

## **The New Man and Immoral Society**

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Ongoing social debates in America have rarely heard a distinctive voice from the church. From abolition and prohibition to the civil rights movement and abortion, conservative Christians have differed over policies, debated strategies, and demonstrated a wide range of intensity in their involvement. Most importantly, evangelicals have differed in their expectations regarding the nature and possibility of societal change.

Ironically some of the most profound differences between evangelicals concern their understanding of human nature and the relationship of the church to society. One might not have expected conservatives to be divided over issues that had earlier separated liberals and neoconservatives, but the political hopes of some evangelicals demonstrate an optimism that seems not to have learned the lessons of the twentieth century. This article reviews some of those lessons by considering the contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr, whose responses to liberalism in his day remain relevant to evangelicalism today.

Martin Marty called Reinhold Niebuhr this century's "most influential native-born American theologian" because of the wide-ranging impact of his Christian realism.<sup>1</sup> Formulated as a

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<sup>1</sup> 1. Martin E. Marty, *The Noise of Conflict, 1919-1941*, vol. 2 of *Modern American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 321. R. Laurence Moore describes Niebuhr's impact in this way: "His was the most influential Protestant voice of the post-World War II years, at least in academic communities, because he seemed to provide a means to challenge the intellectual environment of the twentieth century in religious terms that educated people could respect. Rather than being dismissed as an intellectual reactionary, he became the vanguard. His repeated emphasis on sin, irony, and paradox was absorbed into the language of postwar political and theological liberalism and was hailed as introducing a new brand of realism. The best and brightest applauded him. He was quoted by social scientists in every discipline as a Protestant thinker who was able to meet them convincingly on more or less their own terms. In this way Niebuhr brought about one important reversal. He did not translate religion into the language of the social sciences. He forced social scientists to translate the Christian concept of sin into one of the guiding assumptions of their disciplines" ("Secularization:

response to modern liberalism's optimistic outlook on human nature and societal change, Niebuhr's emphasis on sin as individual and collective pride has provided a starting point for Christian social ethics for over sixty years.<sup>2</sup>

Though Niebuhr identified himself in one of his earliest books as a "tamed cynic,"<sup>3</sup> and in spite of statements by former students that he was a "pessimistic optimist" (as opposed to an optimistic pessimist), Niebuhr has long been accused of being overly cynical in his expectations for society. He was probably very much on target, but his disdain for orthodox theology and his neglect of ecclesiology caused him to understate the uniqueness of the church and its place as a new community. He was largely correct in his understanding of group pride, but the New Testament often calls the church to be distinctive on precisely this point. This article explores that distinctiveness through the Pauline concept of the church as "the new humanity," speaking especially to the relationship between different ethnic groups in the body of Christ and comparing the realities of society with biblical expectations for the church.

### **Immoral Society: Niebuhr's Concept of Group Pride**

Buoyed by technological advances, a strong economy, Darwinism, and the ideals of the Enlightenment, modernists at the turn of the century had reason to be cheerful about human progress. That optimism, however, was severely tested by the aggregate impact of World War I, the failure of idealistic programs (e.g., the Interchurch World Movement, prohibition, and the League of Nations), labor struggles, inflation, and the Depression. This was accompanied philosophically by the development of existentialism, scientifically by the demise of Newtonian physics, and theologically by the rise of neoorthodoxy. As a result, many of liberalism's most basic beliefs came into question. Cauthen summarizes the theological transition well.

The foremost break of theology from liberalism has already been mentioned—the growing awareness that the liberal union of the

Christian message with the life and thought of modern culture had led to a false confidence in social progress which was inconsistent with the experience of Western man in the twentieth century. This revolt led to the reaffirmation of the discontinuity between the Christian revelation and all human and cultural attempts to

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Religion and the Social Sciences," in *Between the Times: The Travail of the Protestant Establishment in America: 1900–1960*, ed. William R. Hutchison [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 248).

<sup>2</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1932).

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (New York: Willett, Clark, 1929).

discover the ultimate truth about human existence. Moreover, the sight of the vast evils and injustices of this century, many of them perpetrated by the most highly educated and culturally advanced nations of the world, gave impetus to an emphasis on the universality and depth of human depravity and on the moral transcendence of God in relation to man.<sup>4</sup>

In America that reaffirmation of human sinfulness was led by Reinhold Niebuhr. He obviously did not destroy the optimism of social gospel liberalism singlehandedly, but, like Karl Barth in Europe, Niebuhr clearly articulated its failings in a time of increasing doubt.

In his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, published in 1932, Niebuhr rejected the liberalism of his youth, arguing that individuals did not have adequate rational or religious resources to counter the collective pride of groups or nations. Dorrien describes the book's style and thesis appropriately.

The book's tone was icy, aggressive, and eerily omniscient. It marked the end of Niebuhr's calls to build the kingdom of God. It ridiculed the moral idealism that had fueled liberal Christianity for the past half-century. It argued that while individuals were occasionally capable of altruism or self-transcendence, human groups never willingly subordinated their interests to the interests of others. Morality was for individuals. If individuals occasionally overcame their inevitable egotism in acts of compassion or love, there was no evidence that human groups ever overcame the power of self-interest and collective egotism that sustained their existence. Liberal Christianity's attempts to moralize society were thus not only futile but also stupid.<sup>5</sup>

Niebuhr himself stated the thesis this way:

The central thesis was, and is, that the Liberal Movement both religious and secular seemed to be unconscious of the basic difference between the morality of individuals and the morality of collectives, whether races, classes, or nations. This difference ought not to make for a moral cynicism, that is, the belief that the collective must simply follow its own interests. But if the difference is real, as I think it is, it refutes many still prevalent moralistic approaches to the political order.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 4. Kenneth Cauthen, *The Impact of American Religious Liberalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 233.

<sup>5</sup> 5. Gary Dorrien, *Soul in Society: The Making and Renewal of Social Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 91–92.

<sup>6</sup> 6. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, ix.

Niebuhr believed that the liberal “moralism” addressed here was ineffective because it was naive about human nature.<sup>7</sup> Stated another way, the “children of darkness” know better than the “children of light,” for in spite of the fact that the former “know no law beyond themselves,” they understand the power of self-interest. By contrast, the children of light have moral ideals, but they underestimate the power of self-will both in the children of darkness and in themselves.<sup>8</sup> With evident sarcasm, Niebuhr summarized the thinking of these moral idealists in six points:

1. Injustice is caused by ignorance and will yield to education and greater intelligence.
2. Civilization is becoming gradually more moral and...it is a sin to challenge either the inevitability or the efficacy of gradualness.
3. The character of individuals rather than social systems and arrangements is the guarantee of justice in society.
4. Appeals to love, justice, good will, and brotherhood are bound to be efficacious in the end. If they have not been so to date we must have more appeals to love, justice, good will, and brotherhood.
5. Goodness makes for happiness and increasing knowledge of this fact will overcome human selfishness and greed.
6. Wars are stupid and can therefore only be caused by people who are more stupid than those who recognize the stupidity of war.<sup>9</sup>

At the heart of this characterization is liberalism’s optimistic view of human nature, applied not just to individuals but also to nations. The social gospel “seemed to believe that the only reason men had not followed the love commandment in the vast collective relations of mankind was because no one had called their attention to the necessity.”<sup>10</sup> Niebuhr was far more pessimistic. Individuals may at times yield to moral arguments, but groups (and therefore society as a whole) will not. “As individuals, men believe that they ought to love and serve each other and establish justice between each other. As racial, economic and national

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<sup>7</sup> Daniel Day Williams later accused Niebuhr of destroying a straw man of liberalism, but Dorrien argues that Niebuhr’s attacks were aimed at the liberalism taught by Shailer Matthews, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Harry F. Ward, Charles Clayton Morrison, and others (Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 141).

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 10–11.

<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Radical Religion* 1 (1936): 39–40, reprinted in *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom: The Enduring Legacy of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. Henry B. Clark (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994), 55.

<sup>10</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Social Christianity,” *Christianity and Society* (Winter 1950–51), reprinted in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, ed. D. B. Robertson (New York: Meridian, 1959), 103.

groups they take for themselves, whatever their power can command.”<sup>11</sup> Because of this collective egotism, “a just society is not going to be built by a little more education and a few more sermons on love.”<sup>12</sup>

The concept of collective pride forms the foundation for Niebuhr’s Christian realism. A realistic understanding of human nature recognizes that groups will not respond to rational, religious, or emotional arguments. They will respond only to power. Therefore genuine solutions to social problems will inevitably involve political coercion.

They completely disregard the political necessities in the struggle for justice in human society by failing to recognize those elements in man’s collective behavior which belong to the order of nature and can never be brought completely under the dominion of reason or conscience. They do not recognize that when collective power, whether in the form of imperialism or class domination, exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it. If conscience and reason can be insinuated into the resulting struggle they can only qualify but not abolish it.<sup>13</sup>

It may be possible, though it is never easy, to establish just relations between individuals within a group purely by moral and rational suasion and accommodation. In inter-group relations this is practically an impossibility. The relations between groups must therefore always be predominantly political rather than ethical, that is, they will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group.<sup>14</sup>

While it is possible for intelligence to increase the range of benevolent impulse, and thus prompt a human being to consider the needs and rights of other than those to whom he is bound by organic and physical relationship, there are definite limits in the capacity of ordinary mortals which makes it impossible for them to grant to others what they claim for themselves.... All social cooperation on a larger scale than the most intimate social group requires a measure of coercion. While no state can maintain its

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<sup>11</sup> 11. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> 12. Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem,” *Religion in Life* (Spring 1932), reprinted in *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. D. B. Robertson (Louisville: Westminster/Knox, 1957), 33.

<sup>13</sup> 13. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, xii.

<sup>14</sup> 14. *Ibid.*, xxii-xxiii.

unity purely by coercion neither can it preserve itself without coercion.<sup>15</sup>

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Stated simply, “realism means particularly one thing, that you establish the common good not purely by unselfishness but by the restraint of selfishness.”<sup>16</sup> The selfishness addressed here is collective, as different groups compete for power and privilege.

Collective pride begins with individual self-interest. People are naturally concerned for their own survival and for that of their offspring, and that concern extends through expanding units of cooperation, but with decreasing commitment.<sup>17</sup> “The chief source of man’s inhumanity to man seems to be the tribal limits of his sense of obligation to other men.”<sup>18</sup> People usually act more humanely to those who are perceived as “family” than to those on the outside, and they tend to involve themselves in issues of justice only when injustice strikes close to home. As Niebuhr wrote shortly after Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor and the consequent declaration of war by the United States, “we could not agree upon our responsibilities to the victims of aggression until we had been joined to them, not by moral act but by historical fate.”<sup>19</sup>

This natural concern for oneself and one’s family, “the will-to-live,” easily becomes “the will-to-power,” and self-interest turns to aggression.<sup>20</sup> Group pride is more dangerous than individual pride, both because of this inherent connection to the will-to-live and because the group dynamics tend to overrule individual consciences. “In its whole range from pride of family to pride of nation, collective egotism and group pride are a more pregnant source of injustice and conflict than purely individual pride.”<sup>21</sup>

One witnesses this phenomenon in the horror of “ethnic cleansing” as described by Miroslav Volf.

It does not seem that anybody is in control. Of course, the big and strategic moves that started the conflict and that keep it going are made in the centers of intellectual, political, and military power.

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

<sup>16</sup> 16. Ronald H. Stone, “An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr,” *Christianity and Crisis*, March 17, 1969, 50.

<sup>17</sup> 17. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> 18. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature and His Communities: Essays on the Dynamics and Enigmas of Man’s Personal and Social Existence* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1965), 84.

<sup>19</sup> 19. Reinhold Niebuhr, “History (God) Has Overtaken Us,” *Christianity and Society* (Winter 1941), reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 293.

<sup>20</sup> 20. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 18.

<sup>21</sup> 21. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man’s Nature*, vol. 1 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 213.

But there is too much will for brutality even among the common people. Once the conflict started it seemed to trigger an uncontrollable chain reaction. These were decent people, helpful

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neighbors. They did not, strictly speaking, *choose* to plunder and burn, rape and torture—or secretly enjoy these things. A dormant beast in them was awakened from its uneasy slumber. And not only in them: the motives of those who set to fight against the brutal aggressors were self-defense and justice, but the beast in others enraged the beast in them. And so the moral barriers holding it in check were broken and the beast went after revenge. In resisting evil, people were trapped by it.<sup>22</sup>

Racial and ethnic conflicts serve as obvious examples of collective self-interest and its accompanying injustice. Having served on the mayor's Race Relations Committee while pastoring in Detroit (for which he produced an uncharacteristically "bland" report<sup>23</sup>), Niebuhr summed up the situation in the following way:

The race commissions try to win greater social and political rights for the Negro without arousing the antagonisms of the whites. They try to enlarge, but they operate nevertheless within the limits of the "zones of agreement." This means that they secure minimum rights for the Negro such as better sanitation, police protection, and more adequate schools. But they do not touch his political disfranchisement or his economic disinheritance. They hope to do so in the long run, because they have the usual faith in the power of education and moral suasion to soften the heart of the white man. This faith is filled with as many illusions as such expectations always are. However large the number of individual white men who do and who will identify themselves completely with the Negro cause, the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.<sup>24</sup>

The Negro will never win his full rights in society merely by trusting the fairness and sense of justice of the white man. Whatever increase in the sense of justice can be achieved will

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<sup>22</sup> 22. Miroslav Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace: Theological Reflections in the Wake of 'Ethnic Cleansing,'" reprinted in *Emerging Voices in Global Christian Theology*, ed. William A. Dyrness (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 34 (italics his).

<sup>23</sup> 23. The assessment is that of Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> 24. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 253.

mitigate the struggle between the white man and the Negro, but it will not abolish it.<sup>25</sup>

Though he spoke most frequently of the pride of empowered groups, Niebuhr recognized the same tendency even among the powerless.

The fact seems to be that all groups, religious and racial, tend to preserve their self-respect by adopting contemptuous attitudes toward other groups and to express their appreciation of their

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own characteristic culture by depreciating that of others. Whatever group happens to be in the majority seems to be the most bigoted simply because it is in a position where it can indulge its arrogance more freely.<sup>26</sup>

For this reason societal justice will not be achieved by replacing oppressors with the oppressed, who would likely become the next oppressors.<sup>27</sup> Instead, the best one can hope for is a balance of political power in which each group's selfishness is held in check.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 25. Reinhold Niebuhr, "Moralists and Politics," *Christian Century*, July 6, 1932, reprinted in *Essays in Applied Christianity*, 81.

<sup>26</sup> 26. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Confession of a Tired Radical," *Christian Century*, August 30, 1928, reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 121.

<sup>27</sup> 27. "There is...as yet no clear proof that the power of economic overlords can be destroyed by means less rigorous than communism has employed; but there is also no proof that communistic oligarchs, once the idealistic passion of a revolutionary period is spent, will be very preferable to the capitalistic oligarchs, whom they are to displace" (Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, 21).

<sup>28</sup> 28. Niebuhr has been accused of ignoring the pride of the working class (Richard W. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* [New York: Pantheon, 1985], 139) and of understating the role of sloth (Ronald H. Stone, *Reinhold Niebuhr: Prophet to Politicians* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1972], 147; and Charles C. Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century* [Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992], 250), but he consistently argued that he found it more important to address those who were in power. On the other hand he has also been accused of failing to identify with the plight of the poor (Dennis P. McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1982]) and of not mentioning the feminine sin of self-effacement (Susan Nelson Dunfee, "The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride," *Soundings* 65 [Fall 1982]: 316-27). While Niebuhr's preoccupations certainly reflected his own self-interest (Clark, *Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom*, 157), he was more sympathetic to liberation thought than most establishment theologians of his day. At the same time he would likely have argued that even the most noble of such efforts are still expressions of collective pride.



But how might such a balance be obtained? Niebuhr seems to have been as perplexed by the question as anyone, resorting to an impotent moralism that reveals his lingering affection for liberalism.<sup>29</sup> In 1948 he wrote,

The sense of racial superiority means that a particular kind of man, white or black, Jew or Gentile, Occidental or Oriental, forgets the conditional character of his life and culture and pretends that his color, creed or culture represents some kind of final and absolute criterion of the good. He proceeds thereupon to judge

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other people severely who do not conform to his particular standard.

This is a pathetic and dangerous fallacy; but it is one in which almost all men are involved in varying degrees. It cannot be cured merely by a shift in a given social equilibrium. It can be mitigated by educational programs, designed to reveal the relative character of all human cultures, and the excellencies in forms of life other than our own.

But the mitigation of racial and cultural pride is finally a religious problem in the sense that each man, and each race and culture, must become religiously aware of the sin of self-worship, which is the final form of human evil and of which racial self-worship is the most vivid example.

We are not God. We are only creatures. All creatures are conditioned by climate and geography and by every special circumstance. Religious humility, as well as rational enlightenment, must contribute to the elimination of this terrible evil of racial pride.<sup>30</sup>

Niebuhr's explanation of the problem is helpful, but he responded to it with an appeal to religious humility and rational enlightenment, precisely those resources he had dismissed in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* as inadequate. As Fox

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<sup>29</sup> 29. That lingering affection may even be seen in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, which, after skewering the liberal agenda for over 250 pages, ends with the surprisingly idealistic statement that one's hope for the perfect realization of justice must "generate a sublime madness in the soul." This "illusion" is "dangerous" and "must therefore be brought under the control of reason," but "one can only hope that reason will not destroy it before its work is done" (ibid., 277). Earlier in the same book he advocated a more modest goal (ibid., 22), but later he regretted this rather contradictory conclusion to the book (Brown, *Niebuhr and His Age: Reinhold Niebuhr's Prophetic Role in the Twentieth Century*, 49).

<sup>30</sup> 30. Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Sin of Racial Prejudice," *The Messenger* 13, February 3, 1948, reprinted in *A Reinhold Niebuhr Reader*, ed. Charles C. Brown (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1992), 71.

observes, the same problem may be observed in Niebuhr's *Does Civilization Need Religion?*<sup>31</sup>

Niebuhr was tempted by the "cynical estimates of man's capacities and potentialities." But he could see no way of incorporating those estimates into a Christian philosophy of social reconstruction. "All this may be true about man, and yet to lose confidence in him is to commit the basest sin against him. For though man is always worse than most people suspect, he is also generally better than most people dream." That rhetorical solution had a faint-hearted ring to it. It was still his only defense against "the prophecies of the cynics." If those prophecies were true, "we can hope for no better future for mankind than that class wars shall be substituted for race wars and that the distrust which men have for people in other nations and races shall be eliminated by enlightened distrust of every man by every man irrespective of color or creed." That outcome was inadmissible on the face of it. He had no choice therefore but to proclaim his "robust" faith in man even when all "immediate evidences" disputed it. *Does Civilization Need Religion?* never got beyond that dilemma; it rested finally on the very sentimentality about man that the book ostensibly condemned.<sup>32</sup>

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Though both of these works were written early in Niebuhr's career, even his later writings offered little hope beyond an enlightened political process. Political solutions are important in securing incremental change in society, but are there no further resources available? The answer is found in Paul's understanding of the church.

### **The Church as the New Man**

Niebuhr traced his understanding of sin to Augustine and beyond him to Paul, who was not at all optimistic about human progress independent of Jesus Christ. The apostle regarded people as universally sinful, enslaved in a condition that continues to grow worse and continues to manifest itself through their actions (Rom 1:18–32; 3:9–18 ; Eph 4:17–19). Paul clearly described some of those actions in his vice lists, which often highlight sins against people (as in Gal 5:20–21: "enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying"). Of course Paul's letters emphasize the hope of salvation and transformation, and he expressed that hope in terms that are corporate as well as individual.

The second chapter of Acts introduces the church as a new community that transcends national differences. Just as individuals were once separated into

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<sup>31</sup> 31. Reinhold Niebuhr, *Does Civilization Need Religion? A Study of the Social Resources and Limitations of Religion in Modern Life* (New York: Macmillan, 1927).

<sup>32</sup> 32. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 103.

nations through language at the tower of Babel, at Pentecost they were united through language. National differences were overcome at least temporarily as those on whom the promised Holy Spirit came spoke in tongues and were understood by people from various regions. The experience of the Spirit's coming was repeated with Samaritans (Acts 8:14–17) and Gentiles (10:44–46), demonstrating that God made “no distinction” between Jews and other ethnic groups, cleansing the hearts of all by faith (15:9).

In Ephesians 2:11–22 Paul described the formation of the church as the creation of a new humanity or the construction of a new building, the most distinctive feature of which is the presence alongside one another of both Jews and Gentiles. He wrote,

Therefore remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, who are called “Uncircumcision” by the so-called “Circumcision,” which is performed in the flesh by human hands—remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ, for He Himself is our peace, who made both groups into one, and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, which is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances, that in Himself

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He might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near; for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow-citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, having been built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit.

As Bock states, the context here is “thoroughly social and racial in nature” as Jew and Gentile are reconciled into one new body, the church.<sup>33</sup> The “new man” is created through the common reconciliation of both groups to God in Christ. For

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<sup>33</sup> Darrell L. Bock, “The New Man’ as Community in Colossians and Ephesians,” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands: Biblical and Leadership Studies in Honor of Donald K. Campbell*, ed. Charles H. Dyer and Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 161. Cf. Carl B. Hoch Jr., “The New Man of [Ephesians 2](#),” in *Dispensationalism: Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 98–126.

this reason the church has been described as a *tertium genus*, a “third race,” that is neither Jew nor Gentile.<sup>34</sup> However, the point should not be overstated, because, though the groups have common access to Christ, they continue to demonstrate their own ethnic distinctives.<sup>35</sup> It is not so much that the church is *neither* Jew nor Gentile, but that the church is *both* Jew and Gentile. There is no favoritism, but neither is there any expectation that either culture be abandoned.

In Ephesians 4 the apostle urged his readers to live consistently with their calling. Part of that exhortation includes the reminder that they had been instructed to “set aside” the “old man” and to “put on” the new (vv. 22–24 ). Many evangelicals have viewed this passage and its parallel in Colossians 3:9–10 individually, but the point of Ephesians 4 is that the church as a community is to behave like the new humanity just described in Ephesians 2.<sup>36</sup> Having been reconciled, believers are expected to

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live as reconciled people, laying aside falsehood, speaking truth to one another as neighbors, resolving conflicts, sharing with one another, edifying one another through their speech, and putting away bitterness while demonstrating kindness and forgiveness (Eph 4:25–32; cf. Col 3:12–17). Those kinds of commands can never be applied by oneself; they can only be applied in the context of a community. Specifically they are to be applied in the context of a multiethnic community called the church.

Though it sounds idealistic, Paul’s concept of the new humanity must never be confused with the utopian dream of modern liberalism. Niebuhr rightly criticized the latter for its inability to counter human sinfulness, the same point Paul made in speaking against the Law (Rom 3:19–20; 7:5–11 ; 8:3 ; 2 Cor 3:3–18). For Paul, change comes through the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom 8:13–14; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 5:5, 22–23). The church is built together “in the Spirit” (Eph 2:22) and believers are to be “strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (3:16 ). The cooperation described in Ephesians 4 is a demonstration of the “unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3 ), and the mutual encouragement and worship described in 5:18–19 comes through the filling of the Spirit (5:18 ). In calling the church to function as a new community, Paul did not advocate a simple moralism. He viewed the church as an assembly of

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<sup>34</sup> 34. For discussion of this term, see Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 138, 271, n. 39.

<sup>35</sup> 35. As J. Lanier Burns observes regarding [Romans 11](#), “The chapter is about how ethnic parts of the church related to each other in the history of salvation, and the parts are never confused; the natural branches never become wild branches or vice versa.... Jews and Gentiles were uniquely joined as believers in a new entity that did not abolish distinctive identities and purposes” (“The Future of Ethnic Israel in [Romans 11](#), ” in *Dispensationalism: Israel and the Church*, 228).

<sup>36</sup> 36. Cf. Bock, “The New Man’ as Community in Colossians and Ephesians,” 157–67.

individuals called together in Christ and uniquely empowered by the presence of the Holy Spirit to live in a manner pleasing to the Lord.

Returning to the subject of collective pride, part of the Spirit's task within individual believers is to create in them what Volf calls a "catholic personality."

The rebirth of a person by the Spirit is nothing less than an anticipation of the eschatological new creation of God, a gathering of the whole people of God and of all the cultural treasures that have been dispersed among the nations. By the Spirit, that future universal event becomes a concrete reality in each believer.

One consequence of the re-creation of a person by the Spirit is that she can no longer be thought of apart from the rich and complex reality of the new creation. The Spirit sets a person on the road toward becoming what one might call a "catholic personality," a personal microcosm of the eschatological new creation. Catholic personality is a personality enriched by otherness, a personality which is what it is only because all differentiated otherness of the new creation has been reflected in it in a particular way. The distance from my own culture that results from being born by the Spirit does not isolate me, but *creates space in me for the other*. Only in distance can I be enriched, so that I, in turn, can enrich the culture to which I belong.<sup>37</sup>

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Volf adds that Christians are both aliens and at home in every culture, for by the Spirit they are open to every culture but are a part of a new community that transcends culture. How might that be demonstrated in eastern Europe? In place of the sin of exclusion (which he equates with Niebuhr's "contempt," the "reverse side of pride"<sup>38</sup>), Volf calls for repentance and forgiveness followed by embrace.

An embrace involves always a double movement of *aperture* and *closure*. I open my arms to create space in myself for the other. The open arms are a sign of discontent at being myself only and of desire to include the other. They are an invitation to the other to come in and feel at home with me, to belong to me. In an embrace I also close my arms around the other—not tightly, so as to crush her and assimilate her forcefully into myself, for that would not be an embrace but a concealed power-act of exclusion; but gently, so as to remain independent and true to her genuine self, to maintain her identity and as such become part of me so that she can enrich me with what she has and I do not.<sup>39</sup>

How can people who are trapped in the whirlpool of revenge do such a thing? Volf recognizes, with Paul, that this can only happen by the Spirit of God.

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<sup>37</sup> 37. Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace," 26–27 (italics his).

<sup>38</sup> 38. *Man's Nature*, 211.

<sup>39</sup> 39. Volf, "Exclusion and Embrace," 39 (italics his).

We need the energies of the *Spirit of embrace*—the Spirit... who lures people into fellowship with the triune God and opens them up for one another and for the whole creation of God. The Spirit of embrace creates communities of embrace—places where the power of the Exclusion System has been broken and from where the divine energies of embrace can flow, forging rich identities that include the other.<sup>40</sup>

This regenerative power of the Spirit bridges the gap between Paul's doctrine of sin and his doctrine of the church. Unfortunately Niebuhr's system does not take that into account.

When Niebuhr invoked the authority of "reality" for Christian realism, he did not refer to the reality of Christ's resurrection or the Spirit's transforming power. The presence of the kingdom inaugurated by Christ and vivified by the Spirit was not a reality that shaped his ethical thought.<sup>41</sup>

Liberalism had retained Paul's high expectations for the church but could do so only by softening his understanding of sin. Niebuhr restored a stronger view of sin, but could do so only by

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lowering his expectations for the church. Niebuhr criticized the liberals for being utopian, and they criticized him for having no theology of the church or the kingdom.<sup>42</sup> Both were legitimate criticisms, but Niebuhr and the liberals both had an inadequate doctrine of the Spirit.<sup>43</sup> Had they followed Paul more closely, they might have been realistic about human nature *and* optimistic about the church.

Liberalism and realism each recognized half-truths, as liberalism's optimism about the church and realism's pessimism about society were both relatively well founded. Unfortunately, having set aside the idea that the church consists of individuals who have been set apart from society by the unique redemptive work of the Spirit, neither group distinguished adequately between their expectations for society and their expectations for the church.

## **The Church and Immoral Society**

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40 (*italics his*).

<sup>41</sup> Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 161.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 100. Consider the criticism from Hauerwas: "For Niebuhr, the kingdom is always an ideal that stands over against any possible realization in history. What that means is that he doesn't have any concrete manifestation of God in history. He just has the ideal standing over against historical realities. And I don't know if you need Jesus for that project" (cited in Richard John Neuhaus, *Reinhold Niebuhr Today* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 114).

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Rachel Hadley King, *The Omission of the Holy Spirit from Reinhold Niebuhr's Theology* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1964).

What kind of expectations can one have for society? Niebuhr was critical of liberals for expecting too much, but he has himself been criticized for expecting too little. Some observers believe that Niebuhr's realism inevitably bred a cynicism that led to complacency through apathy. Though he does not defend it, Lovin summarizes this perspective well.

The attentiveness to facts by which Niebuhr hoped to dissuade his contemporaries from rushing off to change a world that they did not understand has become for us a principal reason to avoid trying to change it at all. The awareness of self-interest by which he hoped to keep them from confusing their own values with the truths of faith has become in our minds a way of explaining why we cannot really be concerned about the needs of other people. We cannot even successfully understand them. We cannot change the world. We can only form our Christian communities and try to protect them from its corrosive atmosphere.<sup>44</sup>

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Certainly Niebuhr cannot be blamed for contemporary apathy, especially since he did not seem to demonstrate it himself. More serious is the charge from many liberationists that Niebuhr's ethnocentrism caused him to support entrenched social classes rather than advancing social classes.<sup>45</sup>

Even if he did not adequately recognize it in himself, Niebuhr frequently attacked complacency in others. He pressed Billy Graham to preach more about racism, noting that revivalism naturally flourished alongside racism in the South, where people could be ignorant of social sin while still considering themselves "redeemed."<sup>46</sup> Niebuhr had little time for Graham and others with an other-worldly focus, which he believed made them irrelevant in the present.<sup>47</sup>

In truth, neither realism nor revivalism leads inherently to complacency in spite of each system's pessimism about human nature. The revivalists may not expect to see the kingdom of God established in their own day, and the realists may have lost their liberal idealism, but nothing hinders either group from seeking incremental change in the present. Realistic expectations need not be fatalistic ones.

What can one expect of the church? Niebuhr criticized Augustine for identifying the "city of God" as the historical church, arguing that no historical entity could ever live up to biblical expectations so long as those within it

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<sup>44</sup> 44. Robin W. Lovin, "Niebuhr at 100: Realism for New Realities," *Christian Century*, June 17–24, 1992, 604. Cf. Benton Johnson, "Taking Stock: Reflections on the End of Another Era," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21 (September 1982): 195.

<sup>45</sup> 45. Dorrien, *Soul in Society*, 163–64; and Richard Shaull, "Theology and the Transformation of Society," *Theology Today* 25 (April 1968): 23–36.

<sup>46</sup> 46. Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Proposal to Billy Graham," *Christian Century*, August 8, 1956, reprinted in *Love and Justice*, 154–58.

<sup>47</sup> 47. Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 13.

continue to fall short of perfection.<sup>48</sup> Ironically any claims to such fulfillment instead reveal examples of collective egotism.<sup>49</sup>

Of course in Paul's concept of the church as the new humanity the standard has not yet been attained. The renewal spoken of in Colossians 3:10 is present and progressing, as is the unity of faith and growth "to a mature man" (Eph 4:12–16). Both texts give instructions to people who are on the journey, not to those who have

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arrived. At the same time, since they *are* on the journey, one should see a difference between those in the church and those outside.

With regard to society in general, Niebuhr was largely right. The Pauline assessment of humanity in Romans 1–2 offers little hope for genuine progress apart from salvation through the Spirit. However, with regard to the church, Niebuhr was overly pessimistic. In the world, yet not of it; alien, yet at home; experiencing the firstfruits of the Spirit, yet awaiting the fullness—the church as God's new humanity is to taste in history what society can only label utopia.

This means that one should have distinct expectations for the world and for the church. One should expect society to function through collective pride, recognizing that change is created and justice is established through political processes that demonstrate a realistic appraisal of human motivation.

On the other hand one should expect the church to behave differently. Since believers continue to struggle with sin, the presence and demonstration of pride (both individual and collective) should not be surprising, even in the church. However, since believers are uniquely empowered by the Spirit to demonstrate love, such self-centeredness must always be regarded as scandalous.

Applying this framework to the issue of race, one may summarize the point with an answer to Rodney King's question, "Can't we all get along?" Unfortunately that may not be realistic in an immoral society. But in the church the answer is different! Believers have been commanded to get along, empowered to get along, and described in God's Word as a group that stands out by getting along. In that sense the church is the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a new man in immoral society.

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<sup>48</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Man's Destiny*, vol. 2 of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1943), 100–105, 145. More pointedly, Niebuhr said that he had addressed the church as he had experienced it and that it did not seem like much of a solution to him, especially when he was addressing his secular and political friends (Stone, "An Interview with Reinhold Niebuhr," 180). He also said the church was too divided to offer a reliable solution in the area of social work (Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1932], 15).

<sup>49</sup> Niebuhr, *Man's Nature*, 216–17.