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REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S CONCEPT OF THE CHURCH

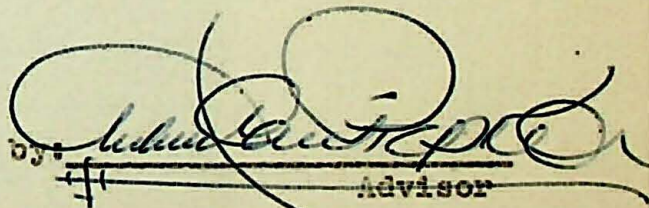
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by


David L. Luecke

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Advisor



Reader

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In recent years Reinhold Niebuhr has come to speak more and more to and for American Protestantism. It was not too long ago that Time Magazine hailed him as "U.S. Protestantism's foremost theologian."¹ Among the many areas of theology on which Niebuhr touches is the doctrine of the church. To be sure, the doctrine of the church holds a far from central place in his thinking. Moreover, within the limits of our investigation, Niebuhr never offers a definitive description of his doctrine of the church.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to believe that he takes the church, in his own definition, quite seriously. References to the task of the church in the world, and how the church has failed to meet the exigencies of the time, are interspersed throughout his voluminous writing in books and periodicals. More than this, Niebuhr is vitally concerned about the misconceptions of the church, particularly the pretensions of the Roman Catholic Church, as will be shown later. Furthermore, Niebuhr considers himself to be a preacher in the church.² However, it must be admitted that

¹"Irony for Americans," Time, LIX (April 7, 1952), 84.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Reunion of the Church Through the Renewal of the Churches," Christianity and Crisis, VII:20 (November 24, 1947), 5.

he believes in the validity of a theology outside the pale of a church: that is to say, that the gospel is not bound to the church, but works both in it and independently of it.

He writes,

Actually, the authority of the Gospel is not derived from the power, prestige, or authority of the church. On the contrary, the authority of the church is derived by proving itself "sharper than a two edged sword" in speaking to the condition of man, in moving him to repentance and in revealing the glory and the redemptive mercy of God to him in the experience of repentance and faith.³

Partly, then, because Reinhold Niebuhr is a leading figure in current American Protestantism, and partly because he often addresses himself on the subject of the church, it is felt that an examination of his definition of the church would be a useful task. If such a study is successful, it might serve to clarify some of his postulates concerning the church in the world today. It is unfortunate that Niebuhr himself has not given a definitive exposition of the nature of the church as he understands it, but it cannot be simply deduced from this omission that the church plays a negligible role in his theology. A statistical examination of his writing would rather indicate that the place of the church in his thought has considerable significance. The reason for his not presenting a doctrine of the church may rather be that he recognizes a possibility of several differing doctrines bearing a wholesome effect on each other.

³Ibid.

The method undertaken by the writer to discover Niebuhr's concept of the church is one with limitations. The attempt was made to examine in a more or less thorough manner everything that Niebuhr has written, and to isolate all his statements on the subject. This obviously leaves the possibility of doing him injustice, both because important loci may be overlooked, and because not all of his writings were available. An important deficiency in respect to the latter are the numerous articles in the periodical Christianity and Civilization which was not available. To compensate for this deficiency, the effort was made to peruse more thoroughly the works available, and to place the stress upon major works. Thus it becomes clear that the findings of this paper will rest largely on a number of representative statements. Unfortunately, no secondary sources proved of much value to this study.

A further limitation to the research embodied in this thesis is that only the works of Niebuhr after his Gifford Lectures delivered in Edinburgh in 1939 are considered. It is felt that not until this time did his theology become crystallized and definitive, and that his writing prior to that time may not be substantiated in his more recent thought.

It must be admitted that in the process of outlining this material categories were used which are not always accommodating to the material, and in some cases utterly

foreign to Niebuhr's thought. The organization of this paper is based on the early definition of the church as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Within the limits of the research of the present writer, no statement of Niebuhr's was found which indicated that he accepted this definition. But this approach may be justified on the basis that Niebuhr uses the term "church" without denying this definition, that he at one time or another addresses himself to each of these attributes, and that he claims membership for himself in the historic Christian Church as was mentioned above.

In applying the terms, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic to the church, Niebuhr warns that a great deal of caution must be employed. The church can claim none of these attributes as a present and complete possession. These attributes can only be applied to the church eschatologically; that is, these attributes belong to the church in its fruition at the end of history. Thus the claim of the church as being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic is an expression of faith and hope, and not of pride or pretentiousness. The church is always in a tension as long as it is in history; it is always faced with the paradox of having and not having. The claim of these attributes for the church, then, is no cause for bigotry on the one hand, for the church can never fully achieve them in history. But this admission must not result in pessimism on the other hand, for the church lives in faith and hope, looking

forward to the time at the end of time when these qualities will be fulfilled in her.

So Niebuhr attributes to the church the quality of oneness, but only as a potential reality. The obvious divisions within the church negate any claim for unity. And those portions of the church which claim oneness for themselves only accentuate the divisions by erecting the barrier of pride between themselves and the rest of Christendom. If the unity of the church can be asserted at all of the church in history, it can only be done on the basis of its acceptance of its one Lord, Jesus Christ. To predicate the oneness of the church on any other basis only results in pride and pretentiousness.

For the same reason the church can only be said to be holy from an eschatological point of view. The church is holy only in the sense that it strives for holiness and has faith and hope that it will achieve perfection at the end of history. There is nothing in the church that can be said to be holy in history. Everything in the church is subject to perversion as long as it remains in time. Any segment of the church which claims holiness for itself only increases its imperfection with the sin of pride.

This is equally true of the claim of the church for catholicity. Every human organization is subject to economic, social, racial, and political self-interest. It is the task of the church to break down all of these barriers which

separate man from man. In this sense the church can be said to be catholic. But again this will never be achieved in history.

As to the attribute of apostolicity for the church Niebuhr is somewhat vague. It seems clear, however, that Niebuhr neither accepts the apostolic succession nor the Apostles' doctrine as the foundation of the church. In opposition, Niebuhr emphasizes both the priesthood of all believers and the freedom of the Holy Spirit to work in any manner he chooses. The authority of the church lies solely in the power of the Gospel. But the Gospel is by no means confined to the church. The authenticity of the Gospel message is measured by its success in accomplishing its purpose in people.

It is not the purpose of this paper to criticize or even evaluate the position of Niebuhr on the doctrine of the church. It is only an attempt to discover and describe what this position is.

CHAPTER II

ONENESS

Reinhold Niebuhr does not deny the oneness of the church: that is, that the attribute unity can properly be applied to the church.¹ But most of his statements on the subject concern themselves more with perversions of the claims which church bodies make for their unity than for defining its genuine basis. Nevertheless, his negative definition of the oneness of the church will shed considerable light on the more positive material.

It is very clear that for Niebuhr the oneness of the church is not based on its possession of the totality of divine truth. No human institution ever "possesses" truth untainted by error. To claim to embody the Word of God in all its truth and purity is a presentation that amounts to idolatry. Thus:

The Reformation . . . detects in the church control of religious dogmas a new form of idolatry on the Christian level. Here a human institution centres life and history around itself; it does this by "possessing" the truth which transcends all truth. . . .²

The church body which places primary emphasis on precise

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), pp. 225-26.

²Ibid., p. 151.

correctness of doctrinal formulation as the basis for oneness in the church does not take human sin and weakness seriously. For this is not the first task of the church, if it were a possibility. The church ought to be more concerned for presenting the goodness and perfection of Christ than for attaching this perfection to itself. So Niebuhr urges:

The church ought to be more concerned to bring the goodness of Christ as a judgment upon every fragmentary form of human goodness, than to find the particular cause which might be identified with Christ.³

Again, it cannot be validly claimed by any denomination or human institution that its unity is based on the righteousness possessed by the church or its members. This argument is particularly a polemic directed against the Roman Catholic Church. This contention is based partly on the very fact that no church body, no matter how disciplined in its external loyalty to its head, can ever claim genuine oneness. The partisan spirit in human nature is too deeply embedded to allow this. So Niebuhr writes:

It remains a fact, nevertheless, that the church is divided by every partisan interest of geographic or racial, economic or politic origin. That fact alone is proof that the sanctity of the church does not consist in the goodness of its members but in the holiness of its Lord.⁴

On the contrary, the unity of the church is fostered when

³Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?" Christianity and Crisis, VIII:14 (August 2, 1949), 105.

⁴Ibid.

the church is most aware of its imperfections. This breaks down the barriers of pretension on the part of the individual fragments of the church, for it is just when the church becomes most sure of its possession of finality and perfection that it is most bigoted and uncharitable. It is for this reason that Niebuhr warns that

the Christian Church must be more humble and not suggest so complacently that it has achieved, in its own life, a form of universal love which it would bestow upon the nations.⁵

Nor can the unity of the church be postulated on the mutual possession of "holy things" by a church body. This will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter. Niebuhr argues this point primarily in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church. No church actually can claim to possess holy things in the sense that it possesses control over the source from which God's grace flows. Inasmuch as the grace of God comes also independent of the church, the unity of the church cannot rightly be based on this contention. Niebuhr refers to the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus as a "picturesque description of the freedom of divine grace in history, working miracles without any 'by your leave' of the priest or church."⁶ More specifically,

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, Discerning the Signs of the Times: Sermons for Today and Tomorrow (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), p. 86.

⁶ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 208.

the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, far from being a source or expression of unity becomes a powerful factor of division. For in claiming to possess it, church bodies have employed it more as a means for exclusion than integration. Thus he writes:

The pathos of this whole problem is most vividly portrayed in efforts to make the sacrament of the Lord's Supper into a genuine symbol of the unity of the church, above and beyond all distinctions and relativities which divide it. Any insistence that this sacrament must be administered according to a particular "order" inevitably leads either to new display or the division of the church, by preventing the common observance of the sacrament; or to a new display of imperialism, by forcing Christians of different persuasion to accept an order of administration as the price of unity.⁷

Again, the sacraments cannot be considered a basis for the unity of the church because, in Niebuhr's thought, the church remains after the sacraments are perverted. If the "holy things" of the church are subject to corruption like all human factors, they cannot stand as the focal point of the oneness of the church. Thus:

The very fact, however, that the sacraments may be the instruments of the final pretension of various fragments of the church proves that they are also subject to corruption. They easily degenerate into magic which gives an unrepentant heart an even cheaper security before the final judgment than any simple moralism.⁸

⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 242.

The positive side of Niebuhr's concept of the oneness of the church is not so easily determined, and offers a great deal more room for error. Nevertheless, some aspects of the unity of the church can be found in his thought.

There is a unity in the church based on the unity of the message of Christ. Niebuhr seems to accept a least common denominator in Christian theology which is acceptable to all Christendom. He writes: "The task of the Christian Church is to define the different facets but also to insist on the unity of the one message in Christ."⁹ Essential elements in this message include the meaning of Christ's cross and Resurrection which humbles the secure and gives assurance to the oppressed.¹⁰

Furthermore, the church as a community assumes the responsibility for interpreting the meaning of revelation. This does not mean that the individual is to be bound to the dogma of a human ecclesiastical organization, but is designed to prevent anyone from appropriating revelation and corrupting it according to his own fancy. The task of the church is to try and reach a consensus on interpretation within the covenant community.¹¹

⁹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Problem of a World Church," The Messenger, XVI:16 (August 21, 1951), 6.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, The Self and the Dramas of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), p. 92.

This mutual attempt of all within the church to reach unity in truth and love becomes a source of oneness within the church. The oneness of the church is a principle, rather than an established fact, and the desire to achieve the principle makes it a reality at least in spirit. So Niebuhr says of the church,

It does not have the unity in fact which it desires in principle. The divisions of history and the chasms of nature and sin leave their mark upon it. It cannot overcome them completely in fact; but it would overcome them more completely than it does if it would recognize its inability to overcome them more contritely. The church could have the more grace, if it admitted that the truth was subject to having and not having.¹²

The oneness of the church, then, is a potentiality, rather than an actuality. It is a tension within the church between what it in fact is and what it ought to be. Unity in the church is what Niebuhr calls an "eschatological character."¹³ Nor will the Christian community possess oneness in history; at least no specific age can claim it. For as soon as a church body asserts itself as the "One" church, it manifests pretensions which destroy unity. So Niebuhr asserts: "The Christian community does not have the perfection of Christ. . . . It will show forth that love the more

¹² Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 226.

¹³ Ibid.

the more surely the less certain it is of its possession."¹⁴

Thus it is that at least in one sense, Niebuhr distinguished between visible and invisible church. He does not do so in order to be able to label one church denomination as the visible church, but to emphasize that no human organization can make that claim for itself. He again uses this argument in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church.

It is indeed promised that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church; but the church which has that security can not be any particular church with all of its historic admixtures of the grace of Christ and the pride of nations and cultures. The secure church is precisely that community of saints, known and unknown, among whom life is constantly transformed because it is always under the divine word.¹⁵

Niebuhr treats the church for all practical purposes as the collection of visible Christian Communities with a responsibility toward the community about them. Nevertheless he believed it wholesome that the concept of the invisible church be preserved in order to remind the church it is also under divine judgment.¹⁶

¹⁴ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 241.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 242.

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man I: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 139.

CHAPTER III

HOLINESS

If one would base his argument on a statistical analysis of Niebuhr's statements concerning the church, it could be successfully argued that Niebuhr's chief concern is with its claim of holiness. Again we find that he largely states the negative side, making as his task that of exposing the false claim for holiness of the church as a particular historic organization.

In regard to the church, as well as to individuals, Niebuhr maintains the simul justus et peccatur emphasis.¹ Every particular church is subject to corruption, even while it lives under the divine word. Thus every ecclesiastical organization is subject to its historic "admixtures of the grace of Christ and the pride of nations and cultures."² So, for Niebuhr, the claim of holiness in a church body is positive evidence for its lack of holiness, displayed in its own bigotry and pretension. The church lives in tension, torn between the perfection that is its hope and faith, and corruption which belongs to her by fact. When the church

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, "Reply to Interpretation and Criticism," The Library of Living Theology II. Edited by Charles Kezley and Robert Bretall (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1956), p. 437.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 242.

disavows this tension, maintaining perfection as an accomplished fact, that it actually loses the holiness which it can claim.

Yet there is no community of grace in which there are not remnants and echoes of the world's pride of race and class. If there is no sacramental agony in the church about this corruption, the religious community easily becomes a seedpot of racial pride and bigotry.³

The claim of perfection to an historic institution, then, is one that perverts the very core of the work and purpose of the church; namely, that of being a witness. For, since no Christian community has the perfection of Christ as an immediate possession, its own claim that it does will negate its message by displaying hypocrisy and pretentiousness.⁴

The polemic of Niebuhr's against a body which claims for itself perfection is largely directed against the Roman Catholic Church. He finds the roots of its error in the identification of the Kingdom of God with the historic church. This is untenable from the Christian view of history in which God is constantly impinging upon sinful man with grace and judgment. Thus:

All Catholic errors in overestimating the sinlessness of the redeemed reach their culmination, or at least their most vivid and striking expression, in the doctrine of the church. Here the reservations of Augustine are forgotten; and the church is unreservedly identified with the Kingdom of God. It is the

³Ibid., p. 241.

⁴Ibid.

"societas perfecta." It is the sole dispenser of grace, its visible head assumes the title: "Vicar of Christ" which appears blasphemous from the perspective of a prophetic view of history.⁵

The church which does not take seriously human sin cannot take the judgment of God on human institutions seriously. For to claim perfection for oneself as an accomplished and fulfilled fact allows little humility before God or man. Again Niebuhr asserts,

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.⁶

This claim of the Roman Church is derived from a misunderstanding, or direct misuse, of St. Augustine's identification of the City of God with the historic church.⁷ And this false identification leads the church today, wherever it is accepted, to persecute the enemies of its human institutions as if they were always the enemies of God.⁸

Nor can the church, and Niebuhr again seems to be

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 144.

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man I: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 202.

⁷ Ibid., p. 216.

⁸ Ibid., p. 202.

speaking primarily about the Roman Church, base its claim for holiness on the perfection of its saints to whom grace was given immediately and directly.⁹ Niebuhr does not argue against the perfect piety of these individuals, but rather points out that these are far outweighed.

Without such faith and hope the church seeks to vindicate itself by the virtues of its martyrs and its saints. This vindication never avails in the end because the "godless" are always able to find for every martyr and saint in the church a score of pious frauds or religiously inspired bigots or self-righteous Pharisees.¹⁰

The only way in which the church could successfully refute the jeers of the sceptics concerning the blamelessness of its life would be to justify the rise and fall of false truths which use it as their vehicle.¹¹ Notwithstanding the above reservations, Niebuhr still shows a great respect for the heroes and martyrs of the faith as a living power within the church.¹²

In the preceding chapter we have already discussed Niebuhr's attitude toward the "holy things" of the church, i.e., the sacraments, as means of grace, as a possession which has nothing to do with the oneness of the church. It

⁹Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 240.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 239.

¹¹Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 129.

¹²Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Captive Churches," Christianity and Crisis, CCK:19 (November 13, 1950), 145.

is also true that the holiness of the church cannot be based on its possession of "holy things." Nothing possessed by the church--the sacraments, the ministry, or anything else--is free from corruption any more than its people. The very attempt to base the holiness of the church on the holiness of its sacraments indicates in itself that they are subject to corruption.

The very fact, however, that the sacraments may be the instruments of the final pretension of various fragments of the church proves that they are also subject to corruption. They easily degenerate into a magic which gives an unrepentant heart an even cheaper security before the final judgment than any simple moralism. When the eschatological tension disappears from the sacraments, sacramental piety becomes a source of a particularly grievous religious complacency.¹³

Furthermore, the attempt to fasten the claim of holiness to the church on the basis of its possession of holy things results in an idolatry. For it centers devotion on a human institution, looking for a power which transcends all human power. This tends to confuse the church with God Himself. Niebuhr sees this as a Reformation insight, for the Reformation

detects in the church control of religious dogma a new form of idolatry on the Christian level. Here a human institution centers life and history around itself; it does this by "possessing" the truth which transcends all truth and by pretending to dispense "grace" which

¹³Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 242.

is a power beyond all human power and is operative only when human powers recognize their own limits.¹⁴

For when the church claims to possess the power of God in "holy things" or the means of grace in the sacraments, it results in the confinement of the power of God. This robs the freedom of God and binds Him within human limits. When this happens, Niebuhr affirms that both mediated and unmediated grace is obscured, for mediated grace becomes bound to an institution, and unmediated grace is denied. Speaking of the Roman Church he says,

Its conception of the fulfillment of life was marred by its confinement of the power of grace to a human-historical institution. In the realm of the spiritual and moral life this meant that grace was bound to sacraments, institutionally controlled and mediated. Since "grace" stands for powers and possibilities beyond all human possibilities, this represents an intolerable confinement of the freedom of God within human limits. "The wind bloweth where it listeth," said Jesus to Nicodemus; and that is a picturesque description of the freedom of divine grace in history, working miracles without any "by your leave" of the priest or church.¹⁵

But it must not be said that Niebuhr negates the validity of the means of grace. The means of grace remain in the church a power for her becoming what she is, for achieving perfection.¹⁶ God works where he wills, wherever the voice

¹⁴ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, pp. 151-52.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 207-08.

¹⁶ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 242.

of Christ is heard, together with or apart from the "holy things" of the church. The sacraments can only bear witness to the voice that it may be heard. So it is also true that the holiness of the church can not be based on a holy order or a doctrine of the Holy Ministry, for these also only bear witness to a holiness which is still above them.¹⁷

Although Niebuhr will not recognize the holiness of the church as a perfection of a particular organization, derived either from the holiness of its saints, or from its possession of "holy things," nevertheless he does admit that the attribute of holiness can rightly be ascribed to the church. But this holiness is not a full possession of the church, but rather something continually entering upon it from without. It is a gift; it is grace, and it always becomes mixed with human sin.¹⁸ This holiness is not mediated by God to organizations or institutions but to individuals who receive it by faith; it is a quality which cannot be mediated by anything human.¹⁹ This is the perfection which comes to Christians when they recognize the cross as the "necessary ransom

¹⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Reunion of the Church through the Renewal of the Churches," Christianity and Crisis, VII:20 (November 24, 1947), 5.

¹⁸ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 242.

¹⁹ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man I: Human Nature, p. 60.

for many."²⁰ Thus the holiness of the church can only be found in relation to the forgiveness of sins. Niebuhr even congratulates the Roman Church insofar as it convinces its adherents that they are forgiven sinners.²¹ So it is that he defines the church.

It is a community which does not fear the final judgment, not because it is composed of sinless saints but because it is a community of forgiven sinners, who know that judgement is merciful if it is not evaded.²²

So the holiness of the church lies in God's giving it holiness, which is ostensibly its assured possession, but which is not fully realized historically.²³

Ultimately, then, it becomes clear that the holiness of the church consists in the holiness of God, for it can only possess it as a gift. At one point, Niebuhr becomes explicit on this point.

It remains a fact, nevertheless, that the church is divided by every partisan interest of geographical or racial, economic or political origin. That fact alone is proof that the sanctity of the church does not consist in the goodness of its members but in the holiness of its Lord.²⁴

²⁰ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 53.

²¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Has the Church any Authority?" Christianity and Crisis, X:5 (April 3, 1950), 36.

²² Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 236.

²³ Ibid., p. 240.

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?" Christianity and Crisis, VIII:14 (August 2, 1948), 105.

But the church is holy not only in the sense that it worships a holy Lord, but also in the sense that it is the community in which the holiness of God impinges. This does not mean that the Christian community comes to possess holiness in totality, but that it is constantly in the process of receiving it. It is a matter of "having and not having."

Reason was bound to find difficulty in understanding that the faith and the grace by which we stand beyond the contradictions and ambiguities of history is no simple possession; that it is a having and not having; and that, claimed as a secure possession, it becomes a vehicle of the sin from which it ostensibly emancipates.²⁵

The church is always in a state of tension between having and not having perfection. Niebuhr finds in Christ's encounter with Peter, in which Peter tries to dissuade Christ from suffering, an illustration of this two-fold aspect of the perfection of the church.

This encounter is an accurate symbolic description of the mixture of the ultimate and human viewpoints which remain in the Christian church throughout the ages. Insofar as it is the community in which Jesus is acknowledged as the Lord, it is a new community, different from all other human communities. Insofar as it joins in Peter's abhorrence of the Cross, it is a sinful community, engulfed in the securities and insecurities of human history.²⁶

²⁵Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, pp. 147-48.

²⁶Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 147 (note).

Thus the perfection of the church is ultimately a process. It is composed in the one sense of Christians who now reign with Christ and of sinners who oppose God, and with this paradox, the church "pursues its course toward perfection."²⁷

In the last analysis, the holiness of the church, like its oneness, is an eschatological emphasis. The tension between having and not having is resolved in its fruition; it is projected into the future. So when Niebuhr speaks of the holiness of the church, he mostly refers to the church eschatologically. The church is constantly in the state of becoming what it is. The church can thus only make the claim of holiness for itself on the basis of God's working in it with judgment and mercy to this goal of perfection.

Without the final eschatological emphasis the church claims to be the Kingdom of God. Actually it is that community where the Kingdom of God impinges most unmistakably upon history because it is the community where the judgment and mercy of God are known, piercing through all the pride and pretensions of men and transforming their lives.²⁸

And conversely, whenever the church fails to realize that its perfection is only an eschatological reality, it becomes perverted. It is the eschatological emphasis which keeps the church humble and open to faith and hope.

²⁷Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 136.

²⁸Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 239.

In short, the church is always in danger of becoming Anti-Christ because it is not sufficiently eschatological. It lives too little by faith and hope, and too much by the pretensions of its righteousness.²⁹

The great symbol of the eschatological qualification of the holy church is the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. It is in the sacrament that the church looks with longing on the perfection of Christ, and in which it follows that mandate of Christ to "do this in remembrance of me," thinking also of Paul's declaration that "as often as ye eat of this bread and drink of the cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come."³⁰ It is in this sacrament that the church simultaneously recognizes it is not having final perfection, and the ultimate perfection that belongs to it. It recognizes both the sin of the church in fact, and perfection of the church in grace still to be achieved.

This eschatological emphasis in the sacrament is a true expression of the eschatological character of the church. It does not have the unity in fact which it desires in principle. The divisions of history and the chasms of nature and sin leave their mark upon it. It cannot overcome them completely in fact; but it would overcome them more completely than it does if it would recognize its inability to overcome them more contritely. . . . The church would have the more grace, if it admitted that the truth was subject to the paradox of having and not having.³¹

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid., p. 241.

³¹Wiebuhr, Nature and Destiny II: Human Destiny, p. 226 (note).

In Niebuhr's thought, the sacraments are only used properly when they illustrate this important qualification of the perfection of the church. In this sense, the sacraments are also to be considered necessary in the church. "A community of grace which lives by faith and hope must be sacramental," he says, for they "symbolize the having and not having of final virtue," but they must be used cautiously, lest the church pretend to have achieved that perfection.³²

This eschatological quality of the perfection of the church is well summarized by E. L. Allen when, in describing Niebuhr's thought on Kingdom of God, he writes,

the truth of prophetic religion, and of Christianity in so far as Christianity is truly prophetic, must survive the tempests of a dying civilization as an ark survives the flood. . . . The hopes which goes unfulfilled in time may come to fruition in eternity. There is a Kingdom of God which lies beyond our success and failure, into which the one is built and by which the other is redeemed. Our final satisfaction is where our heart's allegiance is, in the City which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.³³

³² Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 240.

³³ E. L. Allen, A Guide to the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr: Christianity and Society, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, n.d.), p. 45.

CHAPTER IV

CATHOLICITY

Niebuhr does not address himself directly to the Catholicity of the church. This quality of the church seems rather to be taken for granted. By the very nature of the church it cannot be anything but catholic, for as soon as the catholicity is lost, the church caters to the prejudices of a particular group. When this happens, the church is no longer the Christian church in the fullest sense.¹

Often the attribute of Catholicity is taken to mean the universality of church: that is, that the message of the church applies to all peoples everywhere. Niebuhr does not deny this, but this is not the place where he would place the emphasis. For him, the catholicity of the church has little to do with its geographic coverage, but refers rather to that quality of the message of the church which breaks down all the barriers which divide mankind from each other. For a particular church to claim catholicity on the grounds of its geographic omnipresence is to cater to pride and pretentiousness.²

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953), p. 114.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 239.

But the implications of catholicity go beyond geographic universality, though the church has been slow to grasp this fact. Catholicity ought to be understood as the destruction all barriers to universal brotherhood. But the Christian church is all too often guilty of augmenting human pride which desires to belong to an exclusive group. "It remains a fact," he says, "that the church is divided by every partisan interest of geographic or racial, economic or politic origin."³ This is true regardless of the area which a church body covers, or the vehemency of its claims to catholicity. The charge is largely directed against the claims of the Roman Catholic Church. In it, Niebuhr recognizes indications of Roman or Anglo-Saxon traditions, which, though insisting on catholicity, must remain provincial. To base the claim of catholicity on the area of the church, on the universality of its doctrines, indicates a pride which exposes its implausibility.⁴

The truly catholic church, then, is one that does not ally itself with any particular class, society, nation, or race. It is one that is in the process of transcending all human boundaries to fellowship. The catholic church is always in a struggle to prevent itself from finding its

³Reinhold Niebuhr, "Can the Church Give a Moral Lead?" Christianity and Crisis, VIII:14 (August 2, 1949), 105.

⁴Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 239.

security in an egocentric group. To base this argument, Niebuhr applies to the statement of St. Paul that Christ, who was not expected either by Jew nor Greek, "is nevertheless unto them which are called both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and wisdom of God."⁵ Thus the alliance of the catholic church is above and beyond its national ties. The revelation of God calls the Christian church into a new community which is not any particular community, but is everywhere that God's revelation is received by faith. Thus:

The acceptance of that revelation in faith involves a radical break in the community in which the revelations occur. It ceases to be a particular people or nation. The revelation creates an "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) which is gathered together upon the basis of its acceptance of the revelation by faith.⁶

This, then, is the meaning of the catholicity of the church. That the church as a group sheds all its self-interest to the end that it can aim at the goal of uniting all men with its message. So Niebuhr admonishes:

If the slogan that the Church should be the Church is to have a meaning other than its withdrawal from the world, must it not mean that by prayer and fasting it has at least extricated itself in some degree from its embarrassing alliances with this or that class, race and nation so that it may speak the word of God more purely, and more forthrightly to each man and nation.⁷

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 54.

⁶ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 148.

⁷ Niebuhr, Christian Realism and Political Problems, p. 114.

Niebuhr goes still further to postulate that "whenever the divine word does not illumine the ambiguities of our human virtues, including our social ideas," whenever the church "simply identifies its will with God's will," then the church really ceases to be a church at all.⁸ The implication is that the word of God is clear in demanding that this universal concern take priority to the concern for any particular group, and where this is lacking, the word of God is not heeded.⁹

For divided Christianity, this does not necessarily mean that all fragments of the church should unite. Niebuhr sees a wholesome influence of the varying emphases of each denomination on the church as a whole. But it does mean that there ought to be no barriers between the various denominations, and that the peculiar possessions of each fragment of the church should flow unimpeded into the "whole body of Christ."¹⁰

The church cannot deny this responsibility within itself. Though this form of catholicity may never be achieved in history, it is still an essential part of the church's

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, "Has the Church Any Authority?" Christianity and Crisis, X:5 (April 3, 1950), 36.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Reinhold Niebuhr, "A Problem of Evangelical Christianity," Christianity and Crisis, VI:8 (May 13, 1946), 5.

faith and hope. Niebuhr finds this as a part of the Christian message.

The insistence of sectarian Christianity that the Kingdom of God is relevant to all historical social problems, and that brotherhood is a possibility of history is certainly a part of the Christian gospel.¹¹

Nor can this be merely a part of the faith, maintained intellectually, or ascribed to the eschatological fulfillment, though it will not be fully accomplished till then. But it is the duty of the church to bring the message of Christ's love to the world "in actual deeds of mercy and of justice."¹²

In the last analysis, however, the true catholicity of the church can only be postulated of its eschatological completion. "Yet there is no community of grace in which there are not remnants and echoes of the world's pride of race and class."¹³ Also in regard to its catholicity, the church must find itself under the judgment of God. For inasmuch as the church is a human institution, it will not achieve full catholicity.¹⁴ Thus, again, we have the paradox of having and not having, a tension that can only be resolved in the eschatological hope of the church.

¹¹ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 179.

¹² Reinhold Niebuhr, "The United and Divided Church," The Messenger, XIII:22 (October 26, 1948), 8.

¹³ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 241.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, "Has the Church Any Authority?" p. 36.

CHAPTER V

APOSTOLICITY

Of the attributes employed to define the church: that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, the last term is the most foreign to the thought of Reinhold Niebuhr. Within the scope of the research of this paper, not even a single reference was found in which Niebuhr speaks of the church as being apostolic. In general, he is very vague about the source or authority of the message of the church. It cannot be said that Niebuhr either recognizes the apostolic succession as the source of authority in defining the teachings of the church, or the Apostles' doctrine as the foundation of the church for all time.

The first of these denials is most explicit. This is made very clear in Niebuhr's polemic against the Roman Catholic Church. The claim of final authority on the basis of its orders or its historic tradition again leads to that pretentiousness which puts the church outside of the judgment of God.

The church which claims to be itself the end of history, the fulfillment of history's meaning, seeks to prove the truth of its message by the continuity of its traditions, the "validity" of its order and the solidarity and prestige of its historic form. There is an obvious pathos in this attempt to achieve a transcendent perfection within history. The tradition and continuity by which it establishes its claim of catholicity

obviously reflect historical contingencies of Roman or of Anglo-Saxon or of some other history.¹

The authority of the Gospel or message of the church does not depend in any way on the authority of the means of disseminating it. Rather these means derive their authority from the power of the Message.

Actually the authority of the Gospel is not derived from the power, prestige, or authority of the church. On the contrary, the authority of the church is derived from the Gospel.²

In the last analysis, in terms of the reformation, Niebuhr maintains the concept of the "priesthood of all believers" as opposed to the authority of an apostolic succession. The Gospel strikes men with power wherever it is heard and believed, and where this happens, individuals achieve an authority beyond any human ecclesiastical organization.

It is not the goodness of the historic vehicle: the church, nor yet the virtues of the preacher which moves men to repentance and faith. When the Gospel is heard at all, it is heard by those who have discerned the voice of Christ beyond and above the confused counsels of us poor preachers and recognize a majesty of power and love considerably more glorious than any ecclesiastical majesty or power.³

This priesthood of all believers must not be understood as the individual's capacity to comprehend the full truth, but

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Faith and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 239.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Reunion of the Church Through the Renewal of the Churches," Christianity and Crisis, VII:20 (November 24, 1947), 5.

³Ibid.

rather on "his indivisible responsibility to God, and upon an assurance of mercy for his sins which no institution can mediate, if individual faith is wanting."⁴

The final authority of the church lies not with a specific order within the church, but with the entire community which has been touched by the grace and judgment of God. This is partly mediated to individuals through the tradition of the church and through its theological learning, without which the church loses the "waters of life."⁵ But even this leaves room for the interpretation of revelation by private caprice of individuals. What is there to preserve in the church a unity of message and protect it from heresy? The answer to this is the Christian Church as a consensus. Thus it was for instance that the church found it necessary to assert the Trinitarian dogma to protect its faith in Christ.⁶ In the early church, according to Niebuhr, this was the only justifiable method for dealing with the problem of heresy, of new doctrines grounded on individual judgment, visions, or fancies.⁷ For the church must become cheap and

⁴Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man I: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), p. 60.

⁵Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Weakness of Common Worship in American Protestantism," Christianity and Crisis, XI:9 (May 5, 1951), 70.

⁶Reinhold Niebuhr, Self and the Dramas of History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955), pp. 96-7.

⁷Ibid., p. 92.

banal, sentimental and moralistic, and without discipline, as long as it lacks "the discipline of the Christian consensus."⁸

The validity of the message of the church or its ability to "impart" grace lies not on the historic tradition of its order but rather on the power of its message itself. It is in the Gospel of the church that its authority can be discovered.⁹ But Niebuhr is never very explicit as to what this Gospel is and from what source it is derived. It seems quite safe to say that he does not hold that it is the infallible witness of the Apostles. He does, however, speak of the message of judgment and forgiveness as the "divine word."¹⁰ And he also attributes to the church which preaches the forgiveness of sins to sinners as speaking the "Oracles of God."¹¹ But mostly he merely says of the Gospel that it is the message which possesses saving power.¹²

But to discover the sources from which this message is derived is a difficult task in the thought of Niebuhr. On

⁸Niebuhr, Faith and History, pp. 239-40.

⁹Niebuhr, "The Reunion of the Church Through the Renewal of the Churches," p. 5.

¹⁰Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 242.

¹¹Reinhold Niebuhr, "Has the Church Any Authority?" Christianity and Crisis, X:3 (April 3, 1950), 36.

¹²Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 34.

the one hand, there is no such thing as final truth in history, and for Niebuhr, even Christ Himself was wrong in His interpretation of the Kingdom of God, and He was followed in His error by both St. Paul and the early church.¹³ On the other hand, he maintains that the discovery of truth is not a process, but that it is established once and for all in God's action in history through Christ.

The church is thus not grounded upon a slowly dawning consciousness of the true significance of Christ. It is founded in the miracle of the recognition of the true Christ in the resurrection.¹⁴

In some places it seems that the validity of the message of the church is to be measured by what might be called an empirical method. The Gospel message accomplished a purpose in people, and where this happens, it speaks with authority. So Niebuhr says:

The Gospel must be validated by proving itself "sharper than a two-edged sword" in speaking to the condition of man, in moving him to repentance and in revealing the glory and the redemptive mercy of God to him in the experience of repentance and faith.¹⁵

So Niebuhr also describes the church as believers who are not afraid of life or death, who are persuaded that all of life

¹³ Reinhold Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), p. 49.

¹⁴ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 148.

¹⁵ Niebuhr, "Reunion of the Church Through the Renewal of the Churches," p. 5.

is in the hands of a God who was supremely in Christ, and who therefore do not fear the final judgment, not because of their own perfection, but because of forgiveness for sinners.¹⁶

But it is not enough to say that Niebuhr holds that the Gospel remains the Gospel only in so far as it accomplishes a purpose. He insists on certain basic ingredients in the Gospel message, though he does not thoroughly define them. In one case, he states that the Gospel is not complete as the revelation of God if it does not include the message of the forgiveness of sins through the historical work of Christ.

The revelation of Christ is not completed until the little Christian community surveys the whole Christian epic, which includes the life and teachings of Christ, but also and supremely the sacrificial death upon the Cross, understood by Christ as a necessary "ransom for many."¹⁷

At another time he defines the faith of the church as having three basic parts.

The faith of the Christian community, that the expectations of the ages have been fulfilled in Christ, that the hidden sovereignty of God has been fully revealed, and the meaning of life disclosed and fulfilled, is expressed in the succinct phrase of St. Paul. . . .¹⁸

¹⁶ Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 238.

¹⁷ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man II: Human Destiny, p. 53.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 54.

But generally, the content of the Gospel is summed throughout Niebuhr's writing in the words "judgment and mercy." The church is finally the community where the judgment and mercy of God are known.¹⁹

But in spite of the vagueness with which he presents the Gospel message, and the source from which it is derived, Niebuhr still insists on a unity within the church in defining its different facets of doctrine. The church must insist on "the unity of the one message in Christ."²⁰

¹⁹Niebuhr, Faith and History, p. 239.

²⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Problems of the World Church," The Messenger, XVI:16 (August 21, 1951), 6.

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