

Niebuhr speaks of our facing “two temptations” in trying to profit from the experience of extricating the Christian gospel from its various heresies so as to have Christian unity in accepting “the substance of the gospel.”

The one temptation [he says] is to renounce all commerce with the wisdom of the world, with the various disciplines of culture, all of which contain the danger of deflecting us from the truth of the gospel. If we succumb to this temptation we will be like the man who hid his treasure in the ground. We will not learn to appreciate the truth of these disciplines which are valid on their own level, and we will not be able to validate the truth of the gospel on the level where its truth is apparent and the truth of the wisdom of the world turns into error. That is the level of the self's freedom and responsibility, the self's sin and need of redemption: of God's freedom as creator and redeemer; of the self's encounter with God and of its redemption through divine grace and the self's response of repentance and trust. . . .

The other temptation for us [he says] is to make too much of, or to make too uncritical application of, the rediscovered [b]iblical fact that all men are sinners and that every historical struggle is therefore a struggle between sinful men. The temptation is to imagine that the cry of ‘a plague on both their houses’ is a Christian solution of every problem; that neutralism is an answer to every political perplexity. This error consists in an effort to rise above the responsibilities which we have as men for the order, the justice, and the preservation of our civilizations and painfully nourished systems of justice, seeking to play the part of God, in whose sight no one indeed is justified. But we are men and not God; and we must distinguish between the moral level of our decisions, where we must carefully weigh whether the ostensible foe may not be a friend with whom we must come to terms and whether the ostensible friend and ally may not be a foe who must be resisted resolutely if our prized liberties are to be preserved; and the religious level, on which we have some knowledge of the fact that both we and the most dangerous foe are equally sinners in God's sight and are equally in need of his forgiveness (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 338, 340).

Just what Niebuhr is saying in these passages is not entirely clear. One reason for this is that it's not clear whether the two levels to which he refers in speaking of the one temptation are the same two levels to which he refers in speaking of the other. If they are the same, then his point in what he says about the first temptation, presumably, is that what the so-called disciplines of culture have to say on the moral level is valid, even though what they—or, at any rate,

“the wisdom of the world”—claim to be true on the religious level “turns into error” (proves to be error?) even as “the truth of the gospel” is validated. One reason I incline to this interpretation is that there are two other passages in Niebuhr’s *Auseinandersetzung* with Barth that seem to be clear parallels with this passage. In one of them, he talks about Barth’s believing that the “the purity of the gospel” can be protected only “by destroying every possible commerce or debate between the Christian faith and the philosophical and ethical disciplines. One must not enter into a debate with modern culture to prove that its analysis of the plight of man is mistaken and that its proffered redemptions are illusory; one must preach the gospel and wait for the Holy Spirit to validate it. Neither must one relate the ethical demands of the gospel to any ethical insights which may have come to mankind in classical or modern currents of thought. One may champion justice in the political order provided one does not appeal to ‘natural law’ and is careful to find warrant for one’s conception of justice in the Scripture. One may even have to torture Biblical texts in order to arrive at a preference for a democratic society without making any appeal to non-Biblical sources of insight” (178). In the other passage, Niebuhr, asserts over against what he takes to be the mistaken emphasis of Barth’s theology: “The certainty of the final inadequacy of the ‘wisdom of the world’ must not be allowed to become the source of cultural obscurantism. The Christian must explore every promise and every limit of the cultural enterprise. The certainty of the final inadequacy of every form of human justice must not lead to defeatism in our approach to the perplexing problems of social justice in our day. The possibilities as well as the limits of every scheme of justice must be explored. The certainty that every form of human virtue is inadequate in the sight of God must not tempt us to hide our talent in the ground”(174).

Another issue I would note is raised by what Niebuhr says about the second temptation—namely, whether there is as little difference as he implies between (1) making too much of x ; and (2) making too uncritical an application of x , thereby revealing that one has misunderstood it. If I am right, it’s precisely his tendency again and again to ignore the difference between these two ways of making his criticism that betrays him into making or implying statements that

are theologically untenable. Clearly, from his very own theological standpoint, one simply cannot make too much of the fact, experiential as well as biblical, "that all men are sinners and that every historical struggle is therefore a struggle between sinful men." But what one can do, and, it would seem, is all too likely to do, is to proceed "uncritically," misunderstanding the meaning of this fact and, in consequence, misapplying it. That Barth's theology, or, at any rate, what Niebuhr takes to be Barth's theology, is open to criticism for having done precisely this in no way justifies claiming that he makes too much of something that Niebuhr himself and all of the rest of us have to make at least as much of as Barth does at the peril of not saying what we as Christians and theologians are bound to say.

A final comment is closely related: here as well as elsewhere, Niebuhr is insufficiently careful not to separate the moral and the religious levels even while rightly insisting that they must be distinguished. If he is as theologically justified as I believe he is in insisting on our responsibilities in and for history, this can only be because *the whole truth* of what God sees is not only, as he says, that all human beings are equally sinners and equally in need of forgiveness. He has to allow, at the risk of not having a proper theological ground for his insistence, that God also sees *the very same distinctions* between possibilities and consequences that we have to see if we are to meet our moral and political responsibilities. In other words, God's judgment must be as "discriminate" as it is "indiscriminate," even as our judgment must be as "indiscriminate" as it is "discriminate." Moral and political distinctions can mean as much to us as Niebuhr insists only if they are also mean something to God; likewise, we can live with "a genuine Christian nonchalance," i.e., "the nonchalance of perfect faith and love," only if, in the end, moral and political distinctions mean as little to us as they do to God (330, 328; cf. 135 f., where, having referred yet again to "the nonchalance which is able to confess 'Whether we live, we live unto the Lord; and whether we die, we die unto the Lord, and whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lord's,'" Niebuhr goes on to say: "[T]he gospel gives us no special securities or exemptions from the frailties of men and the tragedies of life. We

are expected to live life fully but also to be detached from life so that we have everything as if we had it not").

23 May 2003