

It seems clear that Niebuhr simply takes over and applies the traditional christological teaching of Protestant orthodoxy, according to which the distinction between the active and the passive obedience of Christ provides the basis of his twofold significance for us, i.e., in Luther's terms, his being both our "example" (by his active obedience) and our "sacrament" (by his passive obedience).

Thus Niebuhr says, "The same Lord who is the pledge of God's grace to us is also our example" (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 332). Or, again, he says, "The gospel of Christ is succinctly expressed in the Cross of Christ," which "always represents two dimensions to the eyes of faith. It means on the one hand the perfect love, which is the final norm for [human freedom]. . . . But the gospel of Christ is not primarily a norm for our freedom but a balm for the wound of our guilt. The central message of the gospel is that 'God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself' and overcoming the hiatus between his divine holiness and our sinful nature." "[T]he answer to the human predicament is more adequately given in the Christ revelation [*sc.* than in the religions of the world], because in that revelation the freedom of man is given its final norm and the guilt of man is given the final salve and healing" (133, 132).

The primacy for Niebuhr of "sacrament" in relation to "example" is also reflected in his characteristic analysis of the questions to which the gospel is a response. The question that comes first for the church, he argues, is not "the moral question: What shall we do?" but rather "the ultimate religious question: What does life mean?" Despite the fact that "[t]he moral-political issues which we face are . . . of unparalleled urgency," "the first business of the Christian church is not to find an answer to those questions. Its first business is to raise and answer religious questions within the framework of which these moral issues must be solved" (88). The same primacy is also attested by what Niebuhr calls "the central message of the gospel" in the citation above or in another place, where he's engaged in a brief discussion with Bultmann, "the essential kerygma"—namely, 2 Cor 5:19).

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