

Review:

John Yocum, *Ecclesial Meditation in Karl Barth*

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In 1947 Barth delivered a series of lectures on the Heidelberg Catechism to students at Bonn. Commenting on the sacraments of Lord's Supper and baptism he speaks of them as *mediations*. Is that not an odd thing for someone who demonstrated a profound concentration on the christomorphicity of grace from the 1920s onwards to say? Is Christ himself not the Mediator, and therefore the sole mediation between God and world? Something that Barth had come to learn after the reviews of the 1922 edition of *Der Römerbrief*, eminently through the critiques of Eric Przywara and Paul Tillich, was that revelation is mediated, always and necessarily received in mediated form (revelation is never, as in certain versions of pietism, directly immediate). Of course the Self-giving of God had concrete bodied form in Jesus Christ, but that Christ-form itself was further mediated. Hence in *CD I.1* Barth developed the threefold form of the Word of God – as embodied in Jesus Christ, through the scriptures, and through ecclesial proclamation. The second and third series of mediations are themselves formed by, take their shape in, and have their corresponding life only in and through their witness to the primary form (Barth even at this stage gave room to hearing God's Word in non-specifically ecclesial form). *CD I* is an extended series of reflections on the mediated forms of God's singular Word. So when Barth speaks of baptism and the Lord's Supper in 1947 as mediations he carefully hedges this with terms such as that of 'witness' that resists the possibility of the immediacy of grace suggested to him by the concept of *ex opere operato*. He is careful to prevent any suggestion of the immediacy of grace –

direct, certainly, in that what is mediated is nothing other or less than God's own Self, but nevertheless not immediate, i.e., not unmediated (a mediated directness rather than Yocum's "mediated immediacy" [p. 74]). In fact, at this stage the sense of *mediation* seems to give them a sense of *creative* contribution to that which is mediated. So in his important reflections on the dialectic of veiling and unveiling of revelation in the very humanity of Jesus Christ Barth suggests that the very mediation itself bears a certain potential for erroneous readings of its complex 'text' that goes all the way down.

Given the important place that the notion of *sacramental* mediation plays in Barth's work until *CD IV*, why does he later move to identify the very category of sacrament exclusively with Jesus Christ? What is the theological significance of this move? John Yocum's interesting study, the fruit of his doctoral dissertation under John Webster at Oxford University, tackles the second question and offers suggestions as to how radical the shift was. He rightly undercuts the ease of those who see in the *Church Dogmatics (CD)* a consistently static Barth whose later volumes are in direct continuity with the earlier ones. The Barthian corpus is much more interesting than the 'continuity' model (such as that Yocum sees in Paul Molnar) would allow for, and its theological reflections endlessly figured, and reconfigured.

A question needs to be asked, though, about the relative lack of contextualising features in this book so that Yocum rarely asks in any depth concerning the 'why' of Barth' shift. Recited are the widely known factors of Barth's increasing aversion to all forms of synergism, in particular with his polemical concern with Roman Catholicism, existentialism, and secularised European Christianity in the 1950s [p. 124]. But is this brief suggestion, largely read out of *CD IV.3.1*, sufficient to explain what was going on? As the study of Timothy Gorrige has quite convincingly demonstrated, after the likes of F-W. Marquardt and even Eberhard Busch (to a much lesser extent Bruce

McCormack), Barth's theology is inadequately understood unless it is read contextually and politically. Serious work needs to be done at this level too. In other words, a case could be made that Yocum, at his best, would only be doing some of the necessary work required. This point could be reinforced by observing that, as is typical of a great many Barth commentators, the *CD* dominates the material, albeit with a decent comparison at a point of *The Teaching of the Church Regarding Baptism*. But it is important to ask just what happened to Barth's theology between *Der Römerbrief* and *CD I*. Is this not important for a study on ecclesial mediation?

Yocum does do a decent job of asking concerning the *theological significance* of the shift, a change in theological presentation that is much more interesting than a shift to "a new nomenclature" [p. 146]. For him something comes to be lost that is theologically important – that God's revelation in Jesus Christ is itself mediated, and that the church's bearing witness to this is itself an *effective sign* (unfortunately less is done on the possibility that this form of signification contributes both for good *and ill* to the shape of the coming Kingdom). Barth "has eliminated a category of effective, divine-human action." [p. 146] In other words, as Yocum reads from T.F. Torrance's critique of Barth, *CD IV.4* negates "the instrumental role of the Church in Christ's work." [p. xii]

If one rejects the concept of sacraments, as Barth does [later], on the principle that the action of God and the action of human beings must be sharply distinguished, such that human action does not reliably mediate the divine action, then one risks distorting the relationship between God and human beings that is manifested in the Church. ... [T]he grounds for the shift are faulty, and ... the consequences are deleterious to Barth's theology. ... [For instance, it] also calls into question the status of the Bible as a definitive and reliable norm for theology as a rational, scientific activity. Furthermore,

it makes it difficult to provide a coherent account of the way that Christian preaching and ethical witness function. [pp. xi, xiii, xiv]

Yet the material reflections are quite thin on certain important occasions. As such they require pressure in order to be pushed further. For instance, although there are some hints, there is insufficient delving into the theological ontology that is necessary for a robust theology of ecclesial sacramentality – in particular, the kenotics of the God who turns to creatures in *covenant* relation (and therein the divine-human relations cannot be construed as competitive); of the God whose way with the world is to keep faith with One abused, rejected and executed, and so on. As Donald MacKinnon frequently emphasised with reference to Hans Urs von Balthasar and Jürgen Moltmann, it is precisely the theological implications of reflections on this One that are salient to what church is theologically and should become in practice. Just what would a theology of ecclesial mediation look like, and what dangers would this concept need to be attentive to? What would a church look like that lived a grace of giving, of dispossession even unto death? Perhaps a conversation with one such as John Milbank would help clarify some of the issues and the pitfalls involved here. Yocum is quite right, nevertheless, to lay *trinitarian* grounds for a sufficiently theological account of ecclesial mediation, and the theme of ‘covenant’ features prominently in places.

... Barth’s protest against ‘sacramentalism’ points to the need to ground any notion of ecclesial mediation in the reality of Christ’s unique saving work and in the ongoing action of the Holy Spirit. A robust theology of ecclesial mediation must be grounded in a robust Pneumatology that gives full value to the role of the Holy Spirit as what George Hunsinger has called ‘the Mediator of communion’. The frequent absence of such a solid connection between an account of the Church’s mediating role and the work of the Spirit – what Reinhard Hüter calls the dissolution of Pneumatology into ecclesiology –

sharpens the point of Barth's attack on sacramentalism and brings into higher relief the need for a nuanced, Christocentric and Trinitarian theology of ecclesial mediation. [p. xxi]

In the second place, Yocum does not ask whether *CD* IV.4 does correct *any* weakness in *CD* I. Yet it is the implications of a dominating Logos-sarx christological model in volume I that has troubled in different ways the likes of Rowan Williams and Hans Frei. Also, can the concept of the one Word of God and two parables of it (*CD* IV.3.1) not perform a similar function to the earlier material on the threefold Word of God (*CD* I.1), while more carefully differentiating the singular form of the Word incarnate from its (ecclesial) witnesses? It is similarly arguable that *CD* IV.4's ethic of correspondence in certain ways parallels Barth's earlier work on the epistemic *nachdenken* (most famously articulated in the *Anselm* text). Moreover, the thesis in *CD* IV.3.1 on the prophetic work of Christ can well open, if handled carefully, pathways to a trinitarian notion of ecclesial mediation – that the church's witness is what is meant by the ongoing prophetic work of Christ. Finally, Barth's treatment of the activity involved in praying the Lord's Prayer could arguably be compared to earlier material on mediations of grace, especially when Barth develops it in terms of a theology of *concursum*.

Certainly, however, a cogent case can be made for considering the earlier work as capable of lending itself to a model of *participation* (that the human is not merely grounded in the divine, but continually participates in it) whereas the later makes the relation sound more external. It is this dominating imagery that creates room for a thesis such as Yocum's in identifying something theologically rich as being lost in *CD* IV.4, and entails that "the distinctions [between divine and human agency] are perhaps too sharply drawn." [p. 134] Yocum's generalised and occasionalistic, but nevertheless

suggestive, comments on the need for a more robust pneumatology here have a large target to aim at. Perhaps a more sustained engagement with pneumatology would have allowed Yocum to ask a further, but no less important, question concerning whether the sacramental can be limited only to church, and not to, for instance, the non-human world.

What is the value of this book in the ever burgeoning corpus of Barth-study? Certainly it makes few if any novel theological proposals as such (the introduction of Congar into the conversation is problematic – in the early chapters in particular it is too piecemeal, brief and unannounced). I am only partially convinced, however, that there has been a significant theological shift in Barth's work for the worse; but I certainly do feel that several of the models Barth uses later can create certain problems, and that therefore it is their introduction that has, at certain key points, been a disimprovement. Nevertheless, Yocum's documentation of his thesis is on the whole very useful, especially since it entails that the significance of the movements and developments in Barth's later work is more far-reaching than its previous tracings with regard to Barth's later theology of baptism would imply. Yocum rightly suggests, then, that things are not quite the same later in terms of Barth's *theology* and not merely in terms of a simple shift in identifying the proper candidates for baptism. On the whole, this is a clear and well-written book that I will certainly make ample use of in my classes, even if that be with the reservations, qualifications, amplifications, and further detailed probings outlined above.

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