

So far as I can see, the significance of Paul's relativizing even of martyrdom in relation to love (1 Cor 13:3) is quite lost on Niebuhr.

To be sure, he can say that "it is difficult to isolate the true church of genuine believers for any one who does not look into the heart" and that "[o]nly God can look into the heart." But he can go on in the very next sentences to cite the teaching, "by their fruits ye shall know them," and then comment: "The contrasting fruits of humble and vain prayer are obvious to all" (*Essays in Applied Christianity*: 117). Surely, if the contrasting fruits of humble and vain prayer are so obvious, it can't be all that difficult to isolate the true church!

In any case, it seems clear that Niebuhr takes "the history of martyrdom" to prove that "the perfect good," or "the perfect love," which is "the final norm" of human freedom, and which consists in "the realization of [one]self in the love of God and [one's] fellows, even at the expense of [one's] physical existence," "is not beyond our possibilities," however certainly it is "not within conventional possibilities of our existence" (132). "The Cross of Christ stands on the very limit of human history" because it is the death of a martyr, which like the history of such deaths, proves that perfect love is our possibility, albeit our "impossible possibility."

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