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REINHOLD NIEBUHR AND JERRY FALWELL:

THE CHRISTIAN IN POLITICS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honors in Religion from the College of William and Mary in Virginia.

by

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Accepted for Honors

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INTRODUCTION

I wish to thank Mr. James Livingston and Mr. Martin Cook for their invaluable assistance in this project. Their suggestions and criticisms after the reading of innumerable drafts were always useful. I owe a special debt to Mr. Livingston, without whose guidance and prodding the thesis might never have made it to conclusion. I would also like to thank many different people for the use of many different typewriters and finally my chief typist, Carolyn Blackwell.

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INTRODUCTION

The 1980 Presidential election saw the rise of a new force in American politics--the so-called Christian Right. The impact of this new group of politically active Americans campaigning under the banner of responsible Christian politics is still being argued, but there is no doubt that there was an impact. In the forefront of this mobilization of extremely religious people into a national grass roots political force was (and is) the Reverend Jerry Falwell, a well known fundamentalist television preacher based at the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia. Falwell is a strong advocate of Christian political participation and believes that America can survive in a troubled world only if guided by strong religious, (specifically Christian), convictions.

Reinhold Niebuhr was one of America's and the world's greatest moral and political theologians. The focus of Niebuhr's work is the practical application of Christian beliefs in the world. He saw politics as the instrument through which justice could be pursued in an evil world. "For Niebuhr, theology and politics are not really separate fields, but two perspectives on a single reality, each helping to illumine the data of the other".¹ It was Niebuhr's overriding concern with the necessary entrance of the Christian into the political realm that led Gordon Harland to describe politics as "the very center of Niebuhr's thought and work, his daily meat and drink". Niebuhr, said Harland, possesses a "unique

authority...derived from the penetrating insight into the modern situation given him by the Christian understanding of man in history, and the pragmatic flexibility of one who knows and daily engages the intricacies of concrete political situations."²

Both of these men are "political Christians"; one a newcomer, one a classic fixture of moral and political philosophy. The purpose of this thesis is to give full hearing to the theology and political philosophy of each, allowing both men to answer the question--Why should the Christian be involved in politics? An analysis of the way in which Falwell and Niebuhr use the scriptural tradition they both contend is foundational for their theories will provide a sound basis to be followed by elaboration of their thought. The fourth and final chapter will be a comparison and contrast of Niebuhr and Falwell focusing on the issue of nationalism which plays a major role in Falwell's thought.

Chapter I: Falwell, Niebuhr and the Bible

Both Jerry Falwell and Reinhold Niebuhr claim Scripture as authority for their religious doctrines. The use of Scripture as authority, however, can mean many things, as David H. Kelsey argues in his book, The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology. It will be helpful to employ Kelsey's analytical scheme for the uses of Scripture in detailing the appeals of both Falwell and Niebuhr to Scripture.

Kelsey contends that "authority" may first be broken down into "'indirect and direct' modes".¹ Distinguishing the two modes is easier if direct authority is considered first. Kelsey believes that there are only two methods of direct scriptural authorization:

[O]ne way in which an argument for a theological proposal might be so ordered that scripture does directly authorize the proposal would be for the warrant (i.e. certification or authorization) in the argument to be itself a direct quotation from scripture. Not a paraphrase or a generalization made on the basis of numerous passages of scripture, but a direct quotation in the proper form...

Another way in which an argument for a theological proposal might be ordered so that scripture does directly authorize the proposal would be for the data to be quotations from scripture and the warrant be either analytically true (i.e., a tautology) or in some other way taken as self-evident.²

All other uses of Scripture, says Kelsey, are in the indirect mode. When "direct quotations from scripture serve as backing in an argument", Kelsey says in an example, "they help authorize the argument's concluding theological proposal only indirectly, i.e., only as they directly support the argument's warrant which, in turn, authorizes the move from data to conclusion".³

It is difficult to find authorization in a direct mode, says

Kelsey, because "when scripture is the basis for the data of a theological argument it is more likely to be just that; the basis and not the explicit content of the data. That is, data in such cases are more likely to consist of claims about scripture than of quotations from scripture".⁴

Kelsey's breakdown of theological arguments illustrates the diverse meanings of "authority" and "authorize":

If we may take the theological proposal itself as the conclusion (C) of the argument, then it is obvious that a passage or passages of scripture might be entered as data (D), or as warrant (W), or as backing for the warrant (B), or even as conditions for rebuttal (R). Each would be a somewhat different role scripture might play in the argument, a different way in which scripture could authorize the argument's concluding theological proposal.

With this scheme in mind, we now turn to elaboration of the use of scripture by Falwell followed by a similar analysis of Niebuhr.

"The Bible", says Jerry Falwell, "contains a positive message. It is a message written by forty men over a period of approximately one thousand-five hundred years under divine inspiration. It is God's message of love, redemption, and deliverance for a fallen race".⁶ There is no clearer illustration of the paramount importance of the Bible in Jerry Falwell's ministry than his own words in the introduction to his Liberty Bible Commentary on the New Testament:

I have preached the message of the Bible for a quarter of a century now and have never found it wanting in meeting man's greatest needs. Every opinion we hold and every conviction that motivates our ministry is based on the Bible.

The Bible also plays a crucial role in Falwell's political world-view:

If a man is not a student of the Word of God and does not know what the Bible says, I question his ability to be an effective leader...God alone has the wisdom to tell men and women where this world is going, where it needs to go, and how it can be redirected. Only by godly leadership can America be put back on a divine course.

Falwell continually declares that "when a person allows biblical morality to be the guiding principle of his life, he can have confidence that 'righteousness exalts a nation'".⁹ How, according to Falwell, does one extract the wisdom of the Bible?

Jerry Falwell is a fundamentalist. His interpretation of Scripture is thoroughly fundamentalist. "A thorough study of the Bible will show that it is indeed the inerrant Word of the living God. The Bible is absolutely infallible, without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, as well as in areas such as geography, science, history, etc."¹⁰

Fundamentalism has traditionally been criticized for literal interpretation of Scripture. This is an inaccurate criticism. "The point of conflict between fundamentalists and others is not over literality but over inerrancy...What fundamentalists insist is not that the Bible must be taken literally but that it must be so interpreted as to avoid any admission that it contains any kind of error".¹¹ Inerrancy requires both literal and non-literal interpretations of the text.

"The dominant fundamentalist assertions about the Bible, namely that it is divinely inspired and infallible, do not mean that it must be taken literally, and are not so interpreted in conservative evangelical literature".¹² This doctrine is clearly evident in the Liberty Bible Commentary:

...the statement of cutting off one's hand or plucking out one's eye definitely is not to be taken literally. What Jesus implied is that if 'thy right eye offend thee' then the logical thing to do would be to 'pluck it out'. His point is not that one should literally pluck out his eye but that one should recognize that the source of lust comes from within the mind and heart of man, not from the physical organ itself. The right eye is not the source of sin, the heart of man is that source.¹³

Here the Scripture is not being "read literally", as fundamentalists are so often characterized as doing.

The process of harmonization is crucial to the principle of inerrancy and is used throughout Falwell's commentary. In this process, "if two passages in the gospels describe the same incident they are harmonized" -- this may be done by simply adding the two together, "so that what one says complements what the other says", by taking one account as literal and the other as non-literal, or by contending that the incident occurred more than once.¹⁴

In the Falwell commentary the difference in the chronological placement of the temple cleansing scene between John's gospel (Jn. 2: 13-22) and the synoptics is harmonized by asserting that Jesus cleansed the Jerusalem temple twice; once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end.¹⁵

A fundamentalist interpreter such as Falwell is not at all insincere or ashamed of his interpretation. Falwell clearly states, "We make no apology for the fundamentalist theology throughout this commentary. Each writer is personally committed to the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith: the inerrant inspiration of Scripture...".¹⁶ Barr writes, "Given his principle of inerrancy fed in as the architectonic control in his (the fundamentalist in-

terpreter's) approach to the Bible, it is obvious that the meanings he discovers are to him indeed the 'plain' meanings".¹⁷

There would seem to be the potential for tension in the move between literal and non-literal interpretations of Scripture, but this is not the case in Falwell's commentary. The book flows smoothly in large part because small, troublesome passages are largely ignored. Literality is strictly maintained in doctrinally important areas -- for example Paul on grace and faith -- and largely dispensed with in other areas. The interpreters are not at all afraid to interpret a text non-literally in terms of fundamentalist theology. The most interesting harmonization is that involving Mark's Easter account. Where the biblical text asserts that the women who discovered the empty tomb said nothing to anyone after seeing it (Mk. 16: 6-8), the Liberty Bible Commentary concludes that "the purpose of these verses, however, centers around their immediate reaction, not the final outcome. They were afraid to tell anyone along the way, but when they found the apostles, they privately shared what had happened".¹⁸ Thus the interpretation makes Mark's account harmonious with the other gospel accounts.

Why is the Bible inerrant? Quite simply, says the fundamentalist, because the Bible says it is inerrant, or because Jesus, Paul and Peter, as represented in the Bible, say that Scripture is inerrant.¹⁹

Thus, we see that the principle of inerrancy, which others would assert distorts many biblical texts, is a constant and dependable tool to be applied equally throughout by Falwell and other fundamentalists. It is the principle of inerrancy, with the necessary interpretive tool of harmonization, that composes the "self-evident"

warrant of which Kelsey spoke. It is a "given" warrant that allows Falwell to claim direct authorization of a conclusion using the biblical texts as data. Quotations can be given, the warrant of inerrancy assumed, and the conclusion arrived at simply by reading the inerrant text, properly harmonized of course. When Falwell declares a theological conclusion to be strictly biblical as he does with all his conclusions, however, it is often unclear how that conclusion was arrived at by the direct authorization mode. This mode, which he maintains is his only method of Scriptural authorization, quite often appears to be disregarded. This will be clearer following some examples.

It is Falwell's belief in inerrancy as the sole necessary warrant that leads him to reject all systems of ethics and morality not based strictly on the biblical texts. Any system introducing, for example, utilitarian concerns violates the unique status of the inerrancy warrant and is therefore rejected by Falwell. The inerrancy warrant allows Falwell and other fundamentalists to claim the Bible as the only true life guide; it is the Word of God and is never wrong on any matter. Reference to the text can answer any question, they say. This seemingly simple rule becomes evidently more troublesome when a reader such as Falwell actually attempts to extract the "inerrant Word" and apply it to an issue.

A news account of Falwell's political action reveals the problems of Scripture use:

...Falwell now says he misread the Bible when he asserted that Scripture teaches ministers to remain outside the political system.

'I actually preached a sermon against it, put it in print, tried to buy it back, on why Christians

shouldn't (be involved in politics)...I thought clear government was going to self-correct', Falwell says now. 'Interpretation of scripture is very much with subject to change...'.²⁰

In the commentary Falwell writes: "To the best of our understanding (emphasis mine) we preach and teach God's word in its clearest and plainest sense. The Scripture alone is our final authority in all matters of faith and practice".²¹ In this last sentence Falwell reasserts his claim to direct authorization of his conclusions by Scripture. In the preceding quotation from the news account he appears to acknowledge that the use of the inerrancy warrant for this direct authorization does not always yield identical conclusions. Falwell does then seem to acknowledge that there are relativities involved in interpretation. Elsewhere this is not so clear. The following are some examples of Falwell's use of Scripture.

Commenting on the thirteenth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes:

"Obvious facts can be concluded from these verses. The authority, 'higher powers' -- the President, the Congress, the judiciary are ordained of God. This does not imply that all persons in places of authority are godly people. It does, however, mean that they are in their position, whether they are aware of the fact or not, by divine ordination".²²

Here we see an example of direct authorization by Falwell using a well-known, and much quoted section of Paul's letter to the Romans.

In his argument against abortion, Falwell says: "The Bible clearly states that life begins at conception".²³ In this conclusion Falwell appears to be using the direct mode once again, but he is not. The direct authority category is one in which the scriptural data leads directly to conclusion via an understood

warrant. Here the data is faulty. Falwell never makes it clear what scripture he is using as data for this conclusion, and with good reason. Neither the Hebrew Bible nor the New Testament contain any statements about abortion; it simply was not an issue. Thus even if the scripture does state that life begins at conception (a dubious scriptural claim), the text is clearly not declaring this as evidence for an ethical decision about abortion. Falwell could not arrive at a prohibition of abortion using the available data and a warrant of inerrancy. The scripture simply has nothing to say on abortion that could serve as direct authority for a conclusion.

When questioned about the political precinct work of many of his followers, Falwell responds: "I can't find Scripture to oppose that, and so I don't get involved".²⁴ This is an extremely interesting example. Here Falwell abandons all modes of authorization as well as his claim that: "Every conviction we hold and every conviction that motivates our ministry is based on the Bible". He appears to contend that without prohibitive scriptural data any conclusion is valid. The logical conclusion is that anything not explicitly banned in Scripture is acceptable.

Falwell defends capitalism, saying:

"The free enterprise system is clearly outlined in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. Jesus Christ made it clear that the work ethic was part of His plan for man. Ownership of property is biblical. Competition in business is biblical. Ambitious and successful business management is clearly outlined as a part of God's plan for His people".²⁵

It is obvious that here Falwell is claiming to justify capitalism

by direct authorization. His claim is impossible to evaluate, however, because no where does he cite the location of the scriptural data he refers to in the statement.

In response to critics of his vocal condemnation of America's sins, Falwell writes:

"The secularist will argue; what right do you have to define sin? If our definition rested on personal opinion, he would have every right to reject our message. That is why it is essential that our concept of sin be based clearly upon Scripture itself."²⁶

In this example, Falwell is simply reiterating the importance of the Scripture for his work.

Like many fundamentalists, Falwell believes in the fulfillment of all biblical prophecy. The principle of inerrancy leads him to regard the prophetic oracle as historically fulfillable. This belief is the basis for his premillennialism--the fundamentalist doctrine that "human history will end fairly soon with the coming of the Anti-Christ, and after which most of mankind will have to endure a terrible period of tribulation before Christ returns and installs his millennial reign of peace and justice".²⁷ Falwell is also a dispensationalist. He believes that the church will be taken from the earth before the Tribulation. "Falwell states that he does not believe that he will die, but be taken directly to heaven without warning in 'the rapture', or that 'God tarrying' he will die and go to heaven. As he says, the rapture 'could occur anytime'".²⁸

Falwell's interpretation of prophecy and particularly the book of Revelation leads to vivid conclusions:

Last summer, Falwell broadcast a series of six sermons on prophecy to his television congregation. In one of them, he described the tribulation and the

Battle of Armageddon in some detail. The tribulation, he said, is possibly already upon us, for the world is, as has been prophesied, chaotic and leaderless. Russia will soon attack Israel, but will eventually be defeated, and the Antichrist will move into the Middle East and unleash the great tribulation, which will culminate in the Battle of Armageddon on a field two hundred miles long and a hundred miles wide, with Jerusalem at its center. The four hundred million who it is prophesied will die there will surely include large numbers of Red Chinese.

One particular aspect of Falwell's interpretation of the Bible warrants special consideration. The topic of creation is important not only because creationism is a current educational and legal issue, but also because Niebuhr devotes great attention to it. Consideration of creation and the Bible will provide a basis for striking comparison of Falwell and Niebuhr on Scripture.

In response to an inquiry concerning creation and evolution, Falwell refers to a book by fellow fundamentalist Henry M. Morris, entitled The Remarkable Birth of Planet Earth which represents Falwell's views. In the book Morris attempts to show that

1. "the Bible clearly teaches all things were created in six natural days several thousand years ago, and all other Biblical interpretations of the creation account contain many irreconcilable contradictions with both science and Scripture" and

2. "there is no demonstrated fact of science which cannot be satisfactorily correlated with this simple and straightforward Biblical record".³⁰

After extensive work with the Scriptural text he concludes, in essence, that the Bible is 'superscience' and creation therefore supplants evolution. Morris gives a telling reason for his effort when he says, "Belief in evolution leads usually and logically to

rejection of the trustworthiness of the Bible and, therefore, failure to appropriate its promises leading to salvation and eternal life".³¹

This particular fundamentalist stance (Morris' and Falwell's) believes the validity of the Bible to depend upon the literal truth of its creation account. What appears to be at stake here is the direct mode of authorization and the warrant of inerrancy. If Scripture does not provide all the facts (data) necessary for conclusions about the creation then other data must be introduced along with other interpretive devices. In that case the unique warrant of inerrancy and the direct mode of authorization break down. Hence the fact of an entire book devoted to showing the Bible to embody and even anticipate certain scientific principles and to refute others. In their view, the creation story stands as 'superscience', literal and inerrant in all aspects.

Respect for biblical authority is of prime importance for a nation, says Falwell. He writes: "God has blessed this nation because in its early days she sought to honor God and the Bible, the inerrant Word of the living God".³² Again: "Our religious heritage and our liberty can never be separated. America is in trouble today because her people are forgetting the origin of their liberty, and questioning the authority and the inerrancy of the Bible".³³ And finally, "The authority of Bible morality must once again be recognized as the legitimate guiding principle of our nation".³⁴

How, specifically, would Falwell use the biblical tradition to guide a nation? How does he justify his political actions and those of his fellow believers? These questions will be addressed in chapter three.

Niebuhr agrees with Falwell that the Bible must play a vital role in religion, society and politics. From there, however, the two diverge widely in their usage of the scriptural tradition. Whereas for Falwell the Bible is a source of moral and spiritual absolutes, the inerrant Word, Niebuhr is wary of placing the Bible in such a position. In fact Niebuhr criticized the Calvinist "back to the Bible" movement because "it gave the Christian an unjustified confidence in the transcendent perfection of moral standards derived from Scripture, obscuring both the relativities of judgment involved in the application of a Scriptural standard and the historical relativities embedded in the Scriptural standards themselves".³⁵ The Calvinists, he said, turned "prematurely to Biblical authority for answers to every conceivable moral and social problem".

In his writing Niebuhr shows a constant awareness of what he calls the relativities of scriptural interpretation. He quotes Abraham Lincoln as an example of the ambiguities involved: "Speaking of the divergent ideals of north and south he said, 'Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. The prayers of both could not be answered'."³⁶

Niebuhr does not, however, let himself be paralyzed by the relativities of interpretation which he sees. He returns to Lincoln: "Yet this religious insight into the inscrutability of the divine does not deter Lincoln from making moral judgments according to his best insight".³⁷ Thus, for Niebuhr, moral decisions can be made using Scripture but scriptural judgments can neither be absolute nor alone sufficient; or to use Kelsey's scheme, authority must be in the indirect mode using one or more explicit warrants:

Today social responsibilities must be guided by norms derived from all moral and empirical disciplines. A sacred text or a religiously sanctified tradition of past ages are inadequate guides to the everchanging human relations of a secular culture.

Clearly Niebuhr does not see the Bible in a solitary role. What importance, then, does the Scripture have for him and in what way does he interpret the text?

For Niebuhr the Bible is a source of revelation, specifically what he calls "historical revelation". It reveals higher meanings, norms and moral imperatives that otherwise are unavailable to men. Such revelation is essential because "no induction from empirical facts can yield a conclusion about ultimate meaning because every process of induction presupposes some canon and criterion of meaning".³⁹

Niebuhr himself best explains the historical revelation of the Bible.

This historical revelation is by no means simply the history of man's quest for God or the record of man's increasingly adequate definitions of the person of God, interpretations to which modern liberal thought has sometimes reduced Biblical revelation. It is rather the record of those events in history in which faith discerns the self-disclosure of God. What it discerns are actions of God which clarify the confrontation of man by God in the realm of the personal and individual moral life.⁴⁰

The Bible then indicates to man the nature of his situation and the source of meaning in that situation. In "Biblical faith," says Niebuhr,

God is revealed in the catastrophic events of history as being, what each individual heart has already dimly perceived in its sense of being

judged: as the structure, the law, the essential character of reality, as the source and centre of the created world against which the⁴¹ pride of man destroys itself in vain rebellion.

Niebuhr sees the most important revelation as lying in the New Testament gospel. His biblical focus is Christo-centric. For Niebuhr the Christ event was and is the ultimate clarifying historical revelation. "Christ, who expresses both the infinite possibilities of love in human life and the infinite possibilities beyond human life, is thus a true revelation of the total situation in which human life stands".⁴²

Niebuhr declares that the revelation in the gospel "is final not only as category of interpreting the total meaning of history but also as a solution for the problem of the uneasy conscience of each individual".⁴³ That solution is the "good news of the gospel", says Niebuhr, "that God takes the sinfulness of man into Himself, and overcomes in His own heart what cannot be overcome in human life...".⁴⁴

While Niebuhr sees the Bible as revealing 'ultimate' meanings, he, unlike Falwell, rejects the Scripture as a specific moral, spiritual, or political guide. The Bible offers insight, says Niebuhr, but not prescriptions relevant to all historical settings; this is consistent with his rejection of direct scriptural authorization. He explains:

The ethic of Jesus may offer valuable insights to and sources of criticisms for a prudential social ethic which deals with present realities; but no such social ethic can⁴⁵ be directly derived from a pure religious ethic.

Niebuhr sees the Bible as historically rooted and capable of

error. He makes extensive use of "myth" as an interpretative category to draw meaning out of a Scripture he often regards as historically inaccurate. Niebuhr interprets virtually all the major stories of the Bible by means of the category of myth. A myth, says Niebuhr, is a story that is not historically factual, but one which conveys an ultimate message. In a vivid analogy, Niebuhr compares the mythical to the artistic:

A portrait is mythical as compared with the scientific exactitude of a photograph...The artist ...falsifies some of the details in order to arrive at a symbolic expression of the total character of his subject, this total character being a transcendent fact which is never completely embodied in any given moment of the subjects' existence.⁴⁶

This is the role of the biblical author, says Niebuhr, and "at their best, both artist and prophet reveal the heights and depths of human experience by picturing the surface with something more and less than scientific exactness".⁴⁷

His admission of myth in the Bible is not embarrassing for Niebuhr. Myth is essential to religion, says Niebuhr, for many of the great doctrines of religions defy rationality and therefore cannot be expressed in historically accurate or literal terms. The concepts embodied in myth are suprahistorical. Niebuhr believes that "a completely rationalized myth loses its virtue because it ceases to point to the realm of transcendence beyond history...".⁴⁸

According to Niebuhr, myth embodies that which the perfectly rational and scientific cannot grasp:

The most obvious aspect of reality which cannot be comprehended in terms of scientific concepts is the aspect of value...Religion seeks mythically to grasp life in its unity and wholeness. This unity

and wholeness can never be expressed in terms of complete⁴⁹ rationality, for reason only observes and deduces.

One of Niebuhr's best known essays on myth and the Bible is entitled "Deceivers Yet True". Niebuhr explains why religions, with their myths, are deceivers in the name of truth:

...[R]eligion is forced to tell many little (historical) lies in the interest of a great truth, while science inclines to tell many little truths in the interest of a great lie. The great truth in the interest of which many little lies are told is that life and history have meaning and that the source and the fulfillment of that meaning lie beyond history. The great lie in the interest of which many little truths are told is that spatio-temporal realities are self-contained and self-explanatory and that a scientific description of sequences is an adequate analysis of causes.⁵⁰

For Niebuhr, there is a distinction between the facts and the truth. Science and history give the facts while religion and myth tell the truth.

The best illustration of Niebuhr's use of Scripture as myth is perhaps his interpretation of creation. The biblical creation stories are myth says Niebuhr, they are scientifically and historically inaccurate. He elaborates:

Every mythical idea contains a primitive deception... The primitive error is to regard the early form in which the myth is stated as authoritative. Thus the Christian religion is always tempted to insist on an actual forming of man out of a lump of clay, or in an actual creative activity of six days. It is to this temptation that biblical literalism succumbs.⁵¹

It is obvious that Niebuhr speaks almost directly to the Falwell type of fundamentalism.

In the creation stories, as in every great religious myth, says Niebuhr, there is a primitive aspect. It is the language and imagery of an ancient tradition unable to detail the scientific or historical facts of an event. But Niebuhr believes that there is much more in myth, as we have seen. Thus, "whenever orthodoxy insists upon the literal truth of such myths (e.g. creation) it makes a bad historical science out of true religious insights. It fails to distinguish between what is primitive and what is permanent, what is prescientific and what is supra-scientific in great myths."⁵²

Niebuhr also rejects what he views as the other extreme in interpretation; the total abandonment of mythical stories as valueless because they are not historically or scientifically reliable. The error of modern religion, he says, "was to disavow permanent myth with the primitive myth. Religion had no right to insist on the scientific accuracy of its mythical heritage. From this position a retreat was necessary."⁵³

Niebuhr does not deny evolution ("It certainly was inevitable that the creation myths of all religions be seen as primitive notions of a temporal process, as indeed they were").⁵⁴ But, he says, evolution states only the empirical realities while the creation stories reveal a higher truth.⁵⁵ Men believe that "when we have the conception of evolution we do not need the story of creation...".⁵⁶ On the contrary, the creation story is of paramount importance for Niebuhr:

It is only through the myth of creation that it is possible to assert both the meaningfulness of life and the fact of evil. To say that God created

the world is to assert its meaningfulness; and to distinguish between creator and his creation is to make a place for the reality of evil in the inevitable relativities of time and history.⁵⁷

Niebuhr would reject Morris' contention that acceptance of evolution leads to the rejection of the Bible because for him the creation story can be interpreted using the warrant of myth. Niebuhr does not reject the Bible, but holds the creation stories to be of inestimable value. For him there is no self-evident warrant of inerrancy at stake in the accuracy of the biblical creation accounts.

Naturalists, says Niebuhr, who reject the suprahistorical truth of such a myth as the creation story and give ultimate meaning to history are at a loss without the myth. They can find no place for human freedom and evil in the world or express "sentimentality over a world too simply meaningful".⁵⁸

The creation story is foundational, writes Niebuhr. It is the ultimate revelation in being the basis for all revelation: "It expresses perfectly the basic Biblical idea of the transcendence of God and His intimate relation to the world".⁵⁹ It "offers the basis upon which all theologies are built in which God is conceived as both the ground and the fulfillment of a meaningful world, as both the creator and the judge of historical existence".⁶⁰

Both Niebuhr and Falwell regard the creation accounts as vital to their faith. That is their only common ground on the issue. Falwell would reject Niebuhr's distinction between "science as fact and myth as truth". For Falwell, the creation account is both fact and truth. Niebuhr would criticize the Falwell stance for failing to distinguish between the primitive and the ultimate in a

story such as Genesis.

Niebuhr also regards many of the major stories of the New Testament as mythical. "For what is true in the Christian religion can be expressed only in symbols which contain a certain degree of provisional and superficial deception".⁶¹ For him the Christian truths are outside the realm of reason and historical verification, but nonetheless are true. He provides an example:

The truth that the Word was made flesh outrages all the canons by which truth is usually judged. Yet it is the truth. The whole character of the Christian religion is involved in that affirmation. It asserts that God's word is relevant to human life...without such a revelation the character of history cannot be known. It is not possible to arrive at an understanding of the meaning of life and history without such a revelation.⁶²

Jesus, for Niebuhr, was "the mythical God-man" who symbolizes God's concern about history and reveals meaning in life. To press the myth of Jesus further is foolish, he says, referring to "the absurdity of theologies which try to define the two natures of Christ and to distinguish between the temporal and the eternal in the mythical God-man...".⁶³

Niebuhr considers both the resurrection of believers and the Second Coming to be mythical constructs. The myth of the resurrection expresses the faith that "nature is not just mortality".⁶⁴ He really goes no further than that in discussing the resurrection, and warns: "It is important not to press the myth of the resurrection to yield us too detailed knowledge of the future...".⁶⁵ He warns also that speculation about the fulfillment of life and

"the heavenly city" on the basis of the resurrection myth "leads to absurdity".⁶⁶ The myth of the Second Coming, according to Niebuhr, teaches simply that "The ultimate fulfillment of life transcends the possibilities of human history".⁶⁷ Again Niebuhr cautions against squeezing the myth for details of the end of history. "No doctrine of Christianity has led to more deceptions and illusions than the hope of the second coming of Christ".⁶⁸ The myth of the Second Coming is symbolic of the meaningfulness of history, he says. History's fulfillment is in history at the end of history, not outside of it. It is a source of hope for history.

It is clear that Falwell, the premillennialist and dispensationalist, would denounce Niebuhr's vagueness regarding the specifics of the end of history. Niebuhr, in turn, would claim that Falwell wrongly seeks historical detail in a suprahistorical myth when he speculates on the coming end.

Niebuhr is probably best known for his doctrine of man. It is to the biblical story of the Fall, which he considers myth, that Niebuhr turns for the foundation of his doctrine. From this myth spring his theories of man and man's sin and subsequently his whole socio-political theory. Niebuhr himself best introduces the discussion of man and the Fall:

"The nature of man is darkly expressed in the myth of the fall in Christian theology much more adequately than in rational explanations of human evil. In explanations which achieve full rational coherence, evil is either attributed to the ultimate source of being (as in various forms of monism), in which case the reality of evil is really denied; or it is attributed to the world of matter, nature and historical concretion (as in various forms of dualism) in which

case the fall is equated with creation (in gnosticism for instance) and impulses of nature are regarded as the source of evil while the direction of the mind is regarded as the source of all good (modern liberalism for example)".⁶⁹

It will be best to first detail Niebuhr's doctrine of man and then show how it is embodied in, and verified by, the myth of the Fall.

Man's creaturely nature, manifested in his finitude; his inability to escape the forces of nature. Man is a part of nature, subject to sleep, suffer illness, and contend with the whims of nature. Man is a creature like any other in being a victim of physical forces over which he has no control. "Man will die, his body will deteriorate. He is a creature of nature, whose power constantly reminds him that he is finite." However, however, man has a second dimension that sets him apart from all other creatures, according to Niebuhr. It is his capacity for self-transcendence that makes him unique. This capacity enables him to 'step' outside himself and nature. Man has the unique power to transcend himself and nature in his self-analysis, says Niebuhr.¹ Man can analyze his own nature, then analyze his analysis, and so on. Niebuhr offers a definition of this transcendence:

Man's knowledge is limited by time and space, but it is not so limited as animal knowledge. Man knows that he is not so limited is given by the fact that he knows something of these limits, which he can transcend. Man knows that he transcends them. Man does not know the immediate natural situation in terms of a total situation and he constantly seeks to understand the immediate situation in terms of a total situation.²

Chapter II: Niebuhr's Doctrine of Man, Moral Knowledge
and the Christian in Politics

Niebuhr describes the nature of man as two-fold. Man, he says, is a creature and a creator. Man's creaturely nature, for Niebuhr, is manifested in his finitude; his inability to escape the contingencies of nature. Man is a part of nature. He must eat, sleep, suffer illness, and contend with the whims of nature. Man is a creature like any other in being a victim. His life is pervaded by physical forces over which he has no control. Man will die, his body will deteriorate. He is a victim of nature, whose power constantly reminds him that he is finite.

Man's nature, however, has a second dimension that sets him apart from all other creatures, according to Niebuhr. It is man's capacity for self-transcendence that makes him unique. Man's power enables him to 'step' outside himself and nature. Man possesses the unique power to transcend himself and nature in "infinite regression", says Niebuhr.¹ Man can analyze his own situation, then analyze his analysis, and so on. Niebuhr offers an example of this transcendence:

[M]an's knowledge is limited by time and place. Yet it is not limited as animal knowledge. The proof that it is not so limited is given by the fact that man knows something of these limits, which means that in some sense he transcends them. Man knows more than the immediate natural situation in which he stands and he constantly seeks to understand his immediate situation in terms of a total situation.²

This second aspect of man's nature involves his ability to escape his creatureliness. Man can, by self-transcendence, go beyond being a creature and become a creator; dreaming, planning, hoping, criticizing his own finiteness:

To a certain degree man is free to reject one environment for another. If he dislikes the spiritual environment of the twentieth century he may consciously choose to live by the patterns of the thirteenth century. If he finds his physical environment uncongenial he has the capacity to modify it.³

Therein lies man's freedom, says Niebuhr. It is a radical freedom that is a source of dignity. It raises man above the herds. Niebuhr illustrates man's separation from the animal world:

Man, unlike animal existence, not only has a centre, but he has a centre beyond himself. Man is the only animal which can make itself its own object...The animal knows its particular needs and the particular objects in its environment which satisfy those needs. Its consciousness therefore does not transcend the natural process in which it is involved. Animal consciousness is merely the expression of a central organic unity of an organism in relation to its immediate environment. Human consciousness involves the sharp distinction between the self and the totality of the world. Self-knowledge⁴ is thus the basis of discrete individuality.

Man is constantly defined by these two aspects of his nature. In the words of Gordon Harland: "The life of man is thus lived in the tension between his creaturely particularity and his capacity for self-transcendence in which inheres his uniqueness" (and freedom).⁵ This tension Harland speaks of is a terrible paradox. Man, says Niebuhr, can never be entirely free and transcendent, for his creatureliness always pulls him down into the

realm of the finite and determinate. Conversely, man can never be merely animal; his freedom to transcend constantly raises him up to a level of dignity and uniqueness.

The result of the 'tug of war' between the two aspects of man's nature, says Niebuhr, is anxiety. "Anxiety is the inevitable concomitant of the paradox of freedom and finiteness in which man is involved."⁶

The capacity for transcendence is ennobling, says Niebuhr, yet it is a source of misery. Man gets only a taste of freedom, because in his transcendence he is still tied to an animal nature. Thus, man's freedom exalts him and frustrates him. It is an imperfect freedom. It creates anxiety. Anxiety also results from man's creaturely nature. Man's involvement in natural contingency makes him insecure. Man's finite nature makes him feel powerless and insignificant. Nature controls him; he cannot consent to be part of the natural process, he is caught in it from birth. This inescapable subjection to the rule of nature makes man anxious.

Thus anxiety follows directly from man's possession of a dual nature. Each aspect of his nature contributes to anxiety. Man is hit from two sides by feelings of insecurity and frustration. This anxiety, for Niebuhr, is not an aspect of some Lockian 'state of nature' which man has historically surpassed. Anxiety, or insecurity, is the natural condition of all men at all times.⁷ Having established this, Niebuhr's main focus becomes the ways in

which man deals with his anxiety.

Man, says Niebuhr, is tempted to remove anxiety by submerging one of the aspects of his dual nature. In so doing man attempts to break the paradox that leads to anxiety. "The occasion for his temptation lies in the two facts, his greatness and his weakness, his unlimited and his limited knowledge, taken together. Man is both strong and weak, both free and bound, both blind and far-seeing. He stands at the junction of nature and spirit; and is involved in both freedom and necessity".⁸ Most commonly, man tries to break this paradox of his existence through either sensuality or pride.

Sensuality, according to Niebuhr, is the attempt of man to escape the anxiety of his existence through over-indulgence of his animal nature. This over-indulgence may have two purposes, as Niebuhr illustrates in characterizing the drunkard:

The drunkard sometimes seeks the abnormal stimulus of intoxicating drink in order to experience a sense of power and importance which normal life denies him. This type of intoxication represents a pathetic effort to make the self the centre of the world to a degree which normal reason with its consciousness of the ego's insignificance makes impossible. But drunkenness may have a quite different purpose. It may be desired not in order to enhance the ego but to escape from it. It would not be inaccurate to define the first purpose of intoxication as the sinful ego-assertion which is rooted in anxiety and unduly compensates for the sense of inferiority and insecurity; while the second purpose of intoxication springs from the sense of guilt, or a state of perplexity in which a sense of guilt has been compounded by the previous sense of insecurity. The tension of this perplexity is too great to bear and results in an effort to escape consciousness completely.

The paths to these two ends are many in addition to drunkenness: sex, gluttony, drugs and others. This response to anxiety, however, is neither Niebuhr's nor this chapter's main concern.

Pride is man's most common reaction to anxiety. It is crucial to Niebuhr's thinking as a whole and particularly to his political theory. "Man is insecure and involved in natural contingency; he seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will to power which overreaches the limits of human creatureliness."¹⁰ Niebuhr believes that man attempts to force his way out of the paradox of his dual nature through exaltation of his freedom and capacity to transcend. Man pretends that he is not limited. "All of his intellectual and cultural pursuits, therefore, become infected with the sin of pride".¹¹

This is the essence of man's sin, according to Niebuhr. It is "...an effort to obscure his blindness by overestimating the degree of his sight and obscure insecurity by stretching his power beyond its limits".¹² The fruit of the anxiety derived from man's nature is "his inclination to transmute his partial and finite self and his partial and finite values into the infinite good. Therein lies sin".¹³

Niebuhr expands his theory of man's predicament and man's sin in the following paragraph from Beyond Tragedy:

Man is mortal. That is his fate. Man pretends not to be mortal. That is his sin. Man is a creature of time and place, whose perspectives and insights are invariably conditioned by his immediate circumstances. But man is not merely the prisoner

of time and place. He touches the fringes of the eternal. He is not content to be merely American man, or Chinese man, or bourgeois man, or man of the twentieth century. He wants to be man. He is not content with his truth. He seeks the truth. His memory spans the ages in order that he may transcend his age. His restless mind seeks to comprehend the meaning of all cultures so that he ¹⁴ may not be caught within the limitations of his own.

Anxiety leads men to strain their eyes to see and to overestimate the extent of their sight:

Thus man builds towers of the spirit from which he may survey larger horizons than those of his class, race and nation. This is a necessary human enterprise; without it man could not come to his full estate. But it is also inevitable that these towers should be Towers of Babel, that they should pretend to reach higher than their real height; and ¹⁵ should claim a finality which they cannot possess.

Anxiety is a spur to creativity and a source of sin, says Niebuhr.

Niebuhr sees the nature of man and the source of his sin as perfectly expressed in the biblical account of the Fall, an account he regards as myth: "We are deceivers, yet true in clinging to the idea of the fall as a symbol of the origin and the nature of evil in human life".¹⁶ He believes the nature of man to be best expressed in the mythical Fall because it is an idea that cannot be fully grasped by rationalistic philosophies: "The real fact is that the mystery of both good and evil in human life and in the world cannot be completely comprehended or stated in perfectly rational terms".¹⁷

According to Niebuhr, the myth of the Fall is foundational for two reasons. First, the Fall shows man, from his beginning, in a situation of finiteness and freedom, with limits on the

extent of his freedom (i.e. the forbidden Tree of Knowledge in the Garden). Second, the myth illustrates that "the situation of finiteness and freedom in which man stands becomes a source of temptation..." and sin.¹⁸ Niebuhr elaborates on the significance of the second point:

While the Bible consistently maintains that sin cannot be excused by, or inevitably derived from, any other element in the human situation it does admit that man was tempted. In the myth of the Fall the temptation arises from the serpent's analysis of the human situation...Man is tempted, in other words, to break and transcend the limits which God has set for him. The temptation thus lies in his situation of finiteness and freedom.¹⁹

As with other "great myths", Niebuhr rejects any attempt to discard the story of the Fall as primitive and replace it with more modern rationalist interpretations of man's nature and sin. The myth of the Fall is essential because:

Against these rationalistic versions the myth of the Fall expresses these ideas: (1) that an element of human perversity is always involved in human sin since a degree of freedom enters into every human action; (2) that nevertheless sin is inevitable since all men are inserted into the paradoxical relation of freedom and mechanism and cannot escape the possibility of destroying the harmony of spirit; (3) and finally, that this inevitability is not to be attributed merely to the fact of nature, finiteness and the world of concrete mechanism and physical impulse.²⁰

To see the myth of the Fall as revealing man's situation, however, is not to accept the story of the Fall as historical.²¹ To do so would be a great mistake in Niebuhr's view: "The idea of the Fall is subject to the error of regarding the primitive myth of the garden, the apple and the serpent as historically true".²²

There is, then, no particular 'fall' for Niebuhr. "It does

not take place in any concrete human act".²³ The Fall never occurs in history. Historically men are always fallen because their situation throughout life is one that leads inevitably to sin. The Fall is the "presupposition" of all human acts.²⁴

Does Niebuhr then reject the notion of original righteousness present in the foundational myths? The answer is both yes and no. Niebuhr rejects original righteousness as a temporally defined concept. There were not originally righteous men or a time of righteousness. He thus criticizes Christian theology for regarding the Fall as historical and "therefore speaking of a perfection before the Fall as if it too were an historical era".²⁵

Niebuhr does not, however, reject original righteousness. It is, he says, with all men at all times in the form of a consciousness. It is the perfection before an act. This perfection is not possessed, only recognized and felt as conscience. Men, in their sin, struggle to submerge it.²⁶ Niebuhr explains:

No man, however deeply involved in sin, is able to regard the misery of sin as normal. Some memory of a previous condition of blessedness seems to linger in his soul; some echo of the law which he has violated seems to resound in his conscience. Every effort to give the habits of sin the appearance of normality betrays something of the frenzy of an uneasy conscience. The contrast between what man is truly and essentially and what he has become is apparent even to those who do not understand that this contrast is to be found in every human being and has its seat in the will of man himself.

"Original righteousness' thus becomes, in Niebuhr's teaching, the moral imperative, the awareness of obligation to do justly

and to love God and man that speaks to us through the voice of conscience...".²⁸

Niebuhr's doctrine of original righteousness and the Fall is most succinctly expressed in one quotation: "Self intrudes into every ideal, when thought gives place to action".²⁹ Man can conceive of the original righteousness, the ideal, but can never realize it because he is already fallen by virtue of the fact that the self will pervert the ideal in action. He never actually falls because the self will always intrude. There is no point of first intrusion; a fall is presupposed.

Did God then create men evil? No, says Niebuhr. Man was created by God with a dual nature and was therefore created anxious. But sin does not flow necessarily from anxiety. Anxiety does bear sin (pride and sensuality), but the two are not the same. Anxiety is not equal to sin, says Niebuhr, because faith can relieve man's anxiety and save him from turning to the sins of pride or sensuality. Faith can help man accept his paradoxical existence. In faith man can see God's mercy and power as lifting his insignificance into significance, while his transcendence is understood as subordinate to the ultimate freedom of God.³⁰

Christianity, Niebuhr contends, "believes that men are egoists in contradiction to their essential nature".³¹ In this difficult aspect of his theology Niebuhr means by 'essential nature' the original dual nature of man controlled by faith (and therefore free of sin). This, he believes, is the nature God intended

man to have (his 'essential nature') for faith is able to "purge anxiety of the tendency toward sinful self-assertion".³²

The key word throughout the two preceding paragraphs was 'can'. Faith can purge anxiety, but it never actually does, because as Niebuhr said earlier, "sin is inevitable".³³ Thus sin flows inevitably, but not necessarily, from anxiety. This is a difficult distinction and some might contend that it is a distinction without a difference. Niebuhr, however, stands strongly by it. For him it is a distinction that separates the creator from the sin of his creation.

Niebuhr preserves what he sees as the essential message of the myth of the fall: It illuminates man's nature and the origin of his sin.

Implicit in man, says Niebuhr, is "his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key...which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it".³⁴

Niebuhr believes that man needs a higher reference to give meaning to his life of anxiety. The sin of pride consists of man's making aspects of his own finite existence those completely transcendent reference points. Pride, says Niebuhr, assumes four basic forms:

1. The Pride of Power. This pride takes on two forms in Niebuhr's teaching. First, it exists in man's imagining himself to be the master of his life and all contingencies. Man ignores his finite animal nature and sees himself as sufficient

and secure. Niebuhr offers an example:

The first form of the pride of power is particularly characteristic of individuals and groups whose position in society is, or seems to be, secure. In Biblical prophecy this security is declared to be bogus and those who rest in it are warned against impending doom...In Ezekiel's prophecies of doom upon the nations of the earth, they are constantly accused of having foolishly overestimated their security, independence and self-mastery. Egypt, for instance, is accused of imagining herself the creator of the river Nile and saying, 'My river is my own, I have made it for myself'. In the doom which overtakes this pride the real source and end of life will be revealed: 'They shall know that I am the Lord'.³⁵

Second, and more importantly for Niebuhr, the pride of power arises when man feels insecure and seeks security through power--usually at the cost of other life. This pride of power is like the child's game 'king of the hill'. Men claw to the top of the hill certain that the power they gain will make them secure. In Niebuhr's words, "...we try to impress ourselves, and the universe perhaps, by power".³⁶ The faith of modern man in his technology is an example of this second form of pride. This faith has tempted man to overestimate the possibility and the value of eliminating insecurity from nature, "This culture is constantly tempted to regard physical comfort and security as life's final good and to hope for its attainment to a degree which is beyond human possibilities. 'Modern man', said a cynical doctor, 'has forgotten that nature intends to kill man and will succeed in the end.'"³⁷

The search for power and control is a never-ending one.

The anxiety that spurred it never goes away, man can never become powerful enough to overcome his natural insecurity. Niebuhr offers another example:

Greed is in short the expression of man's inordinate ambition to hide his insecurity in nature. It is perfectly described in Jesus' parable of the rich fool who assures himself: 'Soul, thou hast much good laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry.' Significantly, this false security is shattered by the prospect of death, a vicissitude of nature which greed cannot master. God said to the rich fool,³⁸ 'This night thy soul shall be required of thee'.

Niebuhr sees this form of the pride of power as ever-present in the world. He sees no clear distinction between 'will-to-live' and will-to-power'. Man's insecurity is so dominant that attitudes of defense and aggression are completely intertwined.³⁹ "To overcome social anxiety, man seeks power over his fellows, endeavoring to subdue their wills to his lest they come to dominate him".⁴⁰ "Therefore", says Niebuhr, "all human life is involved in the sin of seeking security at the expense of other life".⁴¹ Niebuhr's conviction that the pride of power is a dominant force among men is crucial to his political theory, as we shall see.

2. The Pride of Knowledge. Men exhibit this form of pride in claiming final and ultimate status for their own finite knowledge. Men wrongly attempt to give meaning to their life by making an idol out of their intelligence. Reason is the most common idol of the pride of knowledge, in Niebuhr's view. Man imagines reason as transcendent and capable of solving all

problems of existence. In fact, says Niebuhr, reason is as much a finite creature of nature as is man.

Niebuhr rejects the idea that possession of reason makes man and society perfectable. He criticizes rational idealists:

The rationalists always assume that, since men are able to conceive of perfect standards of justice, such standards will be realized as soon as all men become intelligent enough to conceive them. They do not realize that intelligence offers no guarantee of the realization of a standard...nor that such falling short arises not simply from the defect of the mind but from the egotistic corruption of the heart.

Niebuhr believes that "reason is always to some extent the servant of interest in a social situation..."⁴³ His criticism of philosophers provides an example:

The philosopher who imagines himself capable of stating a final truth merely because he has sufficient perspective upon past history to be able to detect previous philosophical errors is clearly the victim of the ignorance of his ignorance. Standing on a high pinnacle of history he forgets that this pinnacle also has a particular locus and that his perspective will seem as partial to posterity as the pathetic parochialism of previous thinkers. This is a very obvious fact but no philosophical system has been great enough to take full account of it.⁴⁴

Niebuhr vehemently criticizes political philosophies (Marxism in particular) for locating the source of evil in society outside of man. Marxism, he said, is wrong in assuming that men are rational and only corrupted by economic institutions. This assumption is an example of the pride of reason.⁴⁵

It is an illusion, says Niebuhr, "that human reason will be able to become the complete master of all the contingent,

irrational, and illogical forces of the natural world which underly and condition all human culture".⁴⁶ Niebuhr sees scientism, the 'religion of science', with its belief that scientific reason can achieve all ends for man, as the twentieth century's most obvious example of the pride of knowledge.

3. The Pride of Virtue. This is moral pride revealed in self-righteous judgments based on highly arbitrary standards, says Niebuhr. This form of pride is a result of man's attempt to establish meaning by asserting that his "relative moral standards are absolute".⁴⁷

Moral pride thus makes virtue the very vehicle of sin, a fact which explains why the New Testament is so critical of the righteous in comparison with 'publicans and sinners'...One might add that the sin of self-righteousness is not only the final sin in the subjective sense but also in the objective sense. It involves us in the greatest guilt. It is responsible for our most serious cruelties, injustices and defamations against our fellowmen. The whole history of racial, national, religious and other social struggles is a commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness.⁴⁸

Man's moral standards are products of his reason and therefore as finite and contingent as reason, says Niebuhr. This pride is certainly sin in Niebuhr's view because "the pretensions of virtue are as offensive to God as the pretensions of power".⁴⁹ The pride of virtue is closely related to the fourth type of pride.

4. Spiritual Pride. This is, for Niebuhr, the worst form of pride: "The ultimate sin is the religious sin of making the self-deification implied in moral pride explicit".⁵⁰ Man makes him-

self God by elevation of his moral standards. This is "man's rebellion against God".⁵¹ As an example, Niebuhr uses Catholic-Protestant disputes:

Protestantism is right in insisting that Catholicism identifies the church too simply with the Kingdom of God. This identification, which allows a religious institution, involved in all the relativities of history, to claim unconditioned truth for its doctrines and unconditioned moral authority for its standards, makes it just another tool of human pride. For this reason Luther's insistence that the pope is Anti-Christ was religiously correct. A vicar of Christ on earth is bound to be, in a sense, Anti-Christ. The whole contemporary political situation yields evidence of the perils of the Catholic doctrine of the church...But as soon as the Protestant assumes that his more prophetic statement and interpretation of the Christian gospel guarantees him a superior virtue, he is also lost in the sin of self-righteousness.⁵²

This pride, in which man creates his own god--himself, is the most offensive to Niebuhr. Twentieth century man's attempt to supplant God with his own system of morality greatly disturbed Niebuhr. "Modern man", he said, "is not immoral because he is irreligious; he is irreligious because he is immoral".⁵³

Is man then unable to make moral and spiritual decisions? No, says Niebuhr, "Men do have to make important decisions in history upon the basis of certain norms, even though they must recognize that all historic norms are touched with both finiteness and sin; and that their sinfulness consists precisely in the bogus claim of finality which is made for them".⁵⁴ Men must be careful in their claims, Niebuhr says. They must also have faith, because although the true faith that excludes all pride cannot be found in men, faith can control the sin of pride. The pride

of virtue provides a forceful example of the importance of faith:

Moral idealists never forgive their foes. They are too secure in their own virtue to do that. Men forgive their foes only when they feel themselves to be standing under God and feel that under divine scrutiny 'our righteousness is as filthy rags'.⁵⁵

Niebuhr believes men are capable of making decisions on the basis of certain moral norms. What are these norms and what is their source?

Niebuhr says that there is only one true and ultimate moral norm for men, the norm of love. Thus, "the only adequate norm of human conduct is love of God and of man, through which all men are perfectly related to each other, because they are all related in terms of perfect obedience and love to the centre and source of their existence".⁵⁶

Niebuhr explains the requirements of the law of love--Thou Shalt Love:

Here something is commanded and demanded. That means law. But what is commanded is a state of heart and mind, a harmony between the soul and God ('Thou shalt love the Lord thy God'), a harmony within the soul ('with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind'), and a harmony between the self and the neighbor ('Thy neighbor as thyself') which⁵⁷ if attained, would exclude all commandment.

The love of this norm, this "law of life" is agape--"heedless indiscriminating, sacrificial love".⁵⁸ Agape is greater than mutual love, says Niebuhr, because mutual love degenerates into "a prudent calculation of the self's interest"⁵⁹ without

the sacrifice of agape. "If mutual love is not constantly replenished by impulses of grace in which there are no calculations of mutual advantages, mutual relations degenerate first to the cool calculation of such advantages and finally to resentment over the inevitable lack of complete reciprocity in all actual relations".⁶⁰

For Niebuhr the greatest and ultimate expression of agape in history is the Cross. It is there that the ultimate norm of love is most clearly revealed. Harland says that for Niebuhr "the sacrificial love of the Cross illumines both the nature of our historical situation and the character of our decisions, and it reveals that the ultimate norm of our life is not a simple possibility of history. The norm of sacrificial love is the love of the Cross".⁶¹ In dying innocently for men, says Niebuhr, Jesus exhibited the norm that should be the character of all men. Yet Niebuhr clearly states that the Cross only reveals the norm of love, it is not the source of the norm.⁶²

The source of the norm of love, says Niebuhr, is man's essential nature. Remember that for Niebuhr, man's 'essential' nature is not realized by men but only remembered as a conscience. "Our essential nature is experienced as a law and as a claim because we experience it not as a possession but as a lack. This is perfectly expressed in the commandment, "'Thou shalt love'".⁶³ Niebuhr believes the norm of love to perfectly express that harmony between the soul and God, between the self and neighbor,

and within the soul that man cannot possess in his inevitable sin but which characterizes his essential nature.

The norm of life then, springs from man. "[T]he norm of agape revealed by Christ on the Cross, far from being something alien and heteronomously imposed is rather the clarification of the norm given by the nature of our own selfhood".⁶⁴ The norm of love is the ultimate norm because it derives from man's essential nature and because no other laws or norms are adequate by comparison:

[T]he coerced unities of nature and the highly relative forms of social cohesion established by historic 'laws' are inadequate as final norms of human freedom. The only adequate norm is the historic incarnation of a perfect love which transcends history, and can appear in it only to be crucified.⁶⁵

In "Ten Years That Shook My World", Niebuhr succinctly summarizes the significance of Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross: "He is what I am essentially, and therefore what I ought to be." Harland completes the summary, adding "but what I cannot be. For at the Cross we learn also the depth of our own self-contradiction and hear, for the first time, our true name pronounced: sinner, beloved of God".⁶⁶

The norm of love cannot be enacted by men, says Niebuhr. Just as they cannot reclaim their essential nature, men cannot embody the norm that characterizes it. Man's nature makes love an impossible ideal. Because man is rooted in historical and social contingency he is unable to establish with another contingent being the harmony required by the law of love. No scheme

of justice or social organization can embody the ultimate norm.

In a lengthy but valuable passage, Niebuhr explains:

All historic schemes and structures of justice must take the contingencies of nature and history and the fact of sin into consideration. Since man transcends race and nation, time and place, no scheme of justice which regulates the interests of China and America, for instance, can stop short of affirming the interests of the individual in China less than the needs of the individual in America. But there is no simple possibility of relating these interests to each other in terms of a perfect coherence of love so that the man in China or America would affirm the interests of the man in America or China as much as he affirms his own. The human imagination is too limited to see and understand the interests of the other as vividly as those of the self. Furthermore, the realization of any such system of harmony would require more than individual action. It would require the organization of vast economic and political structures in defiance of, and transcendence over, the contingencies of geography, the fortuitous differences of natural resources, etc. There is, therefore, no historic structure of justice which can either fulfill the law of love or rest content in its inability to do so...The fact of sin introduces an even more stubborn force of corruption into the inertia of nature and finiteness. The man who is limited by time and place does not merely fail to sense the needs of others who live beyond the limits of his time and place. He resists the claim of their necessities upon his conscience and makes demands ⁶⁷ his own which are incompatible with their interests.

The law of love then, is an impossible ideal due to man's nature. Man is a finite creature rooted in specific historical and social contexts. No man can sufficiently think himself into the position of another to love that other as himself. American man is unable to love Chinese man as himself. Contextual separation makes this impossible. This finiteness of man, coupled

with the persistence of self-regard resulting from anxiety, makes the law of love a practical impossibility in the world, in Niebuhr's view.

Recognizing that love is an impossible ethical ideal, Niebuhr does not, however, leave it ineffectual. The law of love can, and must, make its way into the world in the form of justice. "Justice is not a definable entity in itself. Justice is a relational term in Niebuhr, it is the relative embodiment of agape in the structures of society".⁶⁸ Justice, says Niebuhr, is best expressed as "a political and economic approximation of the ideal of love".⁶⁹

According to Niebuhr, justice must never be separated from love. A separation of the two removes the religious significance of justice. "Justice without love is merely the balance of power".⁷⁰ A separation of love and justice also invalidates love, says Niebuhr. Harland summarizes:

The justice of God is the love of God acting against the corruption of His order. To seek to have love without justice is to sentimentalize the whole Gospel. But the justice of God does not exist apart from His love...⁷¹ Such is the theological rootage of Niebuhr's ethics.

One must be careful, however, not to equate justice and the law of love. Niebuhr believes that "agape is transcendent, heedless, and sacrificial. Justice is historical, discriminating and concerned with balancing interests and claims. Love and justice are never simply the same thing, [yet] they cannot be torn asunder".⁷²

Niebuhr criticizes those who disregard the important distinction between love and justice:

The Christian utopians think they can dispense with all structures and rules of justice simply by fulfilling the law of love. They do not realize that the law of love stands on the edge of history and not in history, that it represents an ultimate and not an immediate possibility. They think they might usher in the Kingdom of God if only they could persuade men not to resist tyranny and thus avoid conflict. They do not recognize to what degree justice in a sinful world is actually maintained by a tension of competitive forces, which is always in danger of degenerating into overt conflict, but without which there would be only the despotic peace of the subordination of the will of the weak to the will of the strong.⁷³

Defining Niebuhr's concept of justice is difficult because of the complex relationship between love, justice and historical contexts. "Justice cannot be properly thought apart from love. Because justice always exists in a dynamic relation between agape and the uniqueness of concrete historical situations one can never say 'exactly' what justice is apart from either agape or the situation".⁷⁴ One may, however, attempt a wide, or general, definition of justice.

"Justice", says Niebuhr, "is basically dependent upon a balance of power".⁷⁵ Thus, "the fence and the boundary line are the symbols of the spirit of justice. They set limits upon each man's interest to prevent one from taking advantage of the other. A harmony achieved through justice is therefore only an approximation of brotherhood".⁷⁶

The boundaries and rules established by systems of justice

approximate the unfulfillable law of love by creating, through a balance of power, regard for those outside the self. In short, the organs of justice combat the persistence of self-regard in man. Niebuhr explains how love is approximated by justice:

Systems and principles of justice are the servants and instruments of the spirit of brotherhood (love) insofar as they extend the sense of obligation toward the other, (a) from an immediately felt obligation, prompted by obvious need, to a continued obligation expressed in fixed principles of mutual support; (b) from a simple relation between a self and one 'other' to the complex relations of the self and the 'others'; and (c) finally, from the obligations, discerned by the individual self, to the wider obligations which the community defines from its more impartial perspective. These communal definitions evolve slowly in custom and in law. They all contain some higher elements of disinterestedness, which would not be possible to the individual self.

The equality of each human life must always be the regulative principle of justice, says Niebuhr, because "in the ideal of equality there is an echo of the law of love, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as THYSELF'".⁷⁸ Niebuhr believes that "equality is a higher social goal than peace" because equality stands for the elimination of power and privilege which are frozen into every contemporary peaceful situation".⁷⁹ Niebuhr elaborates on the idea of equality by comparing it to the ultimate norm of love: Equality, he says,

is love in terms of logic. But it is no longer love in the ecstatic dimension. For the principle of equality allows and requires that the self insist upon its own rights and interests in competition with the rights and interests of the other. Therefore equal justice is on one hand something less than the law of love and on the other

hand the law of love in rational terms.⁸⁰

We now have some idea of what justice entails for Niebuhr. Justice is the balance of the claims and interests of men, enforced by power, in which the balance is regulated by a principle of equality. It is a system that is constantly aware of the persistence of self-regard in men and uses that self-regard to establish complex relations that in some way approximate and embody the wider concerns of the law of love.

Throughout his discussions of love and justice, Niebuhr speaks of the importance of power and balances of power. "Power is, in fact, composed of the authority and prestige which gains the implicit or explicit consent of the subject or the ally with a minimal use of coercive force".⁸¹ The source of that all-important power, says Niebuhr, "is the authority of a government to gain consent without force".⁸²

The power necessary for the establishment of justice lies in the political arena, says Niebuhr. "The question of politics is how to coerce the anarchy of conflicting human interests into some kind of order...".⁸³ That order, the balance of interests using the fence and the boundary line, is justice. Harmony will not arise spontaneously out of human life, says Niebuhr. "In the field of collective behavior the force of egoistic passion is so strong that the only harmonies possible are those which manage to neutralize this force through balance of power, through mutual defenses against its inordinate expression, and through techniques

for harnessing its energy to social ends".⁸⁴

Niebuhr devotes much of his writing to those who would contend that power is unnecessary for establishing justice because sufficient rational persuasion and development can accomplish the task without coercion. He acknowledges that there is a possibility of "increasing social justice through the development of mind and reason"⁸⁵ but he is quick to add (in Harland's words): "Since reason is always to some extent the servant of interest in a social situation, it is altogether naive to suppose that justice can be secured by rational persuasion alone...power must be challenged by power".⁸⁶ So reason does play a role in securing justice by helping men to "extend social impulses beyond the immediate objectives which nature prompts..."⁸⁷ but it is a limited one for: "The will to justice ultimately has a religious root and no rational reason can be given why a man ought to be just, unless it be the prudential one that injustice will finally destroy its beneficiaries as well as its victims..."⁸⁸ Faith is then the source of the will to do justice, but it "can no more dispense with reason in dealing with details of a social ethic than it can dispense with logic in elaborating a total world view, or with science in analyzing the detailed facts of human experience".⁸⁹

A Christian, says Niebuhr, as one who recognizes the law of love displayed by Jesus must seek justice. This much is clear from Niebuhr's interweaving of love and justice: "The distinction between good and evil constitute the moral substance of history; the possibilities for actualizing the good in history define the social obligation of the Christian".⁹⁰

Niebuhr believes that the Christian must pursue justice and that justice is achieved through power. The Christian must recognize this connection between power and coercion and justice.

Niebuhr explains:

To the sensitive spirit, society must always remain something of a jungle, which indeed it is, something of the world of nature, which might be brought a little closer to the Kingdom of God, if only the sensitive could learn, how to use the forces of nature to defeat nature, how to use force in order to establish justice.

Because the source of power and force is government the Christian must enter the political realm in some way. This entrance is a difficult one, for "politics will, to the end of history be an area where conscience and power meet, where the ethical and coercive factors of human life will interpenetrate and work out their tentative and uneasy compromises".⁹² The troublesome nature of the Christian's entrance into politics, says Niebuhr, often leads to the drawing of incorrect answers to the question of mixing religion and politics.

The one wrong answer is to find no relevance at all between our faith and our political actions. This answer is wrong because it denies the seriousness of our political decisions and obscures our Christian responsibilities for the good order and justice of our civil community.

The other wrong answer stands at the opposite extreme. It is to equate religious and political commitments and to regard every political decision as simply derived from our faith. This is a wrong answer because political issues deal with complex problems of justice, every solution for which contains morally ambiguous elements. All political positions are morally ambiguous because, in the realm of politics and economics, self-interest and power must be harnessed and beguiled rather than eliminated. In other words, forces which are morally dangerous must be used despite their peril...All men are naturally inclined to obscure the morally am-

biguous element in their political cause by investing it with religious sanctity...The tendency to equate our political with our Christian⁹³ convictions cause politics to generate idolatry.

Thus, "it is the duty of a Christian in politics to have no specific 'Christian politics'".⁹⁴

By this Niebuhr means not that a Christian viewpoint is irrelevant, but that a set of Christian political decisions is impossible given the evil present in such decisions. Thus he declares the heart of Christian politics to be "the readiness to use power and interest in the service of an end dictated by love, and yet an absence of complacency about the evil inherent in them".⁹⁵

Niebuhr disdains dualistic philosophies separating the Christian world from the evil world of politics. For him they must be one and the same because justice is the goal of any 'Christian world' and the instrument of justice the essence of any political world.

The Christian in politics must be willing to transgress any purely Christian ethic. He must be willing to sin in the name of justice. This is why, Niebuhr says, "political controversies are always conflicts between sinners and not between righteous men and sinners".⁹⁶ Because compromise is necessary for the achievement of justice in an evil world, all moral standards become relative. Niebuhr therefore declares: "Nothing is intrinsically immoral except ill-will and nothing intrinsically good except goodwill".⁹⁷ There is a difficult distinction between evil and immorality in Niebuhr's thinking here. A certain political action may be evil but not necessarily immoral given the circumstances. By 'evil' Niebuhr seems to mean 'ethically repugnant'. This part of his

theory appears similar to Bonhoeffer's notion of the necessity of the Christian bearing sin in certain historical situations.

As an example of a necessary evil in the political realm Niebuhr often uses violence. His argument against non-violence begins with power: "Since power is a necessity of social cohesion, a rational politics must accept it as necessary evil. But it must know that it is an evil; and that injustice inevitably flows from its unchecked expression".⁹⁸ Niebuhr then concludes that the necessity of power for the establishment of justice invalidates any non-violent stance: "A balance of power is not conflict; but tension between opposing forces underlies it. Where there is tension there is potential conflict, and where there is conflict there is potential violence. A responsible relationship to the political order, therefore, makes an unqualified disavowal of violence impossible".⁹⁹ Violence, says Niebuhr, cannot be a priori declared wrong because "once we admit the factor of coercion as ethically justified, though we concede that it is always morally dangerous, we cannot draw any absolute line of demarcation between violent and non-violent coercion".¹⁰⁰

The Christian in politics must walk an ethically treacherous path of compromise and necessary evil, fixing his sight and tailoring his actions to the best approximation of the law of love that this evil world has to offer--justice. While Niebuhr believes the Christian's role to be a difficult one, he also believes it to be essential. The Christian viewpoint, he says, is indispensable in a political system attempting to establish justice.

The Christian is made for politics. His awareness of the standard of love and the nature of man gives him a unique perspective, says Niebuhr. By drawing upon Scriptural tradition Christians find a foundation for a pragmatic ethic using power and self-interest in the knowledge of the law of love as final standard and the law of self-love as a constant force.¹⁰¹ The awareness of the constant force of self-love makes the Christian well-suited for politics, says Niebuhr, because such a realism is the life-blood of any successful political system. Idealism and a rosey view of men and their governments leads to the total failure of any attempt to establish justice, says Niebuhr.¹⁰² All governments and men have self-seeking motives in addition to any motive for justice and any attempt at justice must account for this. "Realism, for Niebuhr, is a clear recognition of the limits of morality and reason in politics; the acceptance of the fact that political realities are power realities and that power must be countered by power; that self-interest is the primary datum in the actions of all groups and nations".¹⁰³

The knowledge of the standard of love and of the force of self-love possessed by politically active Christians makes true justice more possible, according to Niebuhr. "Christian faith will prod us to find that point of coincidence between the interests of the nation and values which transcend those interests".¹⁰⁴ The Christian in American politics will be more keenly aware of the rights, interests, and value of Chinese man though he will still find it impossible to love Chinese man as himself. Just this awareness will make justice easier to achieve. The balancing of interests is

easier when one party recognizes the others interests even though he may never fully understand them.

Niebuhr summarizes the political value of Christian viewpoint fixed on the ideal of love:

Without the ultrarational hopes and passions of religion no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one, which can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible.¹⁰⁵

The Christian's relationship with God makes him the perfect political animal because "both the personality and the holiness of God provide the religious man with a reinforcement of his moral will and a restraint upon his will-to-power".¹⁰⁶ The Christian man is less susceptible to the anxiety that drives men to corruption because: "In the Christian faith man's insignificance as a creature involved in the process of nature and time, is lifted into significance by the mercy and power of God...But his significance as a free spirit is understood as subordinate to the freedom of God".¹⁰⁷ The Christian faith helps men control anxiety, says Niebuhr, making them more able to handle power responsibly and to seek justice. Niebuhr does acknowledge danger in the religious man's assumption of power, as we saw in his discussion of the two answers to the Christian/politics mix: "Whenever religion is mixed with power and whenever the religious man achieves power he is in danger of claiming divine sanction for the very human and frequently sinful actions, which he takes and must take".¹⁰⁸ Niebuhr believes this danger to be combatted by the Christian's understanding of evil in the world and of the necessity to establish justice, though the effort may be marred by evil.

The Christian in politics, says Niebuhr, is less likely to succumb to the cynicism and hopelessness that often arise out of the treachery and brutality of human affairs because the Christian does not regard this brutality as normative.¹⁰⁹ The Christian knows the true standard of men, the law of love. This knowledge is a source of strength and refreshment, says Niebuhr, stopping the Christian short of giving up and concluding that evil is normative. Cynicism is avoided because "for the Christian who really understands his faith life is worth living and this world is not merely a 'vale of tears'. He is able to discern the goodness of creation beneath the corruption of human sin".¹¹⁰ Christianity, says Niebuhr, copes with the tragic brutality of human life. It "takes us through tragedy to beyond tragedy, by way of the Cross to a victory in the Cross".¹¹¹

The true Christian is essential to the political order because he is never satisfied with it, says Niebuhr. A life guided by the impossible norm of love always places political institutions under greater possibilities. The Christian, Niebuhr believes, can never sanctify a particular form of government because it can always be better; more just and a more perfect embodiment of the law of love. In this way a Christian is crucial to politics because he always seeks to improve the political order. It was for its failure to fulfill this role that Niebuhr criticized orthodox Christianity: "Not only did orthodox Christianity fail to deal realistically with the dangers of injustice in government; it also tended to sanctify a particular type of historic government rather than government per se".¹¹²

Niebuhr's formula is simple. The Christian is to seek justice. Politics holds the power necessary for the establishment of justice. Therefore the Christian must participate in the political process. The perspective and beliefs of Christianity make the Christian indispensable in a political order intent on seeking justice in a world pervaded by self-interest. According to Niebuhr, the Christian and politics are made for each other.

For Niebuhr, an explication of his detailed theory of man led naturally to an extensive discussion of love and justice and subsequently to his justification of the Christian in politics. Falwell's career as a writer and speaker on the issue of the Christian in politics has spanned no more than six years. Niebuhr wrote on the subject for forty years. Comparison of the two appears to be one of apples and oranges.

To place the comparison on more equal footing chapters two and three of this thesis will be structured differently. Although Falwell has no doctrine of man and theory of love, he, unlike Niebuhr, does not need these to answer the question at issue: why should the Christian be involved in politics? Where Niebuhr begins his case for Christian political participation with the nature of man, Falwell begins his with the crisis facing America. Hence, this chapter's explication of Falwell's thought will begin there. Falwell's theory of moral knowledge will be detailed in the course of his description of, and response to, America's crisis.

Falwell introduces his book Listen America! by describing the

Chapter III: Falwell and the Christian in Politics

Jerry Falwell does not have a detailed doctrine of man. He states only that "Man was created a free moral agent with the choice of either obeying God or sinning disobeying God".¹ Man sinned and fell from his original righteous state in the Garden of Eden. Since that Fall, he says, all men have been depraved and in need of the Gospel message. For Niebuhr, an explication of his detailed theory of man led naturally to an extensive discussion of love and justice and subsequently to his justification of the Christian in politics. Falwell's career as a writer and speaker on the issue of the Christian in politics has spanned no more than six years. Niebuhr wrote on the subject for forty years. Comparison of the two appears to be one of apples and oranges.

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Falwell introduces his book Listen America! by describing the

horror of Cambodia and its refugees in the wake of war between two "communist" factions--the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge. He writes about a plane trip following that disturbing visit to Cambodia:

It is no wonder that I could not sleep on that plane as I thought of the suffering going on at that very moment in another part of the world, suffering so deep and pervasive that few could describe it. There, in the darkness of the cabin of that plane, I looked intently at my son, who was asleep. I could not help but thank God that he has never gone hungry a day in his life. He knows little but what he has read about communism. As I looked at him while he slept, I prayed that God would turn America around so that he would know the America I have known. I vowed that I would never turn my back on the firm decision and sacred commitment I had made to myself and to God that I would preach and pray to stop the moral decay in America that is destroying our freedoms.²

This passage contains almost all the key elements of Falwell's message. One part of his message found here is that America is threatened from without by "evil forces [who] would seek to destroy America".³ The evil forces are those of communism.

The communist threat is real, says Falwell. He relates an illustrative account of another trip:

One only needs to travel to Rhodesia, as I was privileged to do earlier this year, to realize that the Christians there have lost their opportunity to argue with one another. The recent election of Comrade Mugabe, the new Marxist dictator of that country, may well have ended any opportunity of genuine Christian witness there.⁴

The threat, he says, is everpresent and growing. "Undoubtedly, the next target of communist conquest will be the Republic of South Africa. The many Christian believers of that great nation need our prayers that their doors remain open to the Gospel. If we

are not careful the United States will be next."⁵

Why is Falwell, as a Christian minister, concerned about the external threat to America? Quite simply because America is the last "bastion for Christian missions and a base for world evangelization".⁶ America is God's light to the world, says Falwell. It is the launching pad for the spread of God's message to the earth's people. "I preach very strongly that we have an obligation, that America's only importance to God is as we minister to the world".⁷ Thus it is God's work, according to Falwell, to keep America strong and alive so that the Christian word may be preached to mankind. This is a foundational idea in Falwell's thinking.

Although Falwell advocates a strong defense to battle the external threat, he believes that America is most dangerously threatened from within. This is the other part of the message found in Falwell's reflections on the plane trip. America faces an internal crisis that could either lead to a tragic collapse directly, or weaken her so that she falls to communism. "Our crumbling economy, our fractured family structures, and unrestrained immorality as well as our international reproach are all signs of the fact that we are already headed on a collision course," writes Falwell.⁸

"Action must be taken quickly", according to Falwell, "in the areas of politics, economics, and defense".⁹ He adds, however, that although "these are crucial issues that face us in the 1980's...

America can only be turned around as her people make godly, moral choices".¹⁰

The issue of morality must be the focal point of America's crisis, according to Falwell, because moral collapse is more imminent and dangerous in America than political, military and economic collapse. And moral collapse, he contends, will lead directly to disasters in the other three areas. Political, military and economic calamities will only be averted if the country escapes complete moral decay. The New Yorker magazine provides an excellent summary of the crisis Falwell sees:

"The nation is now in the most serious crisis in its history. Pornography, abortion, divorce, militant homosexuality, drugs, crime, and atheistic humanism are corrupting the moral fibre of the country and destroying its will to resist Communism. America, like the Roman Empire, is on the decline. This decline began long ago (the thirties is the period Falwell looks back to with nostalgia), but the real plunge came in the last decade. Christians must act now, for civilization itself is at stake. America is the last launching pad for world evangelism, and if it falls to Communism--as a result of its moral decay--that will mean the end of Christianity".¹¹

America is sick with idolatry, says Falwell and has rejected God and his standards:

Wallowing in our materialism, self-centeredness and pride, we decided that we really didn't need God after all. We began to tamper with His absolute standards, making them subject to our own opinions and decisions...That which God says is never right, we determined could sometimes be right depending on the situation...As people who no longer felt accountable to a holy God,¹² we began to accept and even admire immoral behavior.

Half of this passage could have been written by Niebuhr. He agrees with Falwell that man's sin arises from a loss of accountability to God. According to Niebuhr, "the human ego assumes its self-

sufficiency and self-mastery and imagines itself secure against all vicissitudes. It does not recognize the contingent and dependent character of its life and believes itself to be the author of its own existence, the judge of its own values and the master of its own destiny."¹³ Falwell adds that man's rejection of God is manifested in the rejection of moral absolutes and the adoption of situation ethics. Niebuhr disagrees strongly contending that the loss of accountability results in either an uncontrolled will-to-power or sensuality. This passage leads naturally to a discussion of Falwell's theory of moral knowledge.

As was shown in Chapter I, Falwell believes that the Bible is the only valid source of moral guidance. That guidance, he says, must be in the form of "moral absolutes" taken directly from Scripture, i.e. directly authorized. It is difficult to detail what moral absolutes Falwell takes from Scripture. (One obvious set of moral standards Falwell repeatedly cites is the Ten Commandments.) It is even more difficult to analyze the way in which Falwell authorizes the conclusions he draws; for as we saw in Chapter I, his claim of direct scriptural authorization is not always a valid one. Suffice to say that he believes that the inerrant Scripture must serve as a source of invariant moral absolutes and that there is a Bible-dictated absolute action guide for every moral decision. Falwell's beliefs are in contrast to other ethical absolutists who hold moral absolutes to be valid but believe that any moral decision must be made balancing conflicting absolutes. Thus there are different ways in which moral decisions are made on

the basis of moral absolutes. Falwell, however, rejects any balancing methods and contends that there is a clear and absolute action guide for every situation.

Falwell detests situation ethics--an ethical system which rejects absolute ethical standards and instead makes contextually rooted decisions on the basis of a balancing of ethical principles. Utilitarianism is situation ethical, and makes decisions between courses of action on the basis of which outcome best achieves some prescribed summum bonum, i.e. greatest good. Falwell vehemently criticizes humanism for sanctioning situation ethical systems such as utilitarianism. In the process he reveals why moral absolutes are so important in his thinking:

[Humanism] has no absolute values. It has an amoral philosophy: nothing is absolutely right or wrong. We used to call it situation ethics, but its really worse than that because it develops a total society based upon what the Book of Judges in the Old Testament describes...Judges 21:25 says, 'In those days there was no king in Israel' --that is, no authority--'and every man did that which was right in his own eyes'. And of course, that is chaos.

Falwell believes that any ethical system not predicated on inerrant scriptural absolutes leads to chaos and confusion. To Falwell a system of invariant moral prescriptions is a source of stability and constancy, both of which are very important.

The lack of moral stability and constancy is the source of America's sickness. He quotes Douglas MacArthur to illustrate the dire consequences of this illness:

History fails to record a single precedent in which nations subject to moral decay have not passed into political and economic decline. There has

been either spiritual awakening to overcome the moral lapse or a progressive deterioration leading to ultimate national disaster.¹⁵

When a nation such as America is collapsing morally: "What we find missing is the mighty man, that man who is willing, with courage and confidence, to stand up for that which is right".¹⁶ This "mighty man" is what all Christians must strive to be, he says. "That which is right" is more difficult to define. Falwell focuses on what he calls America's "five national sins" to find the answer. These sins, which he sees as violations of America's most important moral cornerstones, are abortion, homosexuality, pornography, humanism and the fractured family.¹⁷ "That which is right" are simply those beliefs that stand in opposition to these sins, sins which are causing America's internal collapse and the loss of the greatest Christian base in history.

Falwell has stated what is right, and who is to stand up for what is right, but not the means by which the Christian is to stand up for right. According to Falwell the prescription for America's moral recovery--lead by the Christian--may be broken down into four steps:¹⁸

1. Humility must be promoted. "Humility, however, is the very opposite of pride, which so often besets us. Scripture says, 'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble' (James 4:6). We must acknowledge that we are not deserving of God's favor...We must allow him to strip us of all that we put our confidence in, so that we may trust in Him alone".

2. Prayer must be encouraged so that God's help may be enlisted.

3. People must be encouraged to seek the face of God, "and acknowledge that He alone is the measure of truth".

4. The Christian must act to turn society from wickedness.

This last step is the most important for an analysis of Falwell's political theory. Christians, says Falwell, must act. They must function as the "salt of the earth" and "speak out for God on serious moral issues".¹⁹ Falwell contends that most decisive moral issues are now resolved in the political arena. For this reason Christian political participation has become essential for any moral recovery. The place for the Christian to speak out is at the ballot box and in the halls of legislative bodies. "As Christians we need to exert our influence not only in the church but also in our business life, home life, and social and community life as well".²⁰ That this participation in social and community life means political participation is evident in Falwell's response to critics of his political preaching:

"Those who object to Christians being involved in the political process are ultimately objecting to Christians being involved in the social process. The political process is really nothing more than a realization of the social process. For us to divorce ourselves from society would be to run into the kind of isolationism and monasticism that characterized the medieval hermits".²¹

Unfortunately, says Falwell, the repeal of prohibition convinced many Christians in America that they had no business trying to legislate Christian morality in secular society. What was forgotten after the defeat of prohibition, he writes, is

"that we are still our brother's keeper and that the same spiritual truths that prepare us to live in eternity are also essential in preparing us to live on this earth".²² Here Falwell states his belief that the Christian concern for others must extend itself to a protective concern for their moral health, a concern which is manifested in legislation.

Falwell believes that Christians have a responsibility to influence a sinful society. It is a responsibility to be carried out through the political process. Falwell believes that to shirk it is to discard the Christian faith. Because this responsibility is felt so strongly by Falwell and his followers, they have become, in the words of one sociologist, an aggressive sect "working through the political process to have the group's morality instituted as the societal norm".²³ It is the institution of their morality that they believe will save America from moral collapse and win God's favor. To those who object to the efforts of Falwell and his followers to have their morality legislated as law -- those who object to "having someone else's morality forced" on them -- Falwell responds:

Let's remember that all law is the imposition of someone's morality to the exclusion of someone else's morality. We have laws against murder, rape, incest, cannibalism and stealing. No doubt, there are murderers, rapists, practitioners of incest, cannibals and thieves who are upset that their "rights" have been denied. But in order to provide for the common defense and promote the general welfare,²⁴ it was deemed necessary to pass such laws.

Falwell contends that the five national sins mentioned earlier

are detrimental to the common defense and hinder the general welfare of America. He describes these sins in his "biblical plan of action":²⁵

"While the sins of America are certainly many, let us summarize the five major problems that have political consequences, political implications, that moral Americans need to be ready to face.

1. Abortion--Nine men, by majority vote, said it was okay to kill unborn children...The Nazis murdered 6 million Jews, and certainly the Nazis fell under the hand of the judgment of God for these atrocities. So-called Christian America has murdered more unborn innocents than that. How do we think we shall escape the judgment of God?*

2. Homosexuality--In spite of the fact that the Bible clearly designates this sin as an act of "reprobate mind" for which God "gave them up" (Rm. 1:26-28), our government seems determined to legalize homosexuals as a legitimate "minority"... If our nation legally recognizes homosexuality, we will put ourselves under the same hand of judgment as Sodom and Gomorrah.

3. Pornography--The 4 billion-dollar-per-year pornographic industry is probably the most devastating moral influence of all upon our young people. Sex magazines deliberately increase the problem of immoral lust and thus provoke increased adultery, prostitution, and sexual child abuse...Pornography is certainly the No. 1 enemy against marital fidelity and therefore against the family itself...Pornography is not a victimless crime--the real victims are wives and children!

4. Humanism--The contemporary philosophy that glorifies man, apart from God, is the ultimate outgrowth of evolutionary science and secular education...Applied to psychology, it postulates a kind of moral neutrality that is detrimental to Christian ethics...It is an approach to life that has no room for God and makes man the measure of all things.

*Here Falwell raises a point that will be very important in the discussion of nationalism in Chapter IV. He states his belief in God as judge of the nations. Falwell believes that God will hold the nations accountable for their sins--a key theme in the deuteronomic tradition of the Hebrew Bible.

5. The Fractured Family--With a skyrocketing divorce rate, the American family may well be on the verge of extinction in the next twenty years...The Bible pattern of the family has been virtually discarded by modern American society...Most Americans do not even consider love to be important at all anymore...Since the family is the basic unit of society, and since the family is desperately in trouble today, we can conclude that our society itself is in danger of total collapse. We are not moving toward an alternate family life style; we are moving closer to the brink of destruction.

Falwell claims that these sins clearly violate scriptural principles. He quite often maintains that a condemnation of all five is obvious from scripture, i.e. condemnation is directly authorized by scriptural data. Here, however, as elsewhere, the data is elusive and when present it is unclear in Falwell's writing whether it does in fact directly authorize the conclusion about a sin.

The sin of pornography will serve as an example. Falwell attempts to authorize his denunciation of pornography using the following quotation:

In Philippians 4:8 we find the Apostle Paul saying, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things".²⁶

Falwell may be authorizing a conclusion about pornography by using this passage, but he cannot claim to be doing it in a direct mode. Paul obviously does not speak of pornography. He did not know of it. Any conclusion drawn from this text must be derived from indirectly using at least one warrant in addition to inerrancy. The warrant must be a conclusion about pornography itself--that it

is not any of the things which Paul describes. Falwell must first conclude that pornography is not just, pure, lovely, etc., and then try to use the Scripture to condemn it. Scripture alone fails to authorize a conclusion about pornography.

Falwell devotes a great deal of his time in the pulpit at the Thomas Road Baptist Church to preach of political issues-- particularly those related to the five national sins. Political speakers often visit Thomas Road Baptist Church on Falwell's invitation. The result of this political awareness is a Falwell-molded, activist congregation:

...the members of TRBC desire to change this evil world for the better, to witness to a revival in this country, and to have their Bible morality legislated into law. In furthering the cause of this moral regeneration, the atmosphere of a battle is fostered, and the members believe that they must be activists in achieving the desired goal.*²⁷

The church itself fosters the image of an active Christian political lobbying group:

...TRBC is explicitly proud of the budding political power of evangelical Christians...The church directly intervenes in the political process through a variety of methods. Falwell identifies himself with and supports particular political figures. The congregation itself is organized for a number of activities...Their campaigns against ERA, abortion, and homosexuality have included sending busloads of

*Military imagery plays an important role in the activity of Falwell and his followers. Flint quotes from church literature: "'The local church is an organized army, equipped for battle, ready to charge the enemy. The Sunday School is the attacking squad:...'. The pastor is 'the leader in battle,' and Jesus is the 'commander in chief'...References to people as 'real soldiers of the cross,' 'prayer warriors,' and statements that 'we're the army of God,' bespeak of a militant stance." (Flint, p. 60-61)

believers to lobby members of the Virginia legislature and writing form letters of pro-family resolutions which were sent to the President and members of the U.S. Congress.²⁸

Falwell's church very much resembles a loosely organized grass roots lobbying organization. And it is no accident that it became such:

In a sense, it was only natural that Falwell and his people should go into politics. They had, after all, detailed and comprehensive views about the organization of society. And they had absolutely no doubt that their way was the correct one. Aggressive proselytizers, they had set themselves to convert everyone in society and therefore the society itself. Add to this missionary movement a man with leadership qualities and you have the elements of a powerful political organization.²⁹

Falwell is so active politically that he has often been accused of attempting to violate the constitutional separation of Church and State as well as the tax-exempt status of his church. He responds vigorously:

Any person who suggests that separation of church and state requires more than this--that it requires churches to remain silent on 'political issues' or preachers to be neutral on candidates or religious organizations to pursue only spiritual goals--is simply grinding his own ax rather than reading the law.³⁰

He also addresses the accusation in Listen America!:

To separate personal religious preference from a forced establishment of religion is far different from separating godliness from government. The establishment of a state religion and severing the relationship between God and government are two entirely different things.³¹

Falwell's appeal is truly grass roots. The necessary influence in American politics, he says, must be generated by each

Christian. Each Christian has strong responsibilities. Falwell's call to the individual contains some very specific instructions:

Everett Hale, author of The Man Without a Country, once said: "I'm only one--but I am one. I cannot do everything--but I can do something. What I can do, I should do, and what I should do, by the grace of God, I will do." In order to make your influence felt, the first thing you must do is to know who to contact in positions of authority. Elected officials depend upon the voice of the people, and elected officials are willing to listen to those groups who will speak out on the issues. It is important for you to know who your elected officials are: your senator, congressmen, governor, state attorney general, state senator, state representative, county officials, etc. One of your important obligations is to write or call your elected officials and express your opinions on moral issues and legislation.³²

"Many moral Americans", Falwell says, "are unaware of the real issues affecting them today. Many people do not know the voting record of their congressman and have no idea how he is representing them on political issues that have moral implications".³³

Falwell helped found the Moral Majority Inc., a self-declared non-denominational lobbying organization with the idea of mobilizing and informing moral Americans and of avoiding a legal struggle over tax-exemption. The organization is made up of predominantly conservative evangelical Christians from various denominations. According to Falwell the denominational mix was brought about by two important factors:

First, our very moral existence as a nation is at stake. There are many moral Americans who do not share our theological beliefs but who do share our moral concerns. Second, we must face the fact that it will take the greatest possible number of concerned citizens to reverse the politicization of immorality in our society.³⁴

While Falwell maintains that "Moral Majority is not a religious organization; it's political", that contention is disputed by his own comments, such as: "The Moral Majority will contribute to the preaching of the gospel and saving of souls by helping America to remain free and a base for evangelicalism".³⁶ The Moral Majority clearly is an effort by Christians to exert organized influence on the political process. The stated goals of the organization are³⁷

1. To mobilize grass roots political support;
2. To provide information about government activities;
3. To lobby "intensely in Congress to defeat left-wing social-welfare bills that will further erode our precious freedom";
4. To push for positive moral legislation;
5. To help local Moral Majority chapters fight battles for morality on the community level.

The Moral Majority has drawn up what Falwell describes as "a code of minimum moral standards dictated by the Bible"³⁸ to be used to evaluate political candidates. Although in this statement Falwell appears to claim that the correct answers to the survey are directly authorized by the Bible, it is unclear what scriptural data was used and if that data would permit direct authorization of, for example, a condemnation of marijuana or busing. Excerpts from the lengthy survey will be valuable as examples of the connection that Falwell makes between what he declares "Bible morality" and politics:

- a. Do you agree that this country was founded on a belief in God and the moral principles of the Bible? Do you concur that this country has been departing from those principles and needs to return to them?
- b. Would you favor stricter laws relating to the sale of pornography?
- d. Are you in favor of legalizing marijuana?
- e. Would you favor legalizing prostitution?
- f. Do you approve of abortions on demand when the life of the mother is not in danger?
- g. Do you favor laws that would increase homosexual rights?...
- i. Do you favor capital punishment for capital offenses?
- j. Do you favor the right of parents to send their children to private schools?...
- p. Except in wartime or dire emergency, would you vote for government spending that exceeds revenue?...
- t. Do you favor busing schoolchildren out of their neighborhood to achieve racial integration?...*

Distinct from the discussion of America's five national sins is Falwell's frequent condemnation--as seen in the goals of the Moral Majority--of "left-wing social welfare bills" and socialistic legislation that erodes freedom. Falwell contends that so long as average "moral Americans" believe themselves to be ineffective in the political process "political and social liberals in this society will be able to pass their socialistic legislation at will. We are late, but I do not believe that we are too late. It is time to put our lives on the line for this great nation of ours".³⁹

Falwell says that "the role of government is to minister justice".⁴⁰

*For full text of survey see appendix.

What does he mean by justice? An analysis of his condemnation of "socialistic legislation" will shed light on his concept of justice in government.

Falwell condemns all government-sponsored social welfare programs: "The food stamp program alone is a multi-billion-dollar program. When the government cares for its people, why should its people care for themselves? Welfare programs tend to destroy one's initiative, skill, work habits, and productivity".⁴¹

"Welfarism", says Falwell, corrupts a society. Youth raised in a welfare society "believe that the world owes them a living whether they work or not".⁴²

Falwell opposes welfare and other government benefit programs for another reason other than their corruptive influences. He rejects any notion of government pursuing distributive justice: "It was not the purpose of government to redistribute resources or to enforce any particular results in the relationships and dealings of the citizenry among themselves. Simply stated government was to protect the God-given rights of the people".⁴³ One of these God-given rights is the right to property. "Ownership of property is Biblical", he says in support of this right. Government regulation and redistributive efforts violate freedom: "To destroy or to control a man's right to own and use property is to diminish him as an individual, for property rights are human rights. Freedom to own property is basic tenet of our society".⁴⁴ For this reason Falwell is vehemently opposed to what he sees as

excessive taxation in America and the intrusion of government through regulation of ownership and property.

Falwell believes that the ideas of "the Founding Fathers of our country" have been corrupted by socialistic influences.

"A whole generation of Americans has grown up brainwashed by television and textbooks to believe that it is the responsibility of government to take resources from some and bestow them upon others".⁴⁵ Falwell holds that the government should withdraw

support from social welfare programs and allow those who really need help to be supported by the charity of their fellow citizens.

"Welfarism", he says, "has grown because Americans have forgotten how to tithe and give offerings".⁴⁶ They have forgotten because government has taken over the role of caring for those in need.

It is a role, he writes, that must be returned to the people.

Here Falwell sees the Moral Majority playing an important role:

I can see the Moral Majority creating a sensitivity among the American people for the needs of the unfortunate, the poor, and the disenfranchised that will cause the private sector, particularly the churches, to fill the vacuum that is going to be created by the government's necessary withdrawal from that sphere.⁴⁷

If, as Falwell says, "government is to minister justice" then justice is clearly not a distributive notion. The government's role, he believes, is to "bear the sword".⁴⁸ "A political leader," he contends, "as a minister of God (a reference to Romans 13), is a revenger to execute wrath upon those who do evil".⁴⁹ Falwell can find ample scriptural data, coupled with the warrant of inerrancy,

to authorize his conclusion. His notion of government is quite biblical. Government is to "minister justice and to protect the rights of its citizens by being a terror to evil-doers within and without the nation".⁵⁰ It is clear that Falwell views justice as a retributive or punitive concept. To do justice is to punish those who do evil. Justice, for Falwell is defined as "criminal justice". The government must embody justice by "bearing the sword" and "executing wrath".⁵¹

This concept of justice stands in sharp contrast to Niebuhr's idea of justice and government. As we saw in Chapter II, Niebuhr believes justice to be an approximation of the law of love through a balance of power. Justice is distributive, says Niebuhr, and must be accomplished through power, with one eye on the standard of love and the other on the regulative principle of equality. He clearly believes the duty to establish this justice to lie with the government. He disagrees with Falwell's contention that it is "not the purpose of government to redistribute resources or to enforce any particular results in the relationships and dealings of the citizenry among themselves." In fact, Niebuhr writes, justice is exactly the enforcement of particular results in the relationships and dealings of the citizenry and it must be accomplished through the power inherent in government. True governmental justice, says Niebuhr, is best embodied in a democratic socialism. Socialization of property, he writes, will rid society of "the primary source of injustice in our day."⁵² Falwell's vehement opposition

to such ideas illustrates the wide difference between him and Niebuhr on the concept of justice.

Falwell's belief that the government should withdraw from areas of social welfare and stop impinging on property rights by taxation and redistribution places him on "the right" in the American political spectrum. Falwell echoes such conservative calls as: "It is time we realized that the working population of America cannot indefinitely carry on the burden of governmental spending".⁵³ He favors reduced government, reduced taxes and increased defense. He allies himself closely with leading conservatives such as Senator Jesse Helms. In fact, claims Falwell, "You think of the person who's the most right, right-winger you can think of and I'm beyond him".⁵⁴

Falwell's case for Christian political participation, like that of Niebuhr, is straightforward. America is the last great base from which the word of God is preached in the world. It is threatened seriously by an internal moral crisis which includes an erosion of freedoms through socialistic legislation. Christians, as servants of God, have an obligation to save this evangelical base by directing a moral recovery in America. A recovery can only be sought through the political process because all the crucial moral issues in America are decided in the political arena. Hence Falwell advocates a stringent obligation to political participation which is applicable to all Christians.

Chapter IV: Falwell, Niebuhr and America

America is very important to both Niebuhr and Falwell. Niebuhr's writing is full of comments, criticisms, and analyses of American life and politics. He believed that the tremendous power of the nation made a religious perspective in America essential. As a superpower, America stands to do great good or great evil in the world, says Niebuhr, and it is men of faith who must direct her toward the good. Throughout his writing, Niebuhr attempts to supply this direction. For Falwell, America's survival means the survival of Christian witness. The rebirth of America and her retention of a powerful position in the world are the key themes of Falwell's message. Because America is so central to the thought of both Falwell and Niebuhr, there is no better context in which to compare and contrast the two. Although he never knew of Falwell, Niebuhr has much to say to him about patriotism and America. This chapter will be a forum for that "discussion".

Nationalism is an important theme in Niebuhr's writing. While by all accounts a loyal American citizen, Niebuhr never ceased to warn against what he characterized as the "idolatry" of nationalism and patriotism. He devotes an entire book, Moral Man and Immoral Society, to the potential evil of collective life. Niebuhr labels patriotism "an ethical paradox":

The paradox is that patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism. Loyalty

to the nation is a high form of altruism...It therefore becomes the vehicle of all the altruistic impulses and expresses itself, on occasion, with such fervor that the critical attitude of the individual toward the nation and its enterprises is almost completely destroyed. The unqualified character of this devotion is the very basis of the nation's power and of the¹ freedom to use the power without moral restraint.

Niebuhr does not object to a devotion to one's nation per se. America was important in Niebuhr's world view and he certainly advocated her defense and survival. During World War II he wrote: "The position of the Anglo-Saxon peoples at the crucial and strategic point in the building of a world community is a fact of such tremendous significance that it can only be adequately comprehended in religious terms. It is a position of destiny and carries with it tremendous responsibilities."² Throughout his life Niebuhr believed America to stand in a position of paramount importance for human history, a position of destiny.

What Niebuhr objects to is a corruption of national devotion through the influence of pride. Returning to Anglo-Saxon responsibility, he writes:

Without a religious sense of the meaning of destiny such a position as Britain and America now hold is inevitably corrupted by pride and the lust of power. We may in fact be certain that this corruption will not be absent from our political life. But if the churches in Britain and America are able to speak to the several nations as the prophets spoke to Israel, it may be possible to mitigate the pride sufficiently to allow these two³ nations to serve the world community creatively.

As we saw in Chapter II, Niebuhr believes that a religious perspective is essential for the control of pride. Here the pride

to be controlled is national pride, that which grows out of a country's sense of importance in the world.

The critical attitude of the citizen toward the nation is easily lost, says Niebuhr, and with it disappears any wider concerns for mankind. "Altruistic passion is sluiced into the reservoirs of nationalism with great ease and is made to flow beyond them with great difficulty. What lies beyond the nation, the community of mankind, is too vague to inspire devotion".⁴

America is the centerpiece of Falwell's thought. For him, as we saw in Chapter III, America is the last great base from which God's work is done in the world. Her survival, because it will keep the Christian Gospel alive, is what God wants, says Falwell. His whole message is devoted to keeping America alive and evangelizing. Falwell persists "in the identification of the United States with Christian civilization";⁵ for without America, Christian witness would be lost to the world. Falwell believes that American patriotism is critical to doing God's will. Strong support for the country will avoid both internal moral collapse and external defeat by communism. Through such patriotism America will survive and Christian witness will continue. Falwell, like Niebuhr, sees America in a position of destiny and responsibility.

Falwell's allegiance to America has been termed "flag-waving superpatriotism".⁶ He accepts the notion--if not the words--and declares, "I love America because she, above all the nations of the world, has honored the principles of the Bible. America has been great because she has been good".⁷

Falwell does not see nationalism excluding wider concerns for mankind:

[P]atriotism was just a way of life as a boy. I realized later that one could be committed to his country and still be an internationalist in world missions without compromising either. God has raised up America in these last days for the cause of world evangelization and for the protection of his people, the Jews. I don't think⁸ America has any other right or reason for existence...

It is clear from this brief introduction that Niebuhr and Falwell do not approach patriotism and America with the same amount of scepticism. A comparison of their views will best start with Falwell's discussion of America--with the Founding Fathers.

Falwell writes: "I am positive in my belief regarding the Constitution, that God led in the development of that document and as a result, we here in America have enjoyed 204 years of unparalleled freedom".⁹ This relationship between God and the young America was perceived by the Founding Fathers: "Our Founding Fathers firmly believed that America had a special destiny in the world. They were confident that God would bless their endeavors because they did not forget to acknowledge Him in all their doings".¹⁰ These two quotations convey an image that arises repeatedly in Falwell's writing: God established a covenant with America through the Constitution and the Founding Fathers. This covenantal notion, coupled with Falwell's belief that America must be an evangelical light to the nations, leads to the conclusion that Falwell sees America as a "new Israel"; a nation chosen and blessed by God through a covenant--the Constitution--and in turn given

the covenantal responsibility of evangelizing the world. In Listen America! Falwell speaks of the Founding Fathers in a way that creates images of the Israelites led by Moses in the Sinai desert. The Constitution, for him, becomes a second Torah to guide the new Israel, the new chosen people.

Falwell is not alone in his belief in America as a nation of covenantal relation to God. In his book God's New Israel, Conrad Cherry presents an anthology tracing this tradition from Jonathan Edwards through Lincoln and Whitman to Franklin D. Roosevelt.* One of those represented in the Cherry anthology is Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana (1862-1927). Niebuhr criticizes the new Israel idea using Beveridge as an example:

Such Messianic dreams, though fortunately not corrupted by the lust of power, are of course not free of the moral pride which creates a hazard to their realization. "God has not been preparing the English-speaking and Tuetonic peoples," declared Senator Beveridge of Indiana, "for a thousand years for nothing but vain and idle self-contemplation and self-admiration. He has made us the master organizers of the world to establish system where chaos reigns ...He has made us adept in government that we may administer government among savage and senile peoples. Were it not for such a force this world would relapse into barbarism and night. And of all our race he has marked the American people as his chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world". The concept of administering "government among savage and senile peoples" does of course have power implications. But the legitimization of power is generally subordinate in the American dream to the fact that the concept that a divine favor upon the nation implies a commitment "to lead in the regeneration of mankind"...The American dream is not particularly unique. Almost every nation has had a version of it.¹¹

Niebuhr cautions against the moral pride implicit in the claim

*Conrad Cherry, God's New Israel (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1971).

of a nation to divine mission. Such a claim, he says, devoid of a scepticism born of a religious awareness of pride, leads a nation such as America into irony. Irony arises when America sees her supposed virtues turn to vices in the world: Power becomes imperialism; developing nations reject the "virtues" of democracy; America's growing prosperity serves less and less to help those of mankind who need help, thus turning the virtue of success into a national vice. America is never quite what she supposes herself to be, says Niebuhr. Exposure to the values of all men turns her self-assured virtue to vice:

We were God's "American Israel". Our pretensions of innocency therefore heightened the whole concept of a virtuous humanity which characterizes the culture of our era; and involve us in the ironic incongruity between our illusions and the realities which we experience. We find it almost as difficult as the communists to believe that anyone could think ill of us, since we are as persuaded as they that our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions.¹²

Falwell reflects this shock at the irony of American history and is unable to believe that America could be justly criticized. Falwell first speaks of America's virtue:

We have been the bread basket of the world, we have fed our enemies and cancelled their national debts against us while maintaining an exorbitant debt of our own. We have bound up the wounds of a dying and hurting world. We have rushed to nearly every international disaster in the twentieth century to provide comfort and financial aid.¹³

Then follows the shock and resentment that all in the world do not appreciate these virtues:

In spite of all of this, we have been cursed and belittled by our friends and foes alike. All too often

we have been looked upon as "ugly Americans". Instead of closing our hearts to the needs of the world, we have opened our doors to its peoples. Instead of only exporting the products of our commercial expertise, we have imported the goods of nearly every country in the world. In many ways we have been our brother's keeper.¹⁴

Niebuhr agrees that America has felt a sense of responsibility to other nations and peoples and as a nation has done much good in the world. He declares this concern for other nations "a virtue, even though it is partly derived from the prudent understanding of our own interests".¹⁵ According to Niebuhr, Americans are surprised at the world's criticism of America because they rest too complacently in their own sense of virtue. The virtue of international aid "does not guarantee our ease, comfort, or prosperity. We are the poorer for the global responsibilities which we bear".¹⁶

For Falwell there is an important religious perspective on national life. This crucial perspective consists of the knowledge of God as a judge of the nations; a knowledge derived from the Bible, specifically the Old Testament. Here Falwell employs a dominant theme in the Deuteronomic and prophetic traditions of the Hebrew Bible; God executes his judgment in history on all kings and peoples. Falwell directly authorizes this conclusion using many texts from the Bible: "The Bible declares, 'Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is reproach to any people' (Proverbs 14:34).¹⁷ "The rise and fall of nations confirm the Scripture that says, 'Be not deceived; God is not mocked: Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap' (Ga. 6:7). Psalm 9:17

admonishes, 'The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all the nations that forget God'...we have the promise in Psalm 33:12 which declares, 'Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.' When a nation's ways please the Lord, that nation is blessed with supernatural help".¹⁸

This last sentence is the clue to Falwell's next conclusion from the biblical texts. He asserts that since God is judge, then doing what God wants will lead a nation to material greatness. Or, conversely, any nation--such as America--that is great must have gotten that way through pleasing God. "It is right living that has made America the greatest nation on earth...".¹⁹ "America has become the greatest nation on earth because of what that Solomon said in Proverbs 14 (in paraphrase): 'Living by God's principles promotes a nation to greatness; violating God's principles brings a nation to shame.' If a nation or a society lives by divine principles...that society will be blessed".²⁰ Presumably Falwell would claim some exceptions to this rule--Soviet Russia and Red China, for instance--but nowhere does he mention these examples that would seem troublesome to him.

There are many more examples in Falwell's writing of his belief that God exalts nations that do right and condemns those that sin. In short, Falwell believes God to be the judge of history and finds ample scriptural data to directly authorize this conclusion. As we have seen Falwell moves from this conclusion about God to one about America. Because America is great, and because God exalts righteous nations and condemns evil ones, America has been, and is,

righteous. America has earned her status in the world through good works: "I believe that God promoted America to greatness no other nation has ever enjoyed because her heritage is one of a republic governed by laws predicated on the Bible".²¹ Here we see Falwell introducing the notion of covenant again. He adds: "God has also blessed America because we have done more for the cause of world evangelization than any other nation".²²

The implicit assumption in Falwell's writing is that his conclusions about America are authorized using the "judgment" texts referred to earlier, as well as other similar scriptural data. The validity of this authorization is questionable. As stated, Falwell is justified in claiming direct authority for his belief that God is the judge of nations. That theme is embodied in quotations throughout the Bible. The move he makes from this theology to his claims about America, however, is faulty. To maintain direct authority for his America-blessed-of-God declaration, Falwell must show that the scriptural data speaks specifically about the United States of America, which it does not. Thus direct authority is impossible. To indirectly and logically authorize his conclusions about America Falwell must use some unusual warrants. He must assert that (a) a nation blessed by God according to the Scripture becomes a materially powerful, or great, nation. If Falwell uses this as a warrant he must then claim that (b) God permits only righteous nations to attain power (again, however, we see the Soviet and Chinese conflicts) and that (c) God exalts all righteous nations to greatness. Having inserted these warrants, Falwell could

conclude that since America is great she is blessed by God through her righteous action. None of these warrants are substantiated by Scripture and nowhere does Falwell attempt such a substantiation. He states only that "America has been great because her people have been good".²³

As we saw in the discussion of his notion of God's covenant with America, Falwell adds a note of accountability to every statement about America. He says that America has been exalted to great power, but must never forget that it was God who exalted her. To maintain this greatness America must continue to serve God through evangelism and please Him through moral action. "It is God Almighty who has made and preserved us as a nation, and the day that we forget that is the day that the United States will become a byword among the nations of the world".²⁴

Niebuhr would applaud Falwell's awareness of the judgment of God in history and of the accountability of men. He would condemn Falwell's statements about the exaltation of America through her righteousness as "false prophecy". For Niebuhr, true religion must be prophetic religion; religion that avoids the lure of prejudicial nationalism, selfishness and pride by continually asking the question: "Are we doing this for ourselves?" Niebuhr believes that this characteristic question of all true prophecy is the simplest application of the law of love.²⁵

As we saw in Chapter II, Niebur contends that in all human history there is a contradiction between divine and human purposes, between divine and human standards. The prideful tendency of man,

he says, is to ignore the contradiction and equate the human with the divine. It is to this tendency that the prophetic religion speaks:

The prophets never weary of warning both the powerful nations, and Israel, the righteous nation, of the judgment which waits on human pretension...They regard nothing as absolutely secure in human life and history; and believe that every desperate effort to establish security will lead to heightened insecurity. The great nation is likened unto a cedar whose boughs are higher than all other trees. This eminence tempts it to forget...that every human achievement avails itself of, but also obscures, forces of destiny beyond human contrivance".²⁶

Thus Niebuhr directly criticizes Falwell's claim that America will remain great so long as she maintains the righteous ways that led to her greatness.

Falwell writes: "America has more God-fearing citizens per capita than any other nation on earth"²⁷ and is threatened from without by god-less communism. Niebuhr would criticize this statement for again failing to incorporate a higher perspective. All conflicts, says Niebuhr, are between sinners and the claims of both sides examined in the light of the law of love will show this. In characterizing the conflict between East and West, Niebuhr writes,

...it is very dangerous to define the struggle as one between a God-fearing and a godless civilization. The communists are dangerous not because they are godless but because they have a god (historical dialectic) who, or which, sanctifies their aspiration and their power as identical with the ultimate purposes of life. We, on the other, as all "God fearing" men of all ages, are never safe against the temptation of claiming God too simply as the sanctifier of whatever

we most fervently desire. Even the most "Christian" civilization and even the most pious church must be reminded that the true God can be known only where there is some awareness of a contradiction between divine and human purposes, even on the highest level of human aspiration.²⁸

Niebuhr observes that: "In America there are still many prophets of God who imagine that Christianity and the religion 'of the American dream' are one and the same thing".²⁹ Falwell's identification of America as Christian civilization and his belief in America as a new Christian Israel makes him a false prophet, according to Niebuhr, one who does "not know what a proud, vexatious and cruel king Demos may become on occasion".³⁰

Niebuhr would have criticized Falwell's sanctification of the American constitution as an embodiment of God's laws that has led to American greatness. The prophetic viewpoint is faithful to God, says Niebuhr, because it places all human artifice under infinite possibilities and criticizes it accordingly. What is absent from Falwell's "American religion" is "a pragmatic attitude toward every institution of property and government, recognizing that none of them are as sacrosanct as some supposedly Christian or secular system of law has made them, that all of them are subject to corruption...".³¹

In Niebuhr's view the falsity of Falwell's prophecy is evident in his resentment of the fact that powerful, virtuous, America could be disliked by the rest of the world. Niebuhr believes that the false prophets are ignorant of the moral ambiguity and irony of national life and "do not see to what degree the security of

power leads to both injustice and pride".³² Niebuhr contends that a true prophet "speaks a word of judgment against every ruler and every nation, even against good rulers and good nations."³³ This is something Falwell is reluctant to do.

Falwell contends that if Americans return to the righteous ways that led to the greatness of the nation, God will stand beside the country in the struggle against communism:

There is power in the name of Jesus Christ, and it is the only power that can turn back godless communism. If God is on our side, no matter how militarily superior the Soviet Union is, they could never touch us. God would miraculously protect America.³⁴

Niebuhr speaks almost directly to this viewpoint when he criticizes the American Christian church of his day. The church is to be faulted

because it allows the accents of national pride and of racial prejudice...to color its message, so that the whole business of religion in our day could seem... as a vast effort to lobby in the courts of the Almighty to gain special advantage for our cause...³⁵

This lobbying is the trademark of the religious nationalist whose sin "represents a 'conscious' defiance of more universal standards of loyalty which had been consciously established".³⁶ For Niebuhr the true prophet is an internationalist who casts all national pretensions in the light of divine judgment. The prophet measures all collective human action against the norm of love, and all groups fail to measure up.

Niebuhr, like Falwell, looks to the Bible for insight on the relationship between religion and nation. Obviously, he believes the message of the Scripture to be one of prophetic criticism of

all government. Falwell does not draw upon the prophets in forming conclusions about America and for good reason, in Niebuhr's view; the prophets would never sanction Falwell's benediction of America and American life. The texts Falwell uses to authorize his conclusions fit well with Niebuhr's view of the prophets. Of course righteousness exalts a nation in God's sight, says Niebuhr, but exaltation does not necessarily mean material prosperity. Niebuhr often refers to the continual condemnation of the rich in prophetic literature. And no nation is ever so righteous as she supposes herself to be, Niebuhr adds. All rightly stand under prophetic condemnation for claiming righteousness.

As we have seen, Falwell's belief in God as a judge of nations is one which Niebuhr shares. Niebuhr would contend, however, that Falwell corrupts this important notion by declaring American history just in God's sight and America therefore justly awarded with wealth and power. The values and virtues of all nations are tainted when compared with divine standards, according to Niebuhr. Collective man, even more so than individual man, is unable to embody the universal standard of love. The ideals of the group are always partial and blighted by contextual prejudice. "The group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centred and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual".³⁷ Niebuhr believes that both men and their societies are sinful in the eyes of God and the true prophet. Any true religion and any successful world politics must realize this: American success in the world, writes Niebuhr,

requires a modest awareness of the contingent elements in the values and ideals of our devotion,

even when they appear to us to be universally valid; and a generous appreciation of the valid elements in the practices and institutions of other nations though they deviate from our own. In other words, our success in world politics necessitates a disavowal of the pretentious elements in our original dream.⁵⁸

Niebuhr believes that this disavowal can only be supplied by a truly prophetic viewpoint. It is a disavowal that Falwell is unable to provide. He stands labeled by Niebuhr as "false prophet".

Niebuhr believes that Christian action is the pursuit of justice. The Christian must use a balance of power to achieve justice. Justice is keeping the strong from oppressing the weak. Justice is a "fence" erected with the idea that the individuals on each side are of equal worth simply because they are human. The fence is there to see that that equality is preserved, for without the boundary, the strong on one side will oppress the weak on the other. All humans do not acknowledge equality, says Niebuhr, that is why the Christian, who does, must see that fences and walls create an artificial equality. Civil rights law, for instance, creates a fence between the racist and the minority. Justice is coerced in that situation. That is the best way can do in imitating the ultimate standard of love. The fence symbolizes justice--an imperfect approximation of a perfect norm, love.

For Falwell, Christian action is a means to the end of evangelizing: preaching the Gospel and saving souls. The Christian must get all men to believe in Jesus Christ as their savior. It is for this reason that America must survive, says Falwell, so that the soul-saving may go on. There is no hint that Christian action

CONCLUSIONS

Both Falwell and Niebuhr offer valuable insights on Christian faith. This faith, for both, requires action on the part of the Christian. They contend that the locus of this crucial Christian action is the political arena. From there the two move a great distance apart. Niebuhr believes that Christian action means the pursuit of justice. The Christian must use a balance of power to achieve justice. Justice is keeping the strong from consuming the weak. Justice is a "fence" erected with the idea that the individuals on each side are of equal worth simply because they are human. The fence is there to see that that equality is preserved, for without the boundary, the strong on one side will crush the weak on the other. All humans do not acknowledge equality, says Niebuhr, that is why the Christian, who does, must see that fences and walls create an artificial equality. Civil rights law, for instance, creates a fence between the racist and the minority. Justice is coerced in that situation. That is the best man can do in inacting the ultimate standard of love. The fence symbolizes justice--an imperfect approximation of a perfect norm, love.

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means anything more. Falwell's message is not one demanding the feeding of the poor, the healing of the sick or the prevention of inequality and discrimination. For him, the Christian faith is completely spiritual: Each man must accept Christ, be saved, pray, save others, and wait for the coming end of time. Falwell believes that the only demands Christianity makes involve morality. One must be moral--reject homosexuality, drugs, drinking, dancing, abortion, divorce, humanism, etc. Thus, for Falwell, the Christian must enter politics in an attempt to foster this morality through legislation.

While praising Falwell's call to Christian political participation, Niebuhr would reject Falwell's view of Christian action because it does not require positive ethical action through a pursuit of justice. Politics is important to Niebuhr because government is the arm of justice. Although Niebuhr derives this call to justice from a higher norm of love dictated by man's essential--or uncorrupted--nature, he need not go that far to criticize Falwell. Falwell claims to stand in a Christian tradition rooted firmly in the Bible. The Christian Gospels, the cornerstone of Christian tradition, are dominated by the theme of positive ethical action through justice. Neither time nor space permit a full exegesis here of the theme of justice in the Gospels. In short, Jesus' call was to the outcast, the poor, the unrighteous. He called them to repent--that is, to turn--and walk a new path in the way of the Lord. This turning implied action on behalf of the believer. And if the implication is not enough,

Jesus makes this call to feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the imprisoned and care for the oppressed explicit throughout the Gospels. The justice of the Kingdom of God, as illustrated by Jesus' parables, is a justice slanted toward the poor. It is described as an outrageous justice and likened to the paying of vineyard workers equally for unequal work. It is the justice God demands, it goes beyond common human notions of justice. (Niebuhr would claim that the demands of the Kingdom and the Sermon on the Mount represent an impossible, yet relevant, challenge. For him, they are ideals of which justice is an approximation). The Sermon on the Mount is probably the clearest call to positive ethical action in the New Testament, yet Falwell ignores it and all other justice themes in the New Testament. For him justice is punishing the evil and Christianity is the saving of souls.

Falwell also claims the Old Testament as authority for his message, yet he disregards the entire prophetic ethical tradition. It is a tradition of action much like the Gospels. The call of the prophets is to repentance and action. To repent, say the prophets, is not just to accept God--as Falwell claims--it is to accept him and do his work. His work, they believe, is justice--the protection of the poor who are being robbed of their right (Isaiah 10:2). The way of the Lord is to "Let justice roll down like the waters and righteousness like an ever flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). The justice Amos speaks of is not punitive justice, it is the protection of the weak and the oppressed, the children of God. If the Bible is inerrant, what happened to these themes in Falwell's message?

The historical, sociological and psychological explanations for Falwell's belief in Christianity as morality are beyond this thesis. What he has done--and what a comparison with Niebuhr makes clear--is dilute Christianity to a numbers game. For him and his followers, to be a successful Christian is to save more souls than anyone else. At his services, Falwell regularly reads off the weekly number of souls saved.

Contrary to his claims, Falwell is not an internationalist. His focus is in fact entirely America centered. There are no wider concerns in his whole message. These facts raise suspicions in one's mind as to the relationship between his fierce pride in America and his claim to world-wide evangelical Christianity. Are they compatible? One might ask, which came first? Falwell admits to having been intensely patriotic since childhood and he claims that he experienced Christian conversion in early adulthood. Coming from these strong nationalistic roots, could his only interest in America be her evangelical capabilities?

Niebuhr's theory of man's insecurity and resultant prideful will-to-power is a classic statement of the human condition. Every aspiring world leader should read it. His case for Christian action as justice is faithful to the biblical tradition. Niebuhr's notion of justice is valid for all nations and times. He has constructed a realistic plan for the enactment of Judeo-Christian ideals using the force of political power that dominates world affairs. He does not escape this analysis unscathed, however. His derivation of the justice concept is somewhat far-fetched and

only tangentially related to the scriptural tradition in which he claims he stands. For whatever reason, Niebuhr appears to derive a theory of justice independently of the Bible and then show it to be consonant with both the Gospels and the prophetic tradition. He bases his theory of justice on the one true standard of life--love. This standard is not dictated by the Bible, he says, but only revealed there. He contends that the norm of love is dictated by man's essential nature; it is a law from within man's conscience. Man's essential nature is man's anxious condition free of sin. It exists, he says, because sin does not flow necessarily, but only inevitably when men act. In practice, man's nature is contaminated. His essential, pure nature, typified by the standard of love, does exist in Niebuhr's view because of the distinction between inevitable sin and necessary sin. I contend that this distinction is purely rhetorical. There is no real difference between sinning inevitably and sinning necessarily. Hence man's nature cannot be divided--as Niebuhr contends--into actual nature and essential nature. The two are one and the same. Niebuhr must find another source for the law of love.

Niebuhr takes the law of love from the New Testament to be the highest ethical standard. (This itself is a questionable assertion. Why not simply justice as the highest ethical norm? some might ask). He then attempts to show it as eternally valid on the basis of this ontological reasoning between essential and actual natures. He has done this in an effort to battle rationalistic

theories of man on their own ground. Niebuhr could not oppose John Locke merely by saying, "But what Scripture says is...". He must say: "What Scripture reveals and man's essential nature dictates is...". I believe his attempt to "ontologize" the scriptural law of love is interesting but ultimately flawed because, as stated, the crucial distinction between actual nature and essential nature does not exist. With this distinction falls Niebuhr's theory of the eternally valid ethical ideal of love. His concept of justice is still valid, but its origin outside the biblical tradition remains unproved by Niebuhr.

While they differ widely on the specifics of Christian obligation, both Niebuhr and Falwell make faith relevant in the world by offering a pragmatic ethic: The Christian must participate in politics. For Falwell, politics is where morality is decided. For Niebuhr, it is through the political forum that justice is established. In either case, the Christian must be there.

Appendix

Falwell's survey "to evaluate the stand of candidates on moral issues." Taken from Listen America! pp. 227-228.

- a. Do you agree that this country was founded on a belief in God and the moral principles of the Bible? Do you concur that this country has been departing from those principles and needs to return to them?
- b. Would you favor stricter laws relating to the sale of pornography?
- c. Do you favor stronger laws against the use and sale of hard drugs?
- d. Are you in favor of legalizing marijuana?
- e. Would you favor legalizing prostitution?
- f. Do you approve of abortions on demand when the life of the mother is not in danger?
- g. Do you favor laws that would increase homosexual rights?
- h. Would you vote to prevent known homosexuals to teach(sic) in schools?
- i. Do you favor capital punishment for capital offenses?
- j. Do you favor the right of parents to send their children to private schools?
- k. Do you favor voluntary prayer in the public schools?
- l. Do you favor removal of the tax-exempt status of churches?
- m. Do you favor removal of the tax-exempt status of church-related schools?
- n. Do you believe that government should(sic) remove children from their parents' home except in cases of physical abuse?
- o. Do you favor sex education, contraceptives, or abortions for minors without parental consent?
- p. Except in wartime or dire emergency, would you vote for government spending that exceeds revenue?
- q. Do you favor a reduction in taxes to allow families more spendable income?
- r. Do you favor a reduction in government?
- s. Do you favor passage of the Equal Rights Amendment?
- t. Do you favor busing schoolchildren out of their neighborhood to achieve racial integration?
- u. Do you favor more federal involvement in education?

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