

Karl Barth in Conversation 3/4

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Seminar 6

Questions

People in Conversation: Theological Anthropology (*CD* III.2)

Reading: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, pp. 19-44, 47-54, 71-6, [91-93], 132-136, [145-148], 175-177, 203-220, 243-274 (**Note:** not the small print paragraphs)

Introduction

Barth, in his pre-Göttingen days (particularly 1916-1922) had so emphasised the sovereignty of God and the *krisis* of God over all things that many wondered whether Barth could have any place for a properly positive appreciation of creation, and especially human being within that created order. *CD*, II.2 went some way to providing the theological structure of any anthropology that Barth would develop:

- God's gracious self-election is so as to be God *for us*
- God's gracious self-election is for fellowship with human being
- Human being is elected (i.e., chosen to be created, and this for covenant fellowship) in Jesus Christ
- Therefore, Jesus Christ as electing God and elected man *is* human being –Christian knowledge of both who God is and who humanity is is christologically formed
- Human being is only truly itself in the electing response of obedience and witness

We know of man – only of man, but of man from the Word of God – that his being on earth and under heaven is wholly determined and created in order that God should speak with him and that he should hear

and answer. We know of man – only of man, but of man from the Word of God – the full significance of the depth of God’s mercy and goodness towards him; of the seriousness of the interest with which God the Lord has turned to His creature; and the praise and gratitude which He awaits from His creature and which He is ready to receive as His supreme and only honour. We know of man – only of man, but of man from the Word of God – that God Himself wills to have dealings with him and to make him His partner in the history between them; and that at the climax of this history God Himself willed to become and did become what man is – the Creator a creature, this creature, not a stone or plant or animal, but man. [CD, III.2, 17f.]

CD, III.2 draws these themes out, and has significant sections on the unity of body and soul (re-emphasising embodiedness as gift), and human being in her time (emphasising the *created/gifted* limitations of being human and finite).

III.2, then, treats humanity in the context of the dignity and glory of creatureliness. Barth has further prepared for this in III.1 when discussing the relation of creation and covenant – creation is the external basis of the covenant, and the covenant is the internal basis or goal of the creation. So in III.2 he claims that “in practice the doctrine of creation means anthropology – the doctrine of man.” [CD, III.2, 3] “The universe was created for the sake of God’s gracious plan. Hence its goal and centre is man; its reality stands or falls with the fact that there is human reality within it.” [CD, III.2, 14]

That the cosmos finds itself in this harmony with the history enacted in it is what the Word of God declares also about the cosmos as it addresses man in his existence under heaven and on earth. ... Its [the doctrine of creation’s] understanding of God’s creation is ‘anthropocentric’ to the extent that it follows the orientation prescribed for it by the Word of God; the orientation on man. [CD, III.2, 12]

Yet, it must be emphasised, “Man is certainly not His only creation. Man is only *a* creature and not *the* creature.” [CD, III.2, 3] This Barth terms human “insignificance” [III.2, 4], and the independent dignity of other forms of creation. Barth’s fear is that “If

we confine our considerations to man, our attitude to the wider creation must certainly not be one of blindness, indifference or disparagement.” To reinforce the point, he recognises that in the opening Genesis accounts “Man is the creature of God as he is placed by God in the world which God has created.” Human setting-in-life is, then, one of multiple dependencies. Once again Barth’s ‘post-liberal’ concerns surface:

We are concerned with man as set in the cosmos and therefore not with man as alone before God or alone addressed by Him; not with a cosmos concentrated in man, and perhaps having no independent reality, but being only in the phenomenal world, as radical Idealism maintains, of the mind of man. ... We know the cosmos only through its relation to man. Yet this does not justify us in supposing that its life is necessarily exhausted in this relation. Anthropology has to do with man in the cosmos. [CD, III.2, 4, 15]

III.2 is a volume tracing Barth’s sense of the placing of human being, theologically prepared for by the themes of election (II.2) and covenant (III.1). But this theological “ontology of this particular *creature*” [CD, III.2, 13, my emphasis] is never far from the theologico-ethical sensibility of what Barth terms creaturely loyalty:

We see him in the proximity of angels and animals. If we forget that he must remain loyal to the earth, we shall never truly understand him; and even less so if we forget that heaven is above him.

To be loyal to the earth, Barth makes clear, however, would involve not an ethical ontology developed from the *phenomenality of the human*, from a broadly empirical study of the surface features of being this particular animal (or cognitively closer to being ‘angelic’ for German Idealism).

Instead, the human is a theological consideration as much as is the divine:

The Word of God essentially encloses a specific view of man, an anthropology, an ontology of this particular creature. This being the case, we must accept this view in faith, reflect it in the confession of faith, and develop it as a perception of faith. For this reason the

doctrine of man has always been the central element in the dogmatics of the creature. It has here its necessary right of domicile. [CD, III.2, 13]

Barth claims that this human being “is basically hidden from and inaccessible to man, which absolutely transcends him and is therefore a realm of being higher than man, corresponding though not equal to the transcendence of God.” [CD, III.2, 14] Consequently, in articulating what we think we know about the human “in the light of the Word of God ... [that] is thus its foundation” “we have always to reckon with the possibility that theology as a human work may and will seriously fail to do justice *in concreto* to its object. ... Inevitably, then, theology can give only a dim and blurred reflection.” [CD, III.2, 20]

Questions

1. *What factors have enabled the ‘dualistic’ and God-intense Barth of the Römerbrief ‘period’ to turn his attention to anthropological questions?*

What kind of dualism did *Romans II* tend toward? Walter Lowe – ethical rather than ontological. But Barth’s rhetoric leans him towards exploitation in an ontologically dualist direction also.

- Gradual development of christology [cf. CD, I.1 and I.2] – that God was in Christ
- Election [CD, II.2] – Jesus Christ as electing God and elected man
- Creation and covenant [CD, III.1] – creation as external basis of the covenant, and covenant as internal basis of creation
- Anthropology [CD, III.2] – humanity in Jesus Christ as God’s good creation

2. *What is the significance of Barth’s comment that anthropology “asks what kind of a being it is which stands in this relationship with God.” [CD, III.2, 19]?*

- Undermines the operating procedures of ‘general anthropologies’
- Epistemic – humanity known through the event of revelation
- Ontological – humanity has its ground and being in the event of grace

This special origin and this special claim mark it off from all the every different attempts at self-knowledge which seem to be its competitors.
[CD, III.2, 21]

3. *How does Barth interpret the Psalmist's (rhetorical) question "What is man that you are mindful of him?"*.

Barth acknowledges that its context in Ps. 8 is one of astonishment that the creation of human being happened at all [CD, III.2, 20]. Thus implicit in his recognition there is emphasised

- Astonishment over *grace*
- Gratitude for the giving of grace

But this points to something further – Barth observes that the Psalmist's exclamation is reinterpreted christologically in Heb. 2:5ff. – that the human being who has this status of reflecting the relationship of God to humanity and humanity to God is Jesus Christ.

4. *How does Barth envisage the relation between theological anthropology and anthropological accounts independent of it?*

There are 2 main types of non-theological anthropological account, those coming from: (1) speculative theory, and (2) the exact sciences.

- speculative theory – makes rival and competitive claims over against theological anthropology
 - there can be no worldview *independent* of theology
 - theological anthropology cannot be a "species" of, or moment within, a general anthropology
 - attempt self-knowledge – but there can be no self other than the self of God's covenant creature
- the exact sciences – potential complementarity

Scientific anthropology gives us precise information and relevant data which can be of service in the wider investigation of the nature of man, and can help to build up a technique for dealing with these questions.
[CD, III.2, 24]

The problem arises when this oversteps its bounds and closes itself and constructs a worldview. It can only, at best, speak of the *phenomena* of the human and not its being.

5. “*Sinful man as such is not the real man.*” [CD, III.2, 32] *What does Barth mean by this?*

Barth’s is a positive account of the human under sin that nonetheless does not weaken the ability to speak of the “radical and total” distortion of people under the conditions of sin [CD, III.2, 28]. The reason for this is election – the constitution of the human in the creative grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, “We do not forget, of course, that even as the sinner that he is man is still the creature of God.” [CD, III.2, 27]

- Ontology of the human in divine election of grace – “This man is man” [43] “The ontological determination of humanity is grounded in the fact that one man among all others is the man Jesus.” [132]
- Thus, “If he is the object of God’s favour, his self-contradiction may be radical and total, but it cannot even be the first word about him.” [31]
- “Sinful man as such is not the real man. ... The sin of man is secondary. It is not ultimate, and therefore it is not primary.” [32]
- “We are forbidden to take sin more seriously than grace, or even as seriously as grace.” [41]

6. *What dangers and warnings does Barth detect and advance in “founding ... anthropology on Christology” [CD, III.2, 44]?*

There can be no simple deduction of anthropology from Christology, for 3 main reasons:

- Our sinfulness
 - We exist in antithesis which can only be known in and through the event of God’s revelation, and not through our insight

We are not clear or transparent to ourselves, nor can we see ourselves from any higher standpoint. We are totally and not just partially incapable of occupying any independent vantage point from the height of which we might penetrate and judge ourselves. [30]

- Jesus' sinlessness
- Jesus Christ as original and basic form of the human, the ground and goal of the covenant

7. *Comment on Barth's phrase "the one Archimedean point given us beyond humanity" [CD, III.2, 132] and the claim "because this One is also man, every man in his place and time is changed, i.e., he is something other than what he would have been if this One had not been man too."* [CD, III.2, 133]

- "In its investigation of the nature of man in general, it [viz., theological anthropology] must first look away from man in general and concentrate on the one man Jesus, and only then look back from Him to man in general." [53]
- Our identity is gift and thus involve an ontological *following after* God's giving – "Our self-knowledge can only be an act of discipleship." [53]
- "We cannot break free from this Neighbour. He is definitively our Neighbour." [133]
 - "His freedom will be his freedom to decide for God" [74].
 - "Basically and comprehensively, therefore, to be a man is to be with God." [135]
 - "Godlessness is not, therefore, a possibility, but an ontological impossibility for man." [136]
 - Humans cannot succeed in making themselves unreal

8. *How 'relational' is Barth's ontology of the human?*

Being of the human as answer, response, responsibility, discipleship.

- Have our humanity in Jesus Christ
- Jesus Christ as man for God .
- But Jesus Christ as God and man *for others*

There is not in Him a kind of deep, inner, secret recess in which He is alone in Himself or for God ... apart from His fellows, untouched by their state or fate [211]

- “fellow humanity” [*Mitmenschlichkeit* 212] “belongs to His innermost being.”
- “As He is for God, so He is for man; and as He is for man, so He is for God.” [216]
- Therefore, God-human not to be seen as simple *contrastive* terms, or in *competition* with one another, but rather complimentary – with the former [God] being the ground, source, and constitution of the latter [humanity].
- Hence divine judgment involves not merely Self-vindication but also the vindication of the human against all that defiles and oppresses it. “It means that God does what is right for Himself and therefore for men.” [32]
- Therefore our being for God entails a *necessary* being for others
 - *Imago dei* as relational, I-Thou encounter of responsibility (explicated largely in terms of male-female unity-in-difference)
 - “A pure, absolute and self-sufficient I is an illusion, for as an I, even as I think and express this I, I am not alone or self-sufficient” [245]. I am in encounter, in responsibility [247]

9. *How does Barth distinguish between an analogia entis and an analogia relationis?*