

Dr. Roger Green, American Christianity, Session 22, Neo-Orthodoxy and Social Crisis, Part 2

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Neo-Orthodoxy and the Social Crisis. Oh, I think we finished the part. Didn't we say the five things about his theology? We said that. Okay, so we're now at C, Neo-Orthodoxy and the Social Crisis, Moral Man and Moral Society.

I'm going to give an introduction. In my introduction, I'm going to talk about Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr together. And then I'm going to separate them out.

And we're going to see about Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. Hold first, and then we'll see about H. Richard Niebuhr. Then we're going to get number D, and we're going to get to a book called Christ and Culture.

How many of you have read Christ and Culture for another, maybe for another course? Anybody? Christ and Culture? It's a very, you read the whole thing? You haven't read the whole thing. It's a very, very important book to try to understand neo-orthodoxy and the approach of neo-orthodoxy to the modern world and so forth. So, we'll get to that.

Okay, so first of all, here is an introduction. Okay, now, you've got two brothers here who become very important in American Christianity. Reinhold Niebuhr, there are his dates, and his brother H. Richard Niebuhr and there are his dates.

They were both reared in a pastoral home in a church called the German Evangelical Church. So, they are reared in this German Evangelical Church, which is kind of a church that is the offshoot of German Pietism. So, they were reared in a pastoral theological home, German Evangelical Church, and in this way, they're kind of like Rauschenbusch because Rauschenbusch was reared in a pastoral home, but he was reared in a German Baptist church, a little bit of a different denomination.

But like Rauschenbusch, the Niebuhr brothers would be very familiar, not just with the American religious scene but with the European religious scene and with German theology. So that's going to stand them in good stead for what they're going to try to do. So the two brothers really reared in that really wonderful tradition.

Both of them received undergraduate work in Missouri, but then both of them went to Yale. Interesting that she, I think she mentioned Yale yesterday too, but both of them went to Yale. So, okay, now what happens after their education at Yale is they go in two different directions vocationally, but the two directions are really very important to American Christianity and to American theology, American Christian theology.

Reinhold Niebuhr, first of all, started as a pastor in Detroit, and he was a pastor in Detroit for 11 years. So, in Detroit, Reinhold Niebuhr saw the very kinds of things we've been talking about in terms of social crisis, long hours, poor wages, terrible living conditions, children working, that kind of thing. He saw that firsthand in Detroit.

It's easy to kind of compare him to Rauschenbusch because Rauschenbusch was also 11 years in New York City seeing the same thing. Earlier on, of course, he predated Reinhold Niebuhr, but this is Niebuhr's experience. So, the experience of Rauschenbusch in New York years earlier was the exact same experience as Niebuhr in Detroit years later in that 11-year pastoral ministry.

Now, after 11 years, Reinhold Niebuhr leaves, and he goes to Union Theological Seminary in New York City. Now, remember the history of Union with the Briggs case, right? Remember that. Union had become, it was a Presbyterian seminary because of the Briggs case had become now an independent seminary.

Reinhold Niebuhr goes to Union Seminary, and for the rest of his vocational life, he teaches at Union. And that's a time when he started teaching at Union. That was a time when Union became very important in American theological life because Paul Tillich taught at Union, and the philosopher-theologian taught at Union. Dietrich Bonhoeffer came to Union Seminary for a year, so Bonhoeffer was associated with Union for that year while he was kind of a graduate student.

So, Union Theological Seminary became a very important training ground, but it was also a very important kind of intellectual seminary life for American theology. So, Reinhold Niebuhr goes to Union. Richard Niebuhr, his brother H. Richard Niebuhr, takes a slightly different track.

Richard Niebuhr ends up in teaching at Yale University. So, Richard Niebuhr becomes a professor at Yale, and he spends his time and his influence at Yale. So, Reinhold Niebuhr is at Union, Richard Niebuhr is at Yale, and for about 25 years, they pretty much dominated the American theological scene.

And here's, I'll be right with you, one quotation here: for more than a quarter century, both men, together with many congenial, if not always like-minded colleagues, made these two institutions lively and influential centers of theological

ferment. And so here you had the Niebuhr brothers at Union and at Yale, and they become really very, very important. I'll just mention that we've got a question, but I'll just mention again that we want to mention what we mentioned with Bart.

Notice that Reinhold Niebuhr is also recognized as a public theologian. Reinhold Niebuhr was a very, very important public figure as a churchman and a theologian in America, so much so that Time Magazine, on their 25th anniversary issue, was the guy they put on the cover of Time Magazine. And then there's a picture of his brother, H. Richard Niebuhr.

So, pretty important people here. How much is a part of liberalism? Right, we are going to get into each of them a bit, and maybe we'll talk about that. Of them basically, if you were to kind of pin them down, they were both professors of ethics, basically at Union and at Yale.

The term liberal, you wouldn't want to apply to these people because, by the time they're on the scene, they're reacting against Protestant liberalism. In a sense, their fight is against Protestant liberalism on the left-hand side and against American fundamentalism on the right-hand side. So, they're trying to construct a good, solid, middle-of-the-way biblical theology for Protestantism.

Does that help? The term liberal wouldn't apply to either of them nor would it apply to Karl Barth. Sometimes, a person will say to me, well, I never read Karl Barth because he's so liberal. Well, then, the term doesn't mean anything if you call Karl Barth liberal because that's the very thing he fought against, Protestant liberalism.

I'm happy with the term neo-Orthodox for all three of these people. I saw a hand here, Carter, and then Hannah. Yeah? It's like more moderate, then? More moderate.

I would say more moderate. They're not evangelical. They wouldn't call themselves evangelical, but they are Orthodox.

They are biblical. They want to see how this biblical, how does Bible work its way out into ethical life. That's what they're interested in.

And by that, they mean in social life, in political life, how does biblical theology work itself out that way? You know, that's a good question. I don't know. I'd have to check that out.

I don't know. I think they had a sister, as I recall. They had another sister and another brother.

The brother or the sister? Okay, and there was a sister. You don't know if he ever came home. There was a sister, I think.

There's a great biography, and I'm actually going to mention this biography later on in an illustration that I'm going to give about three weeks from now. There's a great biography of Reinhold Niebuhr. My last name is Fox.

If you want the best biography of Reinhold Niebuhr, it's by a guy whose last name is Fox. He is just tremendous. It's a great biography, right? Okay, so that's the introduction.

Now, what we're going to do is get first to Reinhold and then to H. Richard Niebuhr. So, just a few things about that. First of all, this, in a sense, answers your question, Kike, but first of all, as a pastor in Detroit, he found liberalism to be bankrupt.

Classical Protestant liberalism was not meeting the needs of the people in his parish at all, and he knew there had to be a better way. And so, in a sense, like Barth, he discovers the Bible as the better way, the strange new place of the Bible. Now, what he finds himself as a pastor is that his main interest is going to be in taking the biblical message and applying it ethically.

So, as a pastor, he wants the application now. That's what he's after. In that way, the ethical application is where he parts company with Barth because he felt that he appreciated Barth and Barth's rising star, of course.

These people were all reading Barth and studying with Barth and everything. But he found that Barth's theology, the weakness in Barth's theology was that it didn't come down to ethics. There was greatness and glory to the theology of Barth, but he felt that it was inadequate when there was a real failure to talk adequately about Christian ethics and how to apply this great theology to the social or political world.

By the way, he also found the same thing about Kierkegaard because remember, we said how important Kierkegaard was to Barth; Niebuhr read Kierkegaard but found the same thing. So, his interest was to apply it really radically. So, there it is.

Okay, so I don't know why I did that. So, we're going to talk about a couple of his works. Now, we're still on Reinhold Niebuhr here, so here are a couple of his works.

I don't know why I'm doing the clapping thing, but I don't know how he discovered that. Okay, now, by his works, we're going to get a sense of who he is. Moral Man and Immoral Society, he wrote this in 1932, Moral Man and Immoral Society.

Okay, now what he is reacting against in the book is this kind of liberal optimism, this kind of liberal theology optimism. In the book, he kind of discounts the optimism of

rationality because liberal optimism of rationality gives people the impression that they are capable of creating a rational, well-ordered society. What he does in the book is challenge that kind of liberal optimism of the rationality of human beings and the rationality of humanity.

And what he says in the book, and we'll mention this also in the next book, and what he says in that book is that we've got to be political realists here. Just in reading the Bible, we are political realists because the Bible talks about the sinfulness of human beings. And the Bible talks about the evil that is brought into this world by our sinfulness.

So, the Bible doesn't simply talk about love as a way of ordering society and of coming to grips with evil in society. The Bible also talks about the need for power to order society and come to grips with society. So that's what he does in the book.

Another thing that he does here is say in the book that relationships between individuals are a matter of ethics. Relationships between individuals, my relationship with you and your relationship with me, are ethical matters in which we can appropriate a biblical understanding of love because he had a high view of individuals being able to rise above a selfish life.

He felt that individuals are able to rise above their selfishness in order to come to a loving relationship with other individuals. So, what did he title the book? Moral Man. However, the other side of the story is that the relationship between groups is now a matter of politics.

That's a political matter. And the relationship between groups has to be governed by empowering groups. He believed that groups, groups of people, have what he called collective egoism.

So, once you put a lot of individuals into a group, you've got a collective egoism there, and selfishness takes the place of selflessness. And so, if you've got this restless egoism with these groups, then you've got possible confrontation, and you've got the possibility of one group wanting to take over another group, and that becomes problematic for Niebuhr. So, what's the second title of the book or the other part of the title of the book? Moral Man in Immoral Society.

Moral Man in Immoral Society. Now, it's very interesting that, of course, he himself took his main interest, or one of his great interests, to be in politics. How does the Christian then relate these kinds of matters to the political sphere? He actually formed a fellowship of socialist Christians because Reinhold Niebuhr was, by his own political persuasion, a socialist.

So, he formed a fellowship of socialist Christians then. Now, let me say a word about the book *Moral Man in Immoral Society*, which we had to read pretty carefully when I was getting my PhD. I had a professor by the name of Max Stackhouse.

I don't know if anyone's read anything by Max Stackhouse, pretty remarkable guy. Max Stackhouse was a pretty tough teacher in the PhD program when we came. This has nothing to do with anything, but I remember Max.

But when we came into, you know, you come into seminars where there might be eight of you in a seminar with the professor. And Max Stackhouse used to say, now today we're going to go for the juggler vein. So that was his way of teaching.

You go for the juggler vein, you know, you go at it. So I was a little uncomfortable with that. But anyway, Max Stackhouse went to be with the Lord.

Here, I opened up a magazine, *Christian Century*, a week ago and found the obituary for Max Stackhouse. So, he went to be with the Lord about a week and a half ago or so. But Max Stackhouse said that's the wrong title for the book.

Moral Man, as though individuals are selfless people, you know, and *Immoral Society*, as though all societies are selfish groups of people trying to lord it over everybody. So Max Stackhouse, in our graduate seminars, always said it's the wrong title for the book. The title of the book should be *Moral and Immoral Man in Moral and Immoral Society*.

So, he said we should recognize that even individuals are sometimes very selfish people. We should recognize that there are some groups that are very selfless. So he felt that Niebuhr was a great book.

But he felt it needed to be massaged more, nuanced more than Niebuhr did in the book. So, I just mentioned that book in terms of trying to get at Niebuhr's theology. Let's get a little clap for *The Nature and Destiny of Man*.

Now, I'm using his titles, of course. So, there it is, 1943, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Okay, so now, it's two volumes, obviously.

So maybe some of you have read *The Nature and Destiny of Man*. Okay, now, the first thing he tries to talk about here in *The Nature and Destiny of Man* is that the final solution to the problems of evil in history, the final solution, does not lie in history itself. The final solutions, or the final solution to the problems of evil in our historical circumstances, in our historical life, lie beyond us in Christ, the Redeemer.

So, Christ is ultimately the Lord of history. And it is Christ who gives final meaning to history and final fulfillment in history. And it is in especially the cross of Christ that

we see that final meaning and that final fulfillment because we see God's love breaking into history and finally winning overall historical realities which stand against God or his kingdom.

So he has wonderful imagery about what is the final destiny, what is the final imagery, who is the final Lord of history after all. So that is beautiful. You know, he spends a few hundred pages doing that, but it's a beautiful kind of image.

Okay, now, the second part of this whole process here, the second part of the coin then, is that in the meantime, Christians cannot evade their responsibility for what goes on in the world. In the meantime, Christians cannot sit back and just do nothing when we're facing all of the evil in the world. That is not what Christians are called to do.

And Christians can't kind of opt-out for; they can't kind of opt out of entering into the political realm, into the social realm, and so forth. So, he would not like singing, and this world is not my home. I'm just passing through. Reinhold Niebuhr would not like us singing that because this world is our home, and we're not just passing through, and we have to face the realities of evil and see how we can deal with them.

So, okay, now, there are basically three ways in which you can opt-out. So, there are three ways in which Christians opt out of their responsibility for what's going on in the world. And there are a lot of them in the book, but there are three major ways.

Number one, Christians can opt out of materialism. That is, they can be so interested only in themselves and what their world is all about that they can opt out of their responsibilities by just getting richer and just getting material things. You're evading your Christian responsibility when you do that.

That's one, okay? Number two, you can opt-out of an ill-defined optimism. You can have an optimism that is ill-defined or that isn't facing reality. And some Christians in the 20th century, as far as Niebuhr is concerned, some Christians opted out by that ill-defined optimism.

How can you be optimistic in the 20th century about the way the world is going? Niebuhr would say World War I, World War II, and so forth. So how can you do that? Okay, and number three, you can opt out by kind of dualism. You can opt-out by saying, well, it's only my soul that's saved.

That's my greatest interest in getting my soul saved. I don't have any responsibility for this world. This world isn't my home, so I have no responsibility for it.

But you can opt-out by dualism. You can kind of become almost Gnostic and live your life in a Gnostic way. The spirit is good, and the flesh is evil.

It's only the spirit that's going to be saved. You don't want anything to do with the material world. So those are three ways in which people, he felt, Christians opted out.

He challenges them in these books. That's where he kind of puts down the gauntlet. So okay, okay, I haven't given you a ten-second break.

It is Friday. I'll give you a five-and-a-half-second break because it is Friday, but we did get it. I was also interested in our discussion about the speaker yesterday.

Thank you for that. What did Reinhold Niebuhr think about reformed theology? Just a reminder of our definition of neo-orthodoxy, the new orthodoxy. The new orthodoxy is biblically based.

And it tends to understand the Bible through the glasses of the reformers. So it tends to do that. Right, of course, it's a funny story about Niebuhr, not H. Richard.

They're two distinct personalities. But it's a funny story about Reinhold Niebuhr because he'd be lecturing in the classroom. He'd get all of his stuff.

And he'd run to his office, drop everything off, and then go off and speak to some union meeting or something like that. Then, the next morning, I will be back in the classroom. So, they have a funny picture of Niebuhr.

He would say that reformed theology, however, is too isolationist from the political realities of American life that he knows about. He knows about American life in terms of what we talked about: low wages, terrible capitalists lording over the workers, and so forth. So, he is critical of a theological, philosophical system that doesn't seem to come to grips with the realities of everyday life.

If there's any one word you generally use for Niebuhr, especially Reinhold, and that is he was a political realist. He wants this stuff to make a difference in the union meeting down the street. And so, I think that's where he might kind of disagree.

Yeah. I think, yeah, I don't think we'd want to make a lot of that. But I think in general, that would be true.

Because I mean, Barth wrote a whole book on Calvin and on his theology and so forth. Niebuhr, in a sense, sees the world a little bit more like Luther does. And that is, see the paradoxes of the world and the evil of the world and how to come to grips with it and how to fight against it and so forth.

So, I think that would be a little bit true. Yeah. Now, it's been a long time since I read that Fox biography.

So, I need to go back to that to check on that. But I've actually got a story I'll tell you later when we talk about fundamentalism of what happened to me when I was reading that Fox biography of Niebuhr on a plane. But that's not for today.

So, anything else? OK. H. Richard Niebuhr now. We just mentioned about H. Richard Niebuhr.

H. Richard Niebuhr was also a critic of liberal theology. As far as he was concerned, liberal theology was now bankrupt. Liberal theology did not come through with its promises.

And so, we've got to do something. We've really got to rethink theology for American Christianity in a way that's biblical and makes sense. Now, what he does, and this is on PowerPoint.

I think PowerPoint's up on Blackboard. So, you don't have to write this down. But let's give a little hand to *The Kingdom of God in America*, 1937.

Now, let me just say that in American Christian theology, this is one of the most famous sentences ever written. I mean, it's kind of a dream sentence. You sit down when you're writing and figure out what's going to capture people's attention.

Well, this is going to capture people's attention because this was his word about American Protestant liberalism. He said that a God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of Christ without a cross. And in that one sentence, he pretty much levels American liberal theology.

Because these people, these liberals people, didn't believe in the wrath of God. They didn't believe in the sins of human beings. They didn't believe there was any judgment under which we stand.

And they didn't believe it. They believed Christ was a good guy. But they didn't believe anything about his administration on the cross.

So, with that sentence, that identifies H. Richard Niebuhr so beautifully in one sentence. Notice the title of the book, *The Kingdom of God in America*. So that is pretty amazing here.

So that's H. Richard Niebuhr. And that book, you need to know. And put these books on your reading list, will you? *Nature and Destiny of Man*, *More Manly, More Society*, and *Kingdom of God in America*.

We know you'll have a good summer reading this stuff. Yeah, Jen? OK. So, in terms of Niebuhr, he talks a lot about classical liberal Protestantism.

That's different than what you've heard in American liberal theology. No, no. I use those interchangeably, yeah.

Because liberal theology, classical Protestant liberalism, while it started in Germany, really took hold here in America in denominations and churches and everything. So yeah. So, no, they're the same thing.

OK. Anything else here? All right. Let me just go down to *D, Christ, and Culture*.

And this is H. Richard Niebuhr's most famous book. And because we spend a lot of time on this book, I put it as a separate thing in your outline. So, this is H. Richard Niebuhr's great work.

Some of you seem to maybe have read at least portions of *Christ and Culture*. I know you want to put it on your summer reading list, too. Add that to your summer reading list.

And you notice we're going to do four things. But first of all, we're going to give an introduction here to it. So, I'll get started with that.

And we'll pick this up on next Monday. OK. So, introduction.

Now, if I were going to put in one sentence about what this book is all about, my sentence would be, what is the relationship between Christianity and human culture? How does Christianity relate to human culture? Does it relate to human culture? Does it relate to the world in which we live? So that is what the book is trying to show. It's trying to demonstrate that. What is the relationship of Christ and culture, Christianity to culture? OK.

Now, what happens in the book is that what he decides to do, how he decides to approach the subject, is that he looks at five models, five ways that he has discovered in the history of Christianity. He looks at five ways that the church has tried to answer this question. Now, you'll notice what I've done; however, in your outline is I've chosen three ways, three of the five.

And the reason I've done that is because his middle groupings kind of melt together a bit. So I'm not going to deal with all five. I'm going to deal with the three major ones:

I think, the three major ones, the opposition between Christ and culture, a synthesis of Christ and culture, and Christ and culture in context.

OK. Now, when he's talking about Christ, so he's talking about Christ and culture. When he talks about Christ, he talks about how the incarnated Christ is the key for people to understand themselves.

It's through God coming in the flesh. Remember John 1:14, how important that was for Karl Barth? It's God coming in the flesh that is the key to how Christians understand themselves in this world, how they understand the world, how they understand God, and how they understand good and evil. So, when he's using the word Christ in the book, that's what he means.

When he's using the word culture in the book, what he means by that is the environment that human beings place on the natural world around them. So, when he's talking about culture, he's talking about the environment that we human beings place on the natural world around us by which we shape that natural world. So, how do we shape the natural world? How do we do it? We do it by science.

We shape the world by mathematics. We shape the world by architecture. Architecture shapes the natural world, doesn't it? Architecture tells you something about the world in which we live and what we think about that world.

We do it by art. We do it by music. I mean, we do it in lots of ways in which we shape our environment.

Now, I'm convinced that the most important of those, though, is language. Language is culture. Some of you are language majors, probably, I don't know, or linguistic majors.

But language is culture. And so, language speaks and brings culture to life, in a sense. And, of course, Niebuhr is very interested in that, too.

But the question is, how do human beings shape culture? How do we do it? And what are the means by which we shape culture? So, this is a book on Christ and culture. And that's what he means by Christ. And that's what he means by culture.

So now he's going to try to ask himself, well, what have we seen in the history of the church? How are those two things related to each other? And we use those three models. Okay, well, have a good day.

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