

H. R. NIEBUHR ON CHRISTOLOGY

"Jesus Christ represents the incarnation of radical faith to an even greater extent than Israel. The greatness of his confidence in the Lord of heaven and earth as fatherly goodness toward all creatures, the consistency of his loyalty to the realm of being, seem unqualified by distrust or by competing loyalty" (RMWC, 40, 42).

" [In their encounter with Christ, people discern a] devotion to the one God, uncompromised by love of any other absolute good. [People learn that] there is no other finally love worthy being, no other ultimate object of devotion, than God; He alone is to be thanked; His kingdom alone is to be sought" (CC, 16).

" [Christ is] the focusing point in the continuous alternation of movements from God to man and man to God . . ." (CC, 29).

" [In Christ] the word of God as God's oath of fidelity <sup>became</sup> ~~becomes~~ flesh . . . in this sense that he was a man who single-mindedly accepted the assurance that the Lord of heaven and earth was wholly faithful to him and to all creatures, and who in response gave wholehearted loyalty to the realm of being" (RMWC, 42).

"[Christ is] the personal companion who by his loyalty to the self and by his trust in the Transcendental One reconstructs the broken interpersonal life of faith" ("Faith on Earth," 5).

" [Christ's faith] is humanity in idea, in essence. This, we say, as we regard him, is what we might be if we were not the victims and the perpetrators of treason and distrust" (Ibid., 15).

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1. Niebuhr stresses the "dual role" of Christ, expressly referring this to "the much criticized Ritschlian theology and ethics of the nineteenth century" (RS: 174). Thus Christ was both "the perfect man, the moral emergent," and "the savior who set faltering, stumbling, guilty men, forever transgressing their own moral law, back on their feet." Correspondingly, "when we think of the Christian ethics as one of responsibility to God in all reactions to action upon us we also are under the necessity of seeing Christ in a double role." "Jesus Christ appears not only as the symbol of an ethos in which the ultimate response to the inscrutable power in all things is one of trust. He is also the one who accomplishes in [Christians] this strange miracle, that he makes them suspicious of their deep suspicion of the Determiner of Destiny" (175). "The movement beyond resignation to reconciliation is the movement inaugurated and maintained in Christians by Jesus Christ. By Jesus Christ men have been and are empowered to become sons of God" (177). Thus Jesus Christ is "our reconciler to the Determiner of Destiny" (178). Clearly, Niebuhr wishes to claim more for Christ than that he is the supreme example--"the first and only Christian" (163). As he puts it, Christ's "personal historical action is understood as God's way of making what is impossible for men possible. Christ makes it possible for men to participate in his kind of life, to become somewhat like Christ despite the vast disparity between a unique son of God and all the prodigal children of the Almighty" (163). A comparison with what Niebuhr says about Christ elsewhere suggests that, while Jesus' perfect trust in God and perfect loyalty to God is his exemplary role, his perfect loyalty to the realm of being, and, specifically, his loyalty to the self, is his empowering role. In his loyalty to others, God's own loyalty becomes incarnate--or, as Niebuhr puts it, "the

word of God as God's oath of fidelity became flesh" (RMWC: 42). But, then, Niebuhr's christology has to come to terms with the kind of criticism that Bultmann makes of Herrmann's; i.e., Jesus' own faith, whether his trust or his loyalty, including his loyalty to others, is at best a phenomenon of the past, which I could not conceivably experience today. Jesus is not loyal to me, nor can his loyalty be empowering of me, whatever may have been the case with his contemporaries.

2. This interpretation is confirmed by what Niebuhr says about Christ in "The Triad of Faith": "The wonderful thing about Jesus Christ was his double relationship of faith in God, complete confidence in God and complete loyalty or faithfulness to God. Complete confidence in him, trust in him. . . . This strange thing, so unique, which makes him different from all us suspicious men. Loyalty to God, faithfulness to God, in Jesus even more than in Job. . . . And then you see in him a marvelous loyalty to man. Not confidence in man, but loyalty to man. . . . hence He seeks and saves the lost. . . . He is so loyal. . . . so He invites our loyalty to Him. . . . But . . . if we want to be loyal to Jesus Christ we are required to be loyal to that which transcends Him; namely, to the cause to which He is loyal; . . . we are required to trust not only in the goodness of Jesus Christ but . . . we are required to trust in the Lord of heaven and earth. . . . unless there enters into our existence the demonstration, as it were, of the loyalty of the Lord of heaven and earth to this One who was loyal to Him and so loyal to his fellow man we can't believe in God. . . . Unless God was loyal to the one who was loyal to Him and who trusted Him to the uttermost, we shall forever remain suspicious of the Source and Origin of all things, the One whom Jesus Christ called Father, but whom we can't call Father unless He saves

Christ from the dead" ("The Triad of Faith": 9 f.).

3. Elsewhere, Niebuhr speaks of Jesus Christ as "one who points beyond himself to the cause to which he is faithful and in faithfulness to which he is faithful to his companions--not the companions encountered in the church but in the world to which the Creator is faithful, which the Creator has made his cause" (RS: 86). Clearly, it is through Jesus' own confidence in and faithfulness to the Creator's cause that he is faithful to all his human companions and that the Creator's own faithfulness becomes incarnate (cf. RMWC: 42).