

The Paradox of Church and World: Selected Writings of H. Richard Niebuhr

Jon Diefenthaler (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015)

Reviewed by Maria Erling

In this tumultuous time in our own politics, when a clear voice of conscience is sorely needed, while the diminished role of the churches makes many leaders and commentators hesitant to speak out, this book that gives us a rich selection of theological and ethical advice, is very timely. Jon Diefenthaler, a historian of American religion who wrote his dissertation on H. Richard Niebuhr, has given careful attention to this pivotal figure in American theological history and shows us how relevant theology is for us today in our political predicament. These selected writings relate to the topic of church and world. American pastors and church members can profitably use them to think more critically about the role of the church in the public realm, and gain the confidence churches need to stand on their own over against the polarizing forces that tempt us either to retreat from the fray, or to stand on someone else's stage.

Diefenthaler's comprehensive volume traces Niebuhr's writings from the end of the First World War and such topics as the church's ethical stance in relation to the depression, socialism, Nazism, and the evils of racism. Niebuhr is a guide in thinking through how pastors, students, and active church members can better engage the changing times with critically informed minds that are theologically grounded.

Introductory chapters provide excellent orientation to the many events that conditioned Niebuhr's writings. Diefenthaler gives just the right amount of background information on Niebuhr's connections to his own German Evangelical denomination, as well as accounting for the high regard both H. Richard and his brother Reinhold earned within the wider Protestant and ecumenical circles of the mid-20th century American religious landscape. While the status of the church in our public life is diminished today, this volume brings to light the reality that the same concerns of decreasing relevance were very much in the forefront of church leaders in Niebuhr's day. In reviewing these selections from one of the sharpest observers the American church has ever produced, it is clear that Niebuhr's advice is still worth reading. His assessment that the malaise felt by the churches

is due to the assumption of a too easy accommodation to popular political and cultural currents, reminds us that wishfully thinking that being popular and trendy would do the work of making churches relevant, has been a long standing illusion.

Religious organizations today, both on the right and the left, have too easily clasped hands with political factions that have little real use for them, and even less interest in the church's welfare. While it is tempting to pull away into an isolated sanctuary and retreat from world oriented tasks, a sectarian pose is no better than letting the political stage determine the script that the churches might follow. The churches, Niebuhr would tell us, can stand apart and be true to their own convictions. The work of preaching and witness properly given to the church, based on the gospel, is a unique role given to no other institution. The church's witness to this gospel does not close it off from the world, but it does need to happen in a special, paradoxical relationship to the world. This third option of church and world in a paradoxical relationship is more consistent with the proper calling of the church than the simpler option of taking sides either with the factions of political engagement, or sectarian withdrawal so defined by the world's latest moods.

Of course the paradoxical option outlined by Niebuhr is complex, fascinating, and difficult to summarize. That is why it is worth your money to buy the book from Fortress Press and mull it over for a while. It is worth your time to fashion in your sermons and writings, in your public speaking and prayers, a more considered response to the multiple challenges that your congregation faces in its ministry. Becoming relevant is the payoff for taking more care with the words you speak. Diefenthaler helps us shape those words with this very fine book.

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