

The Christology of Karl Barth

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As with most contemporary theologians the theology of Barth is avowedly Christo-centric. For Barth, at least, this does not mean that the topics of theology are limited to a study of the person and work of Christ but rather that all theology finds its focal center in Christ and that all knowledge of God is obtainable only through Christ.¹

Barth insists, moreover, that the person of Christ and the work of Christ cannot be discussed separately. Liberals who speculated about the abstract person of Christ soon came to doubt the necessity for a doctrine of the God-man. The study of the person of Christ, therefore, must be embedded in a context of a study of the work of Christ for our salvation. It is in this work that we recognize his deity, and it is in this work that we see the significance and importance of a doctrine of the deity of Christ.²

The presupposition of the incarnation of Christ is the pre-existent *logos* and the Christian doctrine of the trinity. According to Barth God exists eternally in three modes. This is not Sabellianism for the modes are not revelatory modes but modes lying eternally in the ultimate being of God. The incarnation of Christ is an incarnation of the whole Godhead but by means of an incarnation of the second mode of God to whom has been peculiarly appropriated the task of redemption.³

Barth's statement of the virgin birth is very clear. He writes, "The incarnation of the Son of God out of Mary cannot indeed consist of the origination for the first time here and now of the Son of God, but it consists of the Son of God taking to himself here and now this other thing which exists previously in Mary, namely flesh, humanity, human nature, humanness. It claims that the man Jesus has no father (exactly in the way in which as the Son of God he has no mother)."⁴

The real purpose of the virgin birth is not to account for Jesus' sinlessness, nor even to explain the deity of Christ. It is rather a sign which stresses the humanness of Christ. The particular virtue of the virgin birth is that it stresses clearly that man himself does not cooperate in the work of redemption carried on by the second mode of the Godhead.⁵

The formula "Mary, Mother of God" Barth defends as a safeguard against Nestorianism. The phrase, however, is not particularly happy because it has led in modern times to the Roman church's glorification of Mary. The virgin birth, therefore, the reality of which points to the lack of all human work in salvation, has led by Roman exaltation of Mary to a stress upon human participation in salvation.⁶

¹ *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1936—), IV, 1, 123.

² *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 123-125.

³ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 484 ff. and 495.

⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 556.

⁵ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 193, 177, and 211.

⁶ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 138, 139, and 140.

The reality of the human nature of Christ is guaranteed by the virgin birth but also by the clear gospel record of the full humanity of Christ. All forms of Docetism and Apollinarianism Barth repudiates as doing less than justice to the Biblical records.⁷ The humanity he ascribes to Jesus Christ, however, is no "speculative humanity." Man does not first figure out what is humanity and then discover Jesus Christ to be that thing, but he discovers in Jesus Christ what is really humanity.⁸

Barth's testimony to the sinlessness of Christ is somewhat ambiguous. In his early Romans Commentary he had declared that Jesus stood as a

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sinner among sinners."⁹ This is sharpened in his dogmatics to the explanation that in becoming flesh Jesus partook of a sinful human nature but that Jesus never actually sinned. As the eternal son of God sin is actually impossible to Christ.¹⁰ In his most recent work this is further toned down to the "weakness" of sinful flesh. His sinlessness as the God-man, in any case, consisted of his overcoming the sinful fleshly nature which he had assumed. In spite of the reality of his temptation he refused to sin and by his death upon the cross in obedience to the will of the Father he triumphed over sin.¹¹

The true divinity of Christ is affirmed again and again by Barth. Jesus is "very God of very God," he argues. He was possessed even in his earthly life, even as a baby of Bethlehem, even in his death on the cross, of all the divine attributes. Never at any moment did the person of Christ cease to be God or limit in any way the fullness of his deity.¹²

In endeavoring to unfold the interrelationships between the two natures of Christ, Barth argues that the New Testament statements on the divinity of Christ cannot possibly be interpreted in any sub-Chalcedonian fashion. They speak neither of a human being who subsequently was exalted to divinity (Ebionism) nor of one who appeared among us as the mere personification and symbol of a divine being (Docetism). Barth defends strongly the Niceano-Constantinopolitan and the later Chalcedonian formula setting forth two natures united in the one person of Christ. He rejects explicitly all the historic formal heresies in the ancient church.¹³

In his discussion of the communication of the attributes of Christ he tries to hold a middle point between traditional Lutheranism and traditional Calvinism. Lutherans, he argues, are right on their main point that it is the divine and human Christ who is omnipresent but they are in constant danger of slipping into Eutychianism. Calvinists, on the other hand, are right in their main point that the natures are not to be confused, but they slip constantly into the danger of Nestorianism. The solution is to be found, so Barth avers, in the idea that the body

⁷ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 172, ff.

⁸ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 131.

⁹ *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 97.

¹⁰ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 150 ff.

¹¹ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 159, 234, 252 and I, 2, 150 ff.

¹² *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 475; IV, 1, 126, 128, and 180.

¹³ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 484 ff.; I, 2, 122 ff.

of Christ is present everywhere but in a different sense from that in which the deity of Christ is omnipresent. Precisely what constitutes this difference Barth does not explain.¹⁴

Over the much mooted phrase "impersonal humanity," Barth passes favorable judgment. What is really intended here, he asserts, is soundly Biblical. The humanity of Christ in its individuality never existed except in personal conjunction with the eternal God. The Son of God became man must be interpreted the Son of God assumed human nature.¹⁵

As to the "extra-Calvinisticum" Barth feels that the controversy was really a tempest in a teapot. The Lutheran argument that the logos exists only in conjunction with the flesh is correct unless one means, as some Lutherans almost seem to say, that the humanity absorbs all the deity of Christ. The Calvinists were right when they said that the logos was not exhausted in the fleshly existence, but no Calvinist meant to deny that the whole logos is actually joined to human flesh.¹⁶

With respect to the "incognito" of Christ Barth affirmed that even in his becoming flesh God still remains hidden. We have in Christ God for us, not God as he is in himself. By some this is interpreted to mean that for Barth all our statements about Christ have no correspondence to objective reality. I interpret this only to be an extreme statement of the purely analogical nature of all human thought about God and that rational evidences are not an adequate ground of faith.¹⁷

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Though in his earlier works Barth makes disparaging statements about the importance of Christ's bodily resurrection,¹⁸ in his *Church Dogmatics* he makes plain that he accepts a bodily resurrection on the third day. For him, the empty tomb is an historical fact, but belief in the deity of Christ is not grounded in the bodily resurrection as evidence or proof. The bodily resurrection, none-the-less, is significant because it is the sign that in Christ it is the ever-living God who acts. Without the resurrection therefore the Christian would be without hope.¹⁹

The appearances of Christ continued for forty days just as the Biblical narrative reports. The details of Scripture are in some places contradictory and need not be accepted in full, but the witness of the gospel to a post-resurrection ministry of Christ must be accepted. These appearances are not spiritual or psychic, but neither are they explainable in the terms of modern physics. We are to accept the Biblical testimony as it stands, so Barth affirms, and we are not to speculate about details.²⁰

¹⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 161 and 162; and II, 1, 488 ff.

¹⁵ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 163 ff.

¹⁶ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 168 ff. and IV, 1, 180.

¹⁷ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 176. This objective hiddenness of clarity in the humanity of Christ as over against a merely subjective hiddenness to sinful men represents one of the crucial differences between Barth and classical Protestant orthodoxy. See Cornelius Van Til, *Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1954), *passim*.

¹⁸ *The Epistle to the Romans*, 204; and *The Resurrection of the Dead* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1933), 135.

¹⁹ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 182; and IV, 1, 340, 341, and 728.

²⁰ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 318, 351, 352 *et passim*.

Following his post-resurrection ministry Christ ascended to the right hand of the Father. There he remains in a state of exaltation while his work is carried on amongst men through the Holy Spirit. This continues until the end of time when Christ will return.²¹

The relationship of Christ, the living word, to Scripture, the written word, is that between revelation and record or testimony to revelation. The primary word of God is Christ alone. He is not so much an act of God as God-acting. The Bible gives us an inspired record of Jesus Christ and is normative for all Christian witnessing. It functions today as the word of God when the Spirit brings the individual man, the believer, into acquaintanceship with Jesus Christ through this written word. When man individually and personally does not meet Christ where the church testifies that it has met Him in the past, namely, in the Bible, man must wait in humility and expectation that he too may find Christ where Christ has willed himself to be found.²²

The preached word is man's attempt to bear witness to Christ. This is done as man conforms his witness to the testimony of Scripture.²³

The relationship of the God-man to the atonement is inescapable. Christianity is not a religion of Christ and does not present a gospel of Christ but rather presents a gospel about Christ and his redemption. This redemption is possible only because of who Christ is. The miracle or reconciliation, Barth declares, cannot be the work of a super- or demi-god. The character of almighty grace demands the acknowledgement that its subject be identical with God in the full sense of the word. The work of the atonement is a substitutionary work of Christ in behalf and instead of sinful man. It is not so much a substitutionary satisfaction, however, as it is a substituted victory and a substituted repentance of Christ instead of the believer.²⁴

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Prepared for the Web in February 2008 by Robert I. Bradshaw

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²¹ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 132, 730, and 731.

²² *Das Christliche Verstandnis der Offenbarung* (Munchen: Chr. Kaiser, 1948), 8 ff.; and *Church Dogmatics*, I, 2, 457 ff.

²³ *Church Dogmatics*, I, 1, 98 ff.; and I, 2, 812 ff.

²⁴ *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, 484 *et passim*.