

Reinhold Niebuhr has often been taken to task for saying that Christians are redeemed "in principle but not in fact."

But what does he mean in saying this other than what Bultmann means, following Paul's witness, in talking about the dialectic, or paradox, of indicative and imperative? Both theologians are concerned to make clear that—and why—Christian existence (or, more generally, authentic existence) is not a matter of either "conduct" or "virtue" in the usual senses of the words. For them, and, as they believe, for Christian faith and witness, the imperative "*Werde, der du bist!*" is always in order, for Christians as much as for anyone else, and the prayer of the believer can never be other than, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!"

One passage from Niebuhr's writings suffices to confirm beyond serious question that he and Bultmann are indeed on exactly the same page on all this—namely, *NDM*, 2:101 f.

Niebuhr says:

[S]ome of the very assertions [*sc.* in the Pauline epistles] which lend themselves to perfectionist interpretations are immediately followed by injunctions which cast doubt upon such an exposition. These injunctions declare in effect: you are now sinless. Therefore, you must not sin any more. The exhortation [by which Niebuhr means, clearly, the 'injunction,' 'you must not sin any more'] implies that the original statements have a slightly different meaning than their obvious connotation. They really mean: self-love has been destroyed in principle in your life. See to it now that the new principle of devotion to God in Christ is actualized in your life. [He then goes on to say:] [Paul's] injunction [*sic!*] to the sinless, not to sin any more, implies that he understands the possibility of sinning for those who have broken with sin in principle.

Then, in the connected footnote 6 on p. 102, Niebuhr not only explicitly cites Bultmann's favorite Pauline text—Gal 5:24-26—but also says, in commenting on Eph 4:17-32, "The fact that they [*sc.* Christians] have renounced sin in principle demands that they break with it in fact, and the redeemed are admonished to conquer very obvious sins."

On the "in principle/ in fact" distinction, see also the following passage (pp. 136 f.):

The important point at issue in the Augustinian conception is whether the destruction of sin 'in principle' means that the power of inordinate self-love is broken in fact. It is the thesis of both Augustine and all the Catholic ages that this is the case; and that residual sin represents the eruption of vagrant desires and impulses which have not yet been brought completely under the control of the central will. The thesis is plausible enough; for if destruction of self love 'in principle' does not also mean 'in fact' in some basic sense, what does it mean? Certainly there must be some facts which reveal the new principle by which the soul lives. Surely there must be 'fruits meet for repentance'!

But here the complexities of the moral life are obscured by too simple statement of them. The actual situation is that man may be redeemed from self-love in the sense that he acknowledges the evil of it and recognizes the love of God as the only adequate motive of conduct; and may yet be selfish in more than an incidental sense. The pride of a bishop, the pretensions of a theologian, the will-to-power of a pious business man, and the spiritual arrogance of the church itself are not mere incidental defects, not merely 'venial' sins. They represent the basic drive of self-love, operating upon whatever new level grace has pitched the new life. Pure love is 'by faith' in the sense that only when man, in prayer and contemplation, is lifted beyond himself does he have a vantage point from which self-love does not operate. In action the power of self-love is mixed with the new power of the love of God which grace has established.

This tragic quality of the spiritual life was never clearly apprehended until the Reformation. Its apprehension gives the Reformation its particular and unique place in the history of the Christian life. Augustine's failure to understand it had the consequence of making him the father of Catholicism in his doctrine of grace; while he became at the same time the ultimate source of the Reformation in his doctrine of sin. The Reformation discovered that there was in the Pauline-Biblical and in the Augustinian analysis of the human situation a problem too profound to be solved by the Augustinian answer to that problem.

As for Niebuhr's other important distinction between "the self in contemplation" and "the self in action," see the following passage from 108:

The plight of the self is that it cannot do the good that it intends. The self in action seems impotent to conform its actions to the requirements of its essential being, as seen by the self in contemplation. The self is so created in freedom that it cannot realize itself within itself. It can only realize itself in loving relation to its fellows. Love is the law of its being. But in practice it is always betrayed into self-love. It comprehends the world and human relations from itself as the centre. It cannot, by willing to do so, strengthen the will to do good. This weakness is partly due to finiteness. The propulsive powers of the self, with its natural survival impulse, do not suffice to fulfill the obligations which the self as

free spirit discerned. But the weakness is not merely one of 'nature.' It is also spiritual. The self never follows its 'natural' self-interest without pretending to be obedient to obligations beyond itself. It transcends its own interests too much to be able to serve them without disguising them in loftier pretensions. This is the covert dishonesty and spiritual confusion which is always involved in the self's undue devotion to itself.

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