

Seminar 7

The God of Salvation: The Judge Judged in Our Place (CD, IV.1)

Reading: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV.1, §59.2, ‘The Judge Judged in Our Place’

Introduction

It may have been merely by chance that Barth composed his massive doctrine of reconciliation at the time of the serious tensions of Cold War politics, but it is no less impressive and poignant for this ‘happy’ accident. Reconciliation meant for him not allowing himself to become trapped in any childish Cold War rhetoric, as if God’s ways could be clearly identified with either East or West.¹ Moreover, God’s purposes are delineated in Jesus Christ as being those of reconciliation – something which events of the time all too clearly demonstrated humanity to be in dire need of.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the 1950s was a time of European rebuilding and prosperity: a time of the formation of a ‘mass culture’. Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation is significant when viewed also in this context:

Barth saw very clearly that the all conquering capitalist society of his day generated manifold forms of alienation and destruction. The powers of Leviathan, Mammon, and the ideologies, he said, tear apart the individual and society as well. [Gorringe, 221f.]

¹ Gordon H. Clark fears that Barth’s refusal to castigate the communist East for its atrocities is an “indifference to the post-World War II struggle”, a “shutting his eyes to historical reality ... and denying the commandments of morality” [*Karl Barth’s Theological Method*, 2nd edn. (The Trinity Foundation, 1997), 44]. This Clark contrasts with Barth’s opposition to Hitler [*ibid.*, 52ff.]. Frederick Nymeyer complains that “Barth is ‘soft’ on communism. ... *Progressive Calvinism* does not consider Stalin to have been a ‘man of stature’ nor in any way better than Hitler. ... And Barth calls the most infamous butcher of

God's Freedom for the Human, and Human Freedom for God

Barth had developed a reputation for, among many other things, iconoclastically calling into question the theological significance of human achievements, and the patterns of history through his earlier emphasis on God as the Wholly Other bringing *krisis*. Of course, his thinking had moved a long way, and become much more complex, since his explosive *Römerbrief* of 1922. The very important lecture of 1956 entitled *The Humanity of God* demonstrated that Barth could not conceive of the terms God and human in ontologically dualistic, or as competitive, terms. The notion of 'the proper humanism of God' entailed that (1) God could not be, because of what we know of God in Jesus Christ (the *actuality* of God's being-in-act in the world), conceived as being without or against, human beings as such; (2) human being cannot be conceived as being human without, or against, God; (3) that their unity in Jesus Christ is the proper place to view their (covenant) relationship. Here all those complaints about Barthian 'objectivism', or the mere inversion of liberalism, or again the loss of the human now come to look distinctly misplaced. God, Barth argues, is the God who is free for incarnate life for the good of creation. God is not, as such, *free from this humanity*, as if God can mask God's own Self from the relations that God has *ad extra* in Christ – that abstraction cannot be properly articulated on Christian grounds.

CD, II.2 had already articulated this freedom of God for the human, that the human is founded solely in the free love/grace of God (through the theme of the Son as *electing God*). But there is a dual movement here – the human has its foundation, its truth in God. That is why in the last session we looked at the sense in which knowledge of God and knowledge of human being are inextricably linked and filtered through the person of Jesus Christ in Barth. And that, of course, is a theme found especially in John Calvin. But what is more, not only is there a dual movement in relation to knowledge, but in terms of the truth of the very life of the human itself: its life in grace *for response*, and thus Jesus Christ is the response of the human to God (the theme of the Son as *elect Man*). Jesus Christ in II.2 is both electing God and elected human, simultaneously (although there remains an important a theological priority in the first pole of the movement).

all time a 'man of stature'! Our readers will begin to understand how strongly our values differ from those of Barth." ['The Real Meaning of Neo-Orthodoxy', *Contra Mundum* 12 (Summer 1994)]

That dual christological dynamic, expressed particularly through the theme of the covenant, is played out again in *CD*, IV, the volume dealing with Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. Thomas Aquinas had spoken of grace as entailing an *exitus* and *reditus* in the event of salvation. As mentioned above, Barth has christologised this – Jesus Christ is the *exitus* and the *reditus* – and this is displayed in the theologically significant architecture of *CD* IV.1 and IV.2.² Christologically developing the movement in the parable of the prodigal son, Barth composes IV.1 around the *exitus* theme 'The Way of the Son of God into the Far Country' [title of *CD*, IV.1, §59.1], the deity in self-imposed exile (or, in covenant terms, the depths of the divine promise 'I will be your God'), and IV.2 around the *reditus* theme 'The Homecoming of the Son', the human in exaltation (or, in covenant terms, the depths of the divine command and human commitment to the 'you will be your people').

IV is also structured around the development of Calvin's doctrine of the three offices of Christ, IV.1 focuses on the kingly ('descent' of the king) and IV.2 on the priestly ('ascent' of priestly offering) – IV.3 is on the prophetic (the declaration of this finished work); and IV.1 and IV.2 radicalise the Reformation understanding of the two states (humiliation and exaltation) by unifying them as simultaneous occurrences. So Webster is right to announce that

In one sense, the entire argument of *Church Dogmatics IV* is nothing more than an extended paraphrase of the name of Jesus, in whom God's work as creator, reconciler and redeemer is fulfilled. [Webster, 2000, 116]

God's Being-in-Act

What this does in terms of the relation of incarnation and soteriology is remind one of II.1's thesis on God's being in act. It should be recalled how Barth went about rejecting the notion of the *Deus absconditus* in II.2 on the grounds that it separated the being of God from God's act in Jesus Christ. This separation, of course, creates all kinds of problems for the notion of revelation as God's Self-giving, of Christology as the presence of the divine under the conditions of human life, of talk of God's love and

² Webster, 2000, 117: "Matters of construction follow dogmatic conviction – about the inseparability of incarnation and atonement, about the being of God as the one who wills, establishes and realizes salvation, about the Holy Spirit as God's act of creating and commissioning the people of God, and about true human existence as glad acknowledgement of the free grace of God in restoring us to covenant fellowship with himself."

grace since God can and is different in God's Self from the way God appears to us in revelation (and that, further, creates all kinds of pastoral issues).

But for Barth, in contrast, being and act are not two separable moments – God's act is *Self*-revelation, and therefore the act of giving God's being in the revelational event. Who Jesus is is inseparable from what he does, and what he does is inseparable from who he is – only God incarnate could have done what Jesus did in our place, and only the acts that Jesus performed could have been the acts that God performed. God is as God does, and God does as God is. On this Webster comments, albeit all too briefly, that

as a further variation on the classical traditions of Christology and soteriology, Barth ties together the deity of Christ and his obedience, thereby pushing the lowliness of the incarnate one back into the being of God himself. [Webster, 2000, 115]

§59 offers, Webster continues a little further on,

offers a unified depiction of incarnation and atonement as, first, an act of sheer divine majesty which is, second, directed towards human salvation and third, effective in human history by virtue of Jesus' presence as the risen one. [Webster, 2000, 120]

A Saving Life

Moreover, and importantly, the event of salvation is the 'product' or consequence of more than merely the cross.³ Indeed, the obedience of Christ throughout his life and his resurrection from the dead are as weighty in considerations of salvation for Barth. Gunton goes so far as to claim, although I think overdoing the point somewhat, that "Barth is above all a theologian of the resurrection, rather than of the incarnation or cross" [Gunton, 2000, 146]. This is better put in the qualification Gunton himself provides:

Although, however, the resurrection may bear the chief weight, it must not be forgotten that in one respect Barth shares with Irenaeus a concern to see the

whole of the events that form the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the way by which salvation is achieved. There is a *recapitulatio* (recapitulation) here, a strong conception of the second Adam fulfilling the promise of and to the first.

Barth's is, in a very real sense, an extended meditation on the implications of the patristic soteriological slogan, "the unassumed is the unhealed". The Son of God becomes human in order to heal, restore, and exalt human being (one can also find in Calvin's treatment of the Lord's Supper this notion of 'wonderful exchange'). In the person of Jesus is lived savingly the restoration of right relationships.

Judgment of Grace

This being of God and human in Jesus Christ, the covenant relationship, of course necessitates a fuller development of the *history* or *event* of this relationality than was provided in II.2 on election – this is done through the narrative christological focus of the doctrine of reconciliation; and an account of the person living as if this is not the proper/only form of the relationship – this is done through the prominence given to the multiple expressions of sin. Hence, Barth's dual christological movement retraces the thematic ground of, and subsequently rewrites, his earlier *krisis* theology of divine judgment – Jesus Christ is the Judge (divine movement) judged in our place (divinely vicarious humanity) and responds obediently to God (the human movement).⁴ Moreover, it is a significant rewriting of the latin atonement traditions – it remains *penal* (Christ as Judge judged) and a *representative substitution* (in our place), but it undoes the externality both of the legal fiction of much western thought (Luther – God declares us righteous even though we are not) and the legal demand (that God demands his right – the obedience of the creature) and also of the transaction between Father and Son (that the Son satisfies the Father's honour, propitiates the Father's wrath, pays back what is owed to the Father).

[See the *Ecce Homo* scheme driving this passage – Pilate and the crowd as the judges of Jesus because of how they adjudge themselves; Jesus as the human with whom God not only remains faithful but on whom God has judged with his Yes; the

³ Colin E. Gunton rightly makes this point in 'Salvation', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), 143-158 (146).

⁴ God reveals one thing as God-Man and effects another as Man-God.

judgment on Jesus by God and the people rebounds back on the people as God's No to the nature of their self-judgment, to their claiming to be have the power to know good and evil for themselves.]

There are several important thematic features worth noting in this text:

- The humility of God – this is an iconoclastic motif, standing against the false supernatural gods of power as control/domination, and the speculative otherworldly gods of absolute self-sufficiency.

Deus pro nobis is something which He did not have to become, but which ... He was and is and will be – the God who acts as our God, who did not regard it as too mean a thing, but gave Himself fully and seriously to self-determination as the God of the needy and rebellious people. [CD, IV.1, 214]

- God for us (*Deus pro nobis*) – representation vs. substitution (D. Sölle)

In understanding what Barth is saying we need to be careful not to be misled by the tendency of the English translation to fall into the language of substitution, the vehicle of a far less nuanced theology than Barth's. [Gorringe, 228]

- The nature of God's judgment – much of the western tradition has set 'wrath' and 'justice' over alongside 'love' and 'grace'. This is especially the implication of Calvinist double predestination: God is love to some, and wrathfully just damnation to others. Barth, however, as the reflections on 'God's Being-in-Act' above suggest, refuses the theology underlying this. He has already in II.1 spoken of God in terms of *freedom to love* (non-abstracted, since it is learnt about in Christ). The significance of this for his judicial language in IV.1 is profound:

[A]bsolutely decisive here is that we are not talking of the judge of the Western legal tradition, the judge invoked in the *Dies Irae* for example, but of the judge of the Hebrew tradition, whose task is to stand up for the

oppressed, who is a redeemer and saviour. Judgement therefore is not a threat ... but *promise*. [Gorringe, 229]

Thus, to be judged in Jesus Christ “means an immeasurable liberation and hope.” [233]

- The relation to human judgment. Barth conceives of the origin, essence and root of all sins in terms of the human desire to judge for herself (the Edenic tree of the knowledge of good and evil).

Redemption, therefore, is once again the attack on, or deconstruction of, human pretensions to the divine. [Gorringe, 229]

Moreover, we come to see ourselves as we truly are, without which we tend to judge ourselves more favourable than we should, more innocent and righteous [see 233]. But in Christ “I am jeopardised”.

- Punishment of sin. It makes little sense to speak of God needing to punish sin, and even less theologically sensible of the option of God punishing the sinner. Barth’s God is so trinitarianly conceived in grace that God is *Deus pro nobis*.

Deus pro nobis means simply that God has not abandoned the world and man in the unlimited need of his situation, but that He willed to bear this need as His own, that He took it upon Himself, and that He cries with man in this need. [CD, IV.1, 215]

Consequently, God takes the consequences of sin and death upon God’s Self in Jesus Christ, in order to destroy sin and restore the sinner to right relations.

The very heart of atonement is the overcoming of sin: sin in its character as the rebellion of man against God, and in its character of the ground of man’s hopeless destiny in death. [253]

Hence, Jesus Christ is the justice and righteousness of God within, for the world and against its distorted (unrighteousness, or not ‘right’) ways of

living and judging/imagining itself. In him, then, comes the ontological reconstitution of the human [258].