked, since it declares quite unambiguously that the human spirit has been elevated to the position of an infallible authority. Only that can be believed which has first passed the scrutiny of the human spirit and there has found recognition.⁵

Hamilton clarifies a relic of liberalism, namely man's capability through his own actions to know God, in Niebuhr's understanding of the role of spirit as the subject of the recognition.⁶ It seems that Niebuhr seeks a "point of contact" between God's will (the gospel of the eternal God) and man, the creature, within the framework of a posited discontinuing dialectic of the eternal and the temporal, even though he is not sure whether or not he has succeeded. The only possible locus of point of contact is in man, because man is the only existence who has the synthesis of spirit and body in him anyhow. According to the unreserved possibility of the human spirit advocated by liberalism, man can be divine in the sense that he is only quantitatively different from God. Niebuhr eludes this mistake by realizing the limitation of man's spirit as creature. Even though Niebuhr acknowledges such a dialectical condition of man, he still needs to seek the possibility of the encounter of the eternal and the temporal only in man.

⁵ Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit," 30.

⁶ This is a very different understanding of revelation from Barth, who maintained the discontinuity by emphasizing the perpendicular revelation from God with his absolute freedom.

Niebuhr avoids liberalism's mistake of seeking Kingdom of God on earth not only by his recognition of human limitation and sin, but also by the basic framework of a dialectical discontinuity of the eternal and the temporal.

Thus Niebuhr found continuity in the fact of the existence of revelation, the will of the eternal God in man and historical events, and the capability of the spirit of man to recognize revelation. In a sense, as Hamilton thinks, because recognition of the revelation depends on the spirit of man, it can be said that "spiritual discernment brings salvation."⁷ In Niebuhr's thought, salvation is not reality but hope of the realization of life. But still it is difficult to see how Niebuhr's capability of man's spirit as the key for the hope of salvation is different from liberalism's seeing it as the key for the realization of Kingdom of God on earth. Although it could be considered that the difference is just a matter of degree of the capability of man's spirit, the doctrine of sin is the anchor that keeps Niebuhr from the mistake of liberalism. Hans Hofmann explains:

But Niebuhr certainly does not accept the conclusion which might be drawn from Bultmann's writings that man when he is confronted by the divine revelation finds his true self. For Niebuhr, it is God Himself in the divine revelation who brings man into close communion with Himself so that man does not, like Adam, hide himself behind the trees of his finitude and creatureliness, but understands the nature of the evil in himself. Confronted by the revelation of God, what man finds is not himself but his sin.⁸

⁷ Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit," 15.

⁸ Hofmann, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 149.

Thus, the doctrine of sin in Niebuhr's thought is the key part of the balance between continuity and discontinuity between the eternal and the temporal. If what man finds in revelation were his true self, the liberal attitude to the realization of the self in belief of an immanent theology would result.

For orthodoxy to learn from Niebuhr's anthropology and his doctrine of sin, there are a few points to discuss. First, there is his dialectical understanding of the nature of man. In Niebuhr's case, anxiety as concomitant with the dialectical structure of man is contended to lie in the context of actual sin. For orthodox Christianity, there is a major problem here. Since the dialectic of the transcendence of spirit and the finiteness of creatureliness in man is a universal condition of creation, Adam before his fall had to have anxiety. However, in the perfection of God's creation, anxiety coming together with the dialectic of man's nature is impossible.⁹ In

⁹ Niebuhr himself could not explain Adam's anxiety because of his mythic interpretation of the Fall, but Kierkegaard did discuss it. Because of the closeness of their thought on anxiety, we may use Kierkegaard's understanding of anxiety of Adam for our purposes here. According to Kierkegaard, during his time of innocence before his fall, Adam had an anxiety of "nothing," of "ignorance." But the spirit, which sustains the soul and body of man, is in the condition of dreaming. In this situation, anxiety exists but peace and repose are still in man. Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety*, 38-46. Carnell explains Kierkegaard's understanding of the relation of spirit and anxiety: "The synthesis of the eternal and the temporal is not a second synthesis but is the expression for the first synthesis in consequence of which man is a synthesis of soul and body sustained by spirit." Spirit finds its freedom in the moment of decision, the moment being "an atom of eternity." It is the "moment" which is the locus of anxiety (dread) for Kierkegaard, since the moment opens up to the individual the simultaneous attraction of seizing eternal potentialities and the fear of the dizziness which would attend their actual possession. Whenever freedom comes to itself, therefore, anxiety results. Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 70. When man actualizes the possible self, of which the spirit dreamed in its decision in freedom,

the sense of prology, it is proper to expect Adam's development, for example spiritual and intellectual growth and fellowship with God. But any defectiveness of creation, like anxiety, dread, or worry, could not have been originally present in creation. It is important to recognize the biblical view of the unity of man, as Hamilton says:

This may seem to be a relatively unimportant matter of theological method, but its implications run deep and wide; for it has the effect of abolishing the biblical view of man as a unity—which Niebuhr ostensibly wishes to preserve—in favour of body-spirit dualism. Man, standing at the juncture of nature and spirit, is a being divided. Since his spirit is not included in his creatureliness he discovers himself to be an uneasy combination of disparate elements, a higher and a lower. The higher alone represents man as he is essentially, while the lower constitutes a continual threat to his integrity because it is basically antagonistic to spirit.¹⁰

At creation, perfect harmony and unity of spirit and body was given to man, not an anxiety that comes with an unstable condition in the structure of man. It is more biblical to consider that, because of the curse after the fall of Adam, the harmony and unity of man's spirit and body was destroyed and anxiety occurred as the result of that destruction.

Niebuhr's reconstruction of the doctrines of original sin and of original righteousness is a rejection of orthodox understanding. The presuppositional key that makes his reconstructions possible is his

anxiety disappears, either in a sinful way or not. But in the next moment another anxiety appears. Thus, in Kierkegaard's thought, anxiety existed from the beginning of man, though in the dreaming condition of spirit, peace and repose are preserved.

¹⁰ Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit," 29.

mythological understanding of the Fall story. Accordingly, the chronological relation between Adam and succeeding generations—which Niebuhr thought to be the reason for the confusion and mistake of orthodox theology—is denied, and the Fall story is interpreted as a myth that symbolizes the process of sin in man in general. Niebuhr’s reconstruction depended on this universal rather than chronological interpretation of the Fall story. However, even if the Fall story were a myth that is not historical fact and symbolized or expressed the common understanding or truth of society, that would not mean that the author of the Fall story did not have any intention of writing history. In fact, the entire Genesis account is a description of the history of man, which is then succeeded in Exodus. The writer of Genesis started with the origin of the world and man, the fall of man, then man’s history as a sinner. The immediate context of the genealogy after Adam right after the Fall story as a chronological description of human history is too obvious to be denied. Thus from the context around the Fall story, it is more plausible to understand that the supposed ahistorical myth by Niebuhr is still used to explain history. The presupposition of Niebuhr’s reconstruction is impossible to be posited.

In chapter 3, it is pointed out that Niebuhr’s salvation is the hope of salvation, not the reality of salvation. Jesus was just a symbol of Christ, as well as a vessel of the revelation of Christ. Hammar considers the relation between Jesus and Christ as follows:

Niebuhr succeeds brilliantly in restoring the ‘myths’ of the

Creation and the Fall into sin, but these 'myths' have not only a trans-historical content, they are in essence *non-historical*. A slight suspicion therefore easily arises that Niebuhr's concept of 'myth' refers not only to something trans-historical but also to something non-historical. Is then the 'myth' of Christ also non-historical as the Creation and the Fall into sin? That is the decisive critical question of Niebuhr's theology. . . . Nevertheless Niebuhr's 'mythical' interpretation of the Christian dogmatic tradition forces him to do away with the Incarnation. If his 'mythical' thinking really has reference to something non-historical, then Niebuhr must be forced to reckon, on the one hand, with a relative historic Jesus and, on the other, with an absolute transcendent Christ. . . . Niebuhr clearly states that the relation between Jesus and Christ does not differ from the relation between 'all life and history and the transcendent,' i.e., Jesus is a *general* revelation of the transcendent Christ! While the non-historical Christ is absolute as God, Jesus is relative as man is!¹¹

Thus Jesus is not reckoned as God incarnate, but as a man who was the revelation of the transcendent Christ and a vessel of the revelation.

Such a Jesus as a mere man could not be worthy of carrying out the redemptive work of dying a substitutional death as the realization of salvation for sinners. There is no reality and certainty of salvation in the redemptive work of Jesus in Niebuhr's soteriology. His salvation is, as Hamilton thinks, "spiritual discernment":

Note that the condition of Christ becoming a 'symbol' (and therefore meaningful) is the prior recognition on the part of men of the limitations of embodied spirit. Truth enters human lives by no other way than through man's proper spiritual awareness. Spiritual discernment brings salvation.¹²

¹¹ George Hammar, *Christian Realism in Contemporary American Theology* (Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeriaktiebolag, 1940), 241-42 (ellipses added).

¹² Hamilton, "Created Soul Eternal Spirit," 32.

This recognition of the meaning of revelation is the action of the spirit or the self. Salvation depends on the work of man. This understanding of salvation strongly implies the character of Pelagianism.¹³ Because of the Pelagianistic emphasis on man's work for salvation in Niebuhr's thought, as well as a strong possibility of universal salvation, his soteriology should be denied by orthodox theology. Even so, his intention and endeavor to interpret the historical and culture achievements of man in the context of a biblical soteriology should be recognized as a wonderful stimulation and challenge.

When Niebuhr criticizes man's mistaken endeavor to fulfill his life, he focuses first on how man is an unstable synthesis of the dialectic of infiniteness and finiteness. Man then reacts to the presented reality of the dialectic between the eternal and temporal, wherein he chooses one or the other for the locus of fulfillment for his life. If man chooses the eternal for the locus of fulfillment, it is wrong because he forgets the fact of his finiteness that bonds him to the flux of nature. On the other hand, if man chooses the temporal for the locus he is wrong because he forgets the fact of his spiritual transcendence. Anxiety, which results from man's unstableness or uneasy conscience, can be resolved only by hope in the future beyond history through faith in God. At a glance this all seems biblical, but in fact biblical concepts are utilized to serve a strong conviction

¹³ Carnell, *The Theology of Reinhold Niebuhr*, 159.

of dialecticism. Niebuhr strictly affirms the discontinuity of the eternal and the temporal, which is the main emphasis of Kierkegaard's dialecticism against Hegel's. Niebuhr follows this dialecticism to avoid the realization of life and history in any achievement of man in history. Rather, he brings such a realization outside of history. Concerning this point, Niebuhr started with the criticism of liberal optimism belief in the human capacity to realize the Kingdom of God on earth. Denouncing the reality of man as sinner, he sees the impossibility of realizing the fulfillment of the final goal on earth.¹⁴ One liberal theologian, Daniel Williams, questions the philosophical orientation in Niebuhr's thought that overshadows his biblical emphasis:

My question to Dr. Niebuhr, then, is, How does he conceive the relation between what he refers to as "beyond history" and God's suffering and redemptive working in history? If he asserts God's actual transforming power in history, then it seems to me that his view comes close to what a realistic liberal theology of history would be. But if Niebuhr holds that we must think of a "three-storied" system of meaning, in which the realms of nature, history, and beyond history are somehow ultimately separate, then I have to say I do not believe that this is the way the Bible regards God's relationship to time and His creation, or that an adequate Christian interpretation of God's saving work in Christ can be put in this way. It seems to me to be an imposition of a Kantian epistemology and a Greek metaphysics on the Bible's dynamic conception of time as the form of the concrete encounter between God and man.¹⁵

¹⁴ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 245.

¹⁵ Daniel D. Williams, "Niebuhr and Liberalism," *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*, ed. Charles W. Kegley & Robert W. Bretall (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 209.

Williams points out that the biblical view has God's interaction with history progressing with creation to salvation, but Niebuhr's thought is based on the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, or more correctly Kierkegaard's dialectic. Orthodox Christianity follows the biblical view of God's fulfillment of salvation on earth, yet from a different point of view than does liberalism. On this point, Williams shares with orthodoxy the idea that the basis of theology is the Bible.

Niebuhr thinks that Jesus made mistakes because of his finite perspective.

He [Jesus] expected the historic interim between the first and second establishment of the Kingdom to be short. In this error he was followed both by St. Paul and the early church, with the consequent false and disappointed hope of the *parousia* in the lifetime of the early disciples. This error was due to an almost inevitable illusion of thought which deals with the problem of the relation of time and eternity.¹⁶

Here, Niebuhr presupposes in Jesus the discontinuity of the eternal and the temporal, and hence Niebuhr concludes that Jesus' expectation of the realization of the *parousia*, the coming of the eternal glorious Christ, was a temporal and thus mistaken judgment. Obviously Niebuhr's theology is based more on dialecticism than on biblical teaching.

Feenstra says with Gustafson that Niebuhr believes that theological concepts and claims are justified by human experience, and that it is

¹⁶ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, vol. 2, 49-50. Cf. Durkin, *Reinhold Niebuhr*, 99.

human experience that establishes the truth of theological claims.¹⁷ For Niebuhr, dialecticism is more plausible to explain human reality and experience than is biblical teaching. He utilizes parts of biblical teaching but denies others that are not congruent with the reality of human experience, even after he tried a new interpretation of biblical teaching.

To sum up this chapter, Niebuhr's doctrine of sin based on anthropology is very useful to understand how actual sin occurs in man, as well as collective sin in society. On the other hand, his soteriology that lacks the fulfillment of salvation through the redemptive work of Jesus as God and man, as well as his absorption of the distinction of good and evil in universal salvation, was too far from the orthodox position. Orthodoxy can thus only learn from Niebuhr's dynamic endeavor to interpret from a biblical perspective the achievements of history and culture as man's self-redemption. Finally, Niebuhr's theology of man and sin is not fully biblical, because dialecticism is the more primary basis of his interpretation than is the Bible.

¹⁷ Ronald J. Feenstra, "Reassessing the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr," *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 155.

CONCLUSION

Niebuhr has two theological frameworks within which he develops his theology: Christian Realism and dialecticism. First, Christian Realism proclaims the importance of the balance between the optimism of liberalism and the pessimism of neo-orthodoxy regarding the understanding of man. Put more philosophically, it maintains the balance between continuity and discontinuity between eternity and time. Christian Realism also stresses experience as the judge of dogma. Second, the dialecticism that Niebuhr follows is Kierkegaard's dialecticism. This dialecticism insists on the discontinuity between eternity and time. The discontinuity is clearly seen in Niebuhr's understanding of history. At the same time, as a Christian Realist he seeks continuity in revelation in man and history through man's spirit, which has the capacity to recognize that revelation.

Without a comprehension of Niebuhr's anthropology, one cannot understand his doctrine of sin. Both are closely related. According to Niebuhr, man has a transcendent spirit as the image of God as well as a limited body in his creatureliness. In addition, there is anxiety as concomitant to the dialectic condition of man. When sin is presupposed, anxiety becomes temptation for man. Thus anxiety and presupposed sin are indispensable elements of man's sin, but anxiety itself is not sin. Niebuhr thinks that to escape from anxiety man commits sin in two ways:

pride and sensuality. When man pretends to have an unlimitedness of his spirit he commits the sin of pride. On the other hand, when he surrenders his transcendence of spirit and plunges into the vitality of nature, he commits the sin of sensuality. Niebuhr's uniqueness is his application of the consideration of individual sin to the collective-self, state, culture, etc. His highest concern is thus the historical achievements of man as self-redemptive endeavor.

Niebuhr's doctrine of salvation is different from that of orthodoxy. In the revelation of the Christ on the Cross, the mercy of God over judgement and the norm of sacrificial love for man is revealed. Man as individual and collective can realize that he is not able to fulfill his life and history on earth. With this contrite heart and faith man can hope for the fulfillment by God beyond history. In this soteriology, the historical Jesus is separated from the transcendent Christ. There is no place for Jesus as God's redeemer through his substitutionary death for sinners. Furthermore, Niebuhr believes in a universal salvation. He thinks that the distinction of good and evil in history is important, but at the time of last judgment before God there will be no righteous people. The merciful God takes up all sin upon Himself and fulfills the end of history beyond history.

Niebuhr's doctrine of man and sin considers the sinner and actual sin. By a reinterpretation of the doctrines of original sin and of original righteousness, he rejects a chronological relation between Adam and later men. The conservative Christian can learn much from and be greatly

stimulated by Niebuhr's unique analysis of actual sin of the individual and of man as collective. This is especially true of his psychological analysis based upon an outlook of the dialectical structure of man, which provides a new direction of approaching the understanding of man and sin. Also, his challenge to resolve the perennial question of "inevitable but responsible" sin by a reinterpretation of original sin and righteousness should be praised from the perspectives of the coherency of his understanding of sin as actual sin and of his apologetic mind. Unfortunately, his rejection of the chronological relation between Adam and later men caused too wide of a gap to prevent an inevitable theological contention.

There was some danger for Niebuhr to lose his position of discontinuity when he found continuity in the ability of man to recognize the revelation of God. As in liberalism, if Niebuhr recognized only the positive image of man, man's immanent possibility would be emphasized. But actually Niebuhr spoke of man's possibility in relation to his limitation, and the content of the revelation recognized by man is his sinfulness and limitation instead of his unlimited possibility. Thus, the doctrine of sin is the key factor to keep a balance between continuity and discontinuity in Niebuhr's theology.

The last thing to say concerns his final foundation of theology. Niebuhr is more dependent on and faithful to dialecticism than to Biblical teaching. For his Christian Realist mind, dialecticism explains the human experience more properly than does the Bible. Because of this experiential

criterion, some of the Biblical teachings of Jesus and Paul are discerned as errors. Such a radical difference of fundamental presupposition forewarned orthodoxy to be careful to learn from his theology.

In conclusion, Niebuhr's doctrines of man and of sin are great accomplishments that contain various theological insight and stimulation for the orthodox Christian to utilize and consider in his own theological framework. On the other hand, serious differences on the important issues of original sin and righteousness and of soteriology, as well as the difference of theological foundation, mean that very careful observation is required to study Niebuhr's doctrines of man and sin.

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