

## 9. The Vanguard and H. Richard Niebuhr's Representational Responsibility

This chapter is a commentary on the concluding six paragraphs of H. Richard Niebuhr's essay entitled "The Responsibility of the Church for Society" published in *The Gospel, the World, and the Church*, edited by Kenneth Scott Latourette (Harper Brothers: 1946). The entire essay can be found on line by typing its title in your search engine.

The six paragraphs I will discuss in this chapter form a section of Niebuhr's essay entitled "The Church as Social Pioneer." The opening paragraph is long and I will deal with it in three parts: the overall thesis, the illustration of the Hebrew people, and the illustration of Jesus.

### The Overall Thesis:

Finally, the social responsibility of the Church needs to be described as that of the pioneer. The Church is that part of the human community which responds first to God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God. It is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole. It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees His judgments, which has the vision of the resurrection. In its relations with God it is the pioneer part of society that responds to God on behalf of the whole society, somewhat, we may say, as science is the pioneer in responding to pattern or rationality in experience and as artists are the pioneers in responding to beauty.

The image of the pioneer is taken from American frontier history. It means leading the way into unexplored territory. Pioneer has already become a metaphor used in the sciences and the arts. Einstein and Picasso can both be viewed as pioneers in their arenas, providing new awareness and understanding on behalf of all of us. If their work seems distant from our daily lives, perhaps we feel more indebted to pioneers in the medical field whose breakthroughs have healed or extended our lives.

But what does it mean for the Church to be a pioneer? And what is its arena? If not pattern or beauty or health, to what is the Church responding on behalf of the rest of us? Niebuhr says that the Church, and he obviously means the true Church, responds first to God. He says "God-in-Christ and Christ-in-God." What does he mean by this strange language? Earlier in the larger essay, he says: ". . . the being to whom the Church responds is Christ-in-God as well as God-in-Christ. The Church looks not only to the absolute in the finite but to the redemptive principle in the absolute. God, it believes and confesses, is love; He is mercy; He so loved the world that He gave His best-loved for its redemption; it is His will that the wicked should not perish but turn from their ways and live. To be a Christian Church is to be a community which is always aware of and always responding to the redemptive principle in the world, to Christ-in-God, to the Redeemer." So Niebuhr means that the true Church is that part of the human race that pioneers on behalf of the rest of us in responding to "the absolute in the finite" and "the redemptive principle in the absolute." If still further decoding is required, we might say that the true Church is that part of the human race that pioneers on behalf of all by responding to the Infinite Wholeness encountered in each passing event and in the understanding that in all these events, we confront a Final Reality that is active benevolence, always moving for our redemption from our estrangements.

Then Niebuhr puts this entire point in a surprisingly universal fashion: "It (the Church) is the sensitive and responsive part in every society and mankind as a whole." What part of the Ku Klux Klan is the sensitive and responsive part? Perhaps it is that part that is leaving the Klan.

Perhaps it is that part that understands that the quest for self affirmation is a valid quest but that a valid and satisfying self affirmation cannot be found in terms of being “white” and arrogating oneself over those who are “black.” In whatever way we picture what sensitive and responsive means for a Klan member, Niebuhr is indicating that the sensitive and responsive part of the Klan is the Church. What part of Muslim culture is the Church? What part of Jewish culture is the Church? These are valid questions because Niebuhr is not talking about the Church as those who hold a Christian doctrine, but those who are sensitive and responsive to Ultimate Reality on behalf of everyone else. So if some part of the Iraqi society is sensitive and responsive to God, that part is the Church. If some part of the Roman Catholic organization is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. If some part of the Southern Baptist Convention is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. If some part of the United States of America is sensitive and responsive, that part, not the whole of it, is the Church. Clearly Niebuhr is developing a view of being the Church that is at variance with the popular view. The Church according to Niebuhr is not a specific set of religious organizations; it is a dynamic in human history. Sometimes we use the term “invisible Church” or “true Church” or “Spirit community” to point to what Niebuhr is indicating, but Niebuhr is pushing beyond even the way most of us use such terms. The Church, as Niebuhr is developing that term, is not a building or a religious organization or a specific group. The Church is a direction of response – toward God. The Church is the sensitive and responsive portion of the entire human species, those who are sensitive and responsive to God, the Final Reality faced by us all.

Niebuhr expands upon this topic using some traditional Christian language. “It is that group which hears the Word of God, which sees His judgments, which has the vision of the resurrection.” What does this mean in plain speech? The Word of God in this context does not mean the Bible, it means the Message of the Infinite as that Communication is enacted in the specific events of our ongoing history. This “Speech” issuing from Reality is experienced as both judgment upon our delusory views of life and the opportunity to be “raised up” to a realistic participation in what is actually happening. Judgment and vision (death and resurrection) are two aspects of each specific Divine Word spoken to us by the Awesome Overallness in our specific situation and filling the situation with the Awe that is part of every fully experienced moment. For example, one might ask what the Word of judgment is in the growing anger directed toward the U.S. government and culture by extremist Muslim movements. Perhaps we can discern that the truth here is something deeper than a hatred of our freedom, or even a hatred of our empowerment of women. Perhaps we can begin to see our own delusory views about the results of our trade and business practices across the world; our “ugly-American” attitudes toward other cultures; our imperial, bullying, dictatorial, know-it-all, non-listening attitudes; our neglect that allows grueling poverty, disease pandemics, hopelessness, chaos, injustice, and ecological disasters, all of which are breeding the worst possible consequences. If we can indeed see the Word of God judging our delusions and omissions, we can also see the vision of a prosperous nation directing the bulk of its wealth and practical savvy toward resolving the major long-range challenges of our common life on Earth. These are the kinds of real world Messages of judgment and resurrection that Niebuhr means. This Word of God is indeed about God’s love, but this love is deeply severe in its judgments and is overwhelmingly merciful in its promised outcomes.

Niebuhr wraps up his overall image of the Church with these words: “In its relations with God it (the Church) is the pioneer part of society that responds to God on behalf of the whole society . . .” Niebuhr calls this pioneering or representational responsibility. And in the middle of this paragraph he gives this illustration:

#### **The Illustration of the Hebrew People**

This sort of social responsibility may be illustrated by reference to the Hebrew people and the prophetic remnant. The Israelites, as the major prophets ultimately came to see,

had been chosen by God to lead all nations to Him. It was that part of the human race which pioneered in understanding the vanity of idol worship and in obeying the law of brother-love. Hence in it all nations were eventually to be blessed.

This is a very interesting overview of the entire pre-Jesus biblical story. That complexly developing heritage did indeed pioneer in understanding the vanity of idol worship. The radical monotheism contained in Old Testament stories, psalms, and prophetic writings still profoundly challenges all nations with regard to the futility of worshipping the passing process of life. And the law-writing of the Israelites, though now grossly time-dated in its particularities, is a profound departure from the law-writing of Egyptian hierarchy or that of other civilizations then and now. Law that applies to all people equally, king as well as peasant, was something new. Law that was rooted in Divine Reality rather than in a human social hierarchy was something new. The Israelites pioneered this for us. On our behalf they were the "Church" in its calling to representational responsibility. Niebuhr continues illustrating representational responsibility with the figure of Jesus.

#### **The Illustration of Jesus Christ**

The idea of representational responsibility is illustrated particularly by Jesus Christ. As has often been pointed out by theology, from New Testament times onward, he is the first-born of many brothers not only in resurrection but in rendering obedience to God. His obedience was a sort of pioneering and representative obedience; he obeyed on behalf of men, and so showed what men could do and drew forth a divine response in turn toward all the men he represented. He discerned the divine mercy and relied upon it as representing men and pioneering for them.

Jesus, he says, was the first born of many brothers (and sisters we 21st century theologians need to add). This both removes Jesus from an unwarranted pedestal and puts all of us humans on higher ground than we are accustomed to viewing ourselves. Jesus, he says later, showed us what we could do. We Christians have typically relied on Jesus to do something for us, but showing us how to be resurrected persons who render obedience to God may be showing us more than we volunteered to learn. Indeed, what does such language even mean? Most Christians have so literalized the resurrection of Jesus that the very idea of being resurrected seem strange. And even more frightening to our typical complacencies is the realization that being resurrected assumes some sort of "having died." As Paul put it, "We were crucified with him that we might also be raised up with him to newness of life." And how are we to be crucified? Our delusions, our very self as a delusory fabric of living, must be killed. And what is this newness of life like? Obedience to God! And what does that mean? It means bowing to the fullness, fury, and glory of Reality and its call to realistic living. Jesus showed us what this looks like. And, says Niebuhr, Jesus "drew forth a divine response in turn toward all the men he represented." That is, he brought this death/new-life redemption dynamic into the historical drama as a fully conscious dynamic. History was changed. The divine mercy was discerned in its full depths, and Jesus showed us what relying on this mercy looks like. He pioneered for us. He represented us in doing something we never thought possible. If we follow him, we do so because he trod this path first. Niebuhr continues this topic in the next paragraph:

This thought of pioneering or representational responsibility has been somewhat obscured during the long centuries of individualist overemphasis. Its expression in the legal terms of traditional theology is strange and often meaningless to modern ears. Yet with our understanding of the way that life is involved with life, of the manner in which self and society are bound together, of the way in which small groups within a nation act for the whole, it seems that we must move toward a conception similar to the Hebraic and medieval one.

By “the long centuries of individualist overemphasis” Niebuhr means the entire modern age beginning with the Reformation and the Enlightenment. These important breakthroughs recovered individual faith and individual reasoning from the legalistic solidarity of the late Middle Ages, but this emphasis on the individual has obscured, says Niebuhr, the also valid solidarity that each of us have with the whole. Each of us is a part of nature. Each of us is a part of society. Small groups of us can and do act on behalf of the whole. Representative responsibility is a fuller view of our actual situation and a fuller vision of our responsibility as pioneers in realistic living. In the next paragraph Niebuhr begins his specific descriptions of the Church as pioneer for the whole society.

In this representational sense the Church is that part of human society, and that element in each particular society, which moves toward God, which as the priest acting for all men worships Him, which believes and trusts in Him on behalf of all, which is first to obey Him when it becomes aware of a new aspect of His will. Human society in all of its divisions and aspects does not believe. Its institutions are based on unbelief, on lack of confidence in the Lord of heaven and earth. But the Church has conceived faith in God and moves in the spirit of that trust as the hopeful and obedient part of society.

Niebuhr says the Church is that part of society that moves toward God. I want to underline the word “moves.” The Church that Niebuhr describes is not a passive collusion with the status quo. This priest moves rather than retreats to the back rooms of religious buildings or the bookshelves of a theological library. This priest moves. This priest acts. This movement may take place in a Church building or a library, but it is a movement on behalf of every city street and country valley. For Niebuhr, the word “Church” means those who move in God-ward movement on behalf of the whole human society that in the main is not making such movement. For Niebuhr the words “faith,” “believes,” and “trusts” point to active movement upon a path that all humankind might follow. And this is a secular path, not a cultic path: it is simply being the hopeful and obedient part of society. Hopeful about what? About living a full and realistic life and building a just and workable society. Obedient to whom? To the God of history whose Awesome demands are seen to be wholly trustworthy. In this context Niebuhr speaks of Christian ethics.

In ethics it (*the Church*) is the first to repent for the sins of a society and it repents on behalf of all. When it becomes apparent that slavery is transgression of the divine commandment, then the Church repents of it, turns its back upon it, abolishes it within itself. It does this not as the holy community separate from the world but as the pioneer and representative. It repents for the sin of the whole society and leads in the social act of repentance. When the property institutions of society are subject to question because innocent suffering illuminates their antagonism to the will of God, then the Church undertakes to change its own use of these institutions and to lead society in their reformation. So also the Church becomes a pioneer and representative of society in the practice of equality before God, in the reformation of institutions of rulership, in the acceptance of mutual responsibility of individuals for one another.

In this paragraph Niebuhr makes clear that moving toward God in trust has specific concrete ethical implications. His illustrations are intended to be obvious ones. Of course, not all the ethical implications of this movement toward God are obvious; many matters have to be discussed and worked out by this moving community of faith. What is important about this paragraph is Niebuhr’s clarification of the dynamics of repentance. Repentance, in this paragraph, does not mean feeling sorry or allowing our superegos to beat us up. Repentance is movement. Repentance is action. ONE: it is an about face, a change of direction, a turning away from the evil trends that society generally still promotes and manifests. TWO: it cleans up our

own lives and the policies and programs of the groups to which we belong. THREE: it leads the whole society; it is not concerned to become a righteous or holy group separate from the rest of the world. It represents the society in being the first to change what needs to be changed, and its repentance includes showing the society at large how to move, how to change. Such repentance also implies identifying with the sin of the whole society and understanding its failings as our failings, its changes as changes in our own larger life. And Niebuhr is not focusing on individual morality, on drinking or dancing or narrow teachings about sex, contraception, and abortion. He is illustrating what he means by repentance with property institutions, innocent suffering, the practice of equality, the reformation of institutions of rulership, and the acceptance of mutual responsibility of individuals for one another. Niebuhr continues to clarify this broad social focus in the next paragraph.

In our time, with its dramatic revelations of the evils of nationalism, of racialism and of economic imperialism it is the evident responsibility of the Church to repudiate these attitudes within itself and to act as the pioneer of society in doing so. The apostolic proclamation of good and bad news to the colored races without a pioneering repudiation of racial discrimination in the Church contains a note of insincerity and unbelief. The prophetic denunciation of nationalism without a resolute rejection of nationalism in the Church is mostly rhetorical. As the representative and pioneer of mankind the Church meets its social responsibility when in its own thinking, organization, and action it functions as a world society, undivided by race, class and national interests.

Nationalism, racism, and economic imperialism still remain key issues 58 years after Niebuhr's essay was written. But perhaps we could add several other issues that have become dramatic revelations of evil in the intervening decades. Prominent among them is the full liberation of women from patriarchal prerogatives. Equally crucial is the revelation of the ongoing and expanding oppression of the entire natural planet, causing what we have come to call "ecological crisis" for most living species, including the human species. We have only begun to repent of this horrific evil. Most institutions are still struggling against making the initial "about face."

But let's look at the issues that Niebuhr does raise. Racism, in spite of steady progress, is still far from overcome. The pioneering Church still has some leading to do in the racial arena. The worst forms of nationalism were defeated in Germany and Japan, but destructive nationalism still reigns in many nations. The United States, in its current practices, is very far from functioning "in its own thinking, organization, and action" "as a world society, undivided by race, class and national interests." We hear every day that the key purpose of national governance is to advance our national self interest. Cannot we who are this nation include caring for the planet along with defending and caring for this nation? Cannot this nation truly pioneer democracy, freedom, and justice for all parts of the world? The pioneering Church has a great deal of leading to do in this regard. And last, but certainly not least, economic imperialism is being practiced in its most extreme forms by transnational corporations, many of whom are based in the United States. The U.S. government is itself so dominated by these corporations that little or no distance can be discerned between the regulating governmental bodies and the economic institutions they claim to regulate. Many scathing books are being written on the economic imperialism being suffered both in developed societies and in the developing societies. The authors of those books are among the sensitive and responsive members of our society. They are part of the Church that Niebuhr describes. But the typical Christian congregation colludes with economic imperialism and even justifies it as Christian morality.

Niebuhr winds up his essay with this stunning denunciation of socially irresponsible churches:

This (representational responsibility) seems to be the highest form of social responsibility in the Church. It is the direct demonstration of love of God and neighbor rather than a repetition of the commandment to self and others. It is the radical demonstration of faith. Where this responsibility is being exercised there is no longer any question about the reality of the Church. *In pioneering and representative action of response to God in Christ the invisible Church becomes visible and the deed of Christ is reduplicated.*

The repetition of the commandment to love is not the same as “a direct demonstration of the love of God and neighbor.” Niebuhr holds God-and-neighbor together. Representative responsibility flows from loving the God who gives us the neighbors who concretely neighbor us. It flows from a quality of love that loves the neighbor in the context of loving God. Representational responsibility demonstrates what trusting God looks like. This trusting, loving responsibility makes the true or invisible Church visible. Whenever any group of people, any part of any society of people pioneer realism, trust, and love in a relevant practical way on behalf of that whole society, “the deed of Christ is reduplicated.” Niebuhr is willing to see representational responsibility as the root meaning of the life of Jesus. Jesus can be known as the Christ, precisely because he took upon himself responsibility for the sins of his society (and the sins of the whole of humanity) and on their behalf repented. He led them by showing them what repentance looks like. When his enemies or his disciples did not follow his lead, he led them in practicing forgiveness; he led them in forgiving and calling for the repentance of every single human being. He welcomed all those who resisted his challenge to nevertheless return home to the love of God and neighbor on the basis of which his repentance and his challenge were founded. This deed of Christ has been done, and it is manifested again every time anyone anywhere is engaged in representational responsibility.