

Niebuhr says, "[T]he ethic of Jesus is an absolute and uncompromising ethic. It is, in the phrase of Ernst Troeltsch, an ethic of 'love universalism and love perfectionism. The injunctions 'resist not evil,' 'love your enemies,' 'if ye love them that love you what thanks have you?' 'be not anxious for your life,' and 'be ye therefore perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect,' are all of one piece, and they are all uncompromising and absolute. . . .

"[The] total ethic can be summarized most succinctly in the two injunctions 'Be not anxious for your life' and 'love thy neighbor as thyself.'

"In the first of these, attention is called to the fact that the root and source of all undue self-assertion lies in the anxiety which all men have in regard to their existence. The ideal possibility is that perfect trust in God's providence ('for your heavenly father knoweth what things ye have need of') and perfect unconcern for the physical life ('fear not them which are able to kill the body') would create a state of serenity in which one life would not seek to take advantage of another life. But the fact is that anxiety is an inevitable concomitant of human freedom, and is the root of the inevitable sin which expresses itself in every human activity and creativity. . . . There is no [*sc.* human] life which does not violate the injunction 'Be not anxious.' That is the tragedy of human sin. It is the tragedy of man who is dependent upon God, but seeks to make himself independent and self-sufficing.

"In the same way there is no life which is not involved in a violation of the injunction, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.' No one is so blind as the idealist who tells us that war would be unnecessary 'if only' nations obeyed the law of Christ, but who remains unconscious of the fact that even the most saintly life is involved in some measure of contradiction of this law" (*Christianity and Power Politics*: 11 ff.).

But what is "the ideal possibility" of which Niebuhr speaks here except the eschatological (and also protological) possibility that Paul speaks of variously as "faith working through love," "keeping the commandments of God," and "a new creation" ? In asking this, I'm thinking of Marxsen who interprets Jesus' ethic as an eschatological ethic in this sense, i.e., not as stipulating the conditions that must be met in order to enter God's reign/ rule, but rather as setting forth what

he calls the "house rules" of the reign/ rule of God, or as describing how those who have submitted to it in fact live. But I'm also thinking of Bultmann's interpretation of the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount, according to which "it is not justice as such that is under discussion," but the individual's use of the demands of justice to avoid fulfilling the full demand of God by pursuing her or his own interests at the expense of the neighbors'. In other words, even if the meaning of the antitheses is that "the demand of justice is still a long way from the demand of God," there isn't the least suggestion that "the demand for justice as such stands in contradiction to the divine demand." On the contrary! Far from implying a negation of justice as such, the antitheses imply that "justice has a legitimate meaning when it stands in the service of the demand of love, or, in practical terms, when it serves the community." "Moreover, with the idea that justice receives its meaning from the demand of love there is also given a criterion for criticizing and further developing positive justice; and this is true however little Jesus himself was interested in any such further development of it" (*Existence and Faith*: 201-205).

It could hardly be clearer, in other words, that the convergence of Niebuhr's position with Bultmann's and my own is very close indeed.

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