

PROCLAMATION AS EVENT

Barth's supposed 'universalism' in the context of his view of mission

Despite frequent denials, both by himself and by his more sympathetic critics, Karl Barth continues to be suspected of 'Universalism'. Nowhere would this suspicion be more prevalent than among Barth's 'evangelical' detractors who would rightly be concerned by the implications of a universalistic system for the mission of the Church. In what does evangelism consist if all men are ultimately saved anyway, regardless of their attitude? The proclamation of the Gospel would cease to have the urgency of a life and death issue. The mission of the Church would be reduced to the imparting of information concerning a cosmic alteration in the state of all men before God. While it would still be appropriate to proclaim this message, there would be little urgency in doing so, since the matter of each individual's eternal destiny would be settled in any case. A proper thankfulness towards God for this all-inclusive decision may continue to issue in eucharistic acts of goodness and mercy but the impetus for such acts would be at least diminished.

It is for this reason that a brief review of that which Barth actually says about the mission of the Church could provide indications concerning the validity of the charge of 'Universalism'. Is Barth's view of mission consistent with the common and critical parody of his concept of election as a universal *fait accompli*?

Barth first addresses the theme of the Church's mission within the *Church Dogmatics* under the general heading of 'The Proclamation of the Church' and as part of his exposition of 'The Doctrine of the Word of God'.¹ The Church's mission is determined by its commission by God to proclaim the Word of God. It only fulfils its mission and discharges its commission as it proclaims this Word. Yet its proclamation of the Word is not a merely human endeavour. As an outcome of the grace of God in Jesus Christ the proclamation of the Church is itself a form of the Word of God: 'Jesus Christ in the power of His resurrection is present wherever men really speak really of God'.² With this in view the task of proclamation must be undertaken both with prayer and with 'serious and honest work'.³

Previously Barth had stressed the foundational nature of the Church's proclamation. Proclamation is that which 'makes the Church the Church'. It is 'the function of the Church's life which governs all others'.⁴ The Word of God is itself God's positive command that such proclamation should occur. The Word of God is the content of that proclamation. The Word of God is also the criterion by which this proclamation is to be tested. The Word of God is finally the event which must occur if proclamation is truly to be proclamation.⁵

Barth's major treatment of the doctrine of the Church falls within the context of his 'Doctrine of Reconciliation'. In the introduction to these later volumes he speaks of the Church's mission as the ordination 'to be the community sent out as a witness in the world and to the world'.⁶ The Church is a 'missionary community'; a prophetic community in relation to the world. As such the Church 'stands vicariously for the whole world' as it 'bears witness to the truth known within it'.⁷ The Church is:

... ordained for its part to confess Him before all men, to call them to Him and thus to make known to the whole world that the covenant between God and man concluded in Him is the first and final meaning of its history, and that His future manifestation is already here and now its great, effective and living hope.⁸

The Church exists for the world because it exists for God and because God

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himself, as the electing God, exists for the world.⁹ While the Church is separated from the world by being called out of the world by the Word of God it is nonetheless, and at the same time, genuinely called into the world.¹⁰ It exists for the world as it performs its mission.¹¹ Though the world is in 'no position to know itself in its true reality',¹² it is given to the Church, in its knowledge of the covenant between God and man, to know the world as it truly is.¹³

The task of the Church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is the confession of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ The Church's ministry is positively defined by its call to exist actively in the world as the community of Jesus Christ,¹⁵ but it is not its ministry to do the work of Jesus Christ or to take His place (it cannot itself reconcile the world to God). Rather it is called to confess Jesus Christ to the world as 'the work of God accomplished for it'.¹⁶ The ministry of the Church must consist therefore in the proclamation, explanation and application of the Gospel as the Word of God.¹⁷ For Barth however there is no false tension between the Church's proclamation and the Church's action:

No matter how we understand speaking or proclamation on the one side and acting or healing on the other in the ministry of the community, and no matter what the community may think it is commanded to do and may actually try to fulfil along these two lines: there can be no doubt that in the light of its origin, of the Giver of its task who is also its content, its ministry and witness have always to move along these two lines: not merely along either the one or the other, but along both; and no less along the one than the other, but with equal seriousness and emphasis along both.¹⁸

While expounding the ministry of the Church, Barth draws a distinction between the Church's evangelism and the Church's mission. He defines evangelization as the task of the Church within the confusing context of the identification of Church and State: a confusion compounded by the 'even more curious custom of infant baptism'.¹⁹ Evangelization must consist in a call to those who are 'within in theory but not in practice'; a declaration of the Gospel 'on this shifting frontier between true and merely nominal Christians'.²⁰

But the mission of the Church in its narrower but also its true and original sense consists in the attesting of the Gospel amongst the nations of the world: the proclamation that Jesus Christ died and rose again also for those who have 'fallen victim' to 'false beliefs in false gods'.²¹ According to Barth, this task ought not to be restricted to some missionary society composed merely of 'friends of missionary work': the true missionary society 'can only act representatively for the whole community which is as such a missionary community'.²² The goal of the Church's mission is not to 'convert the heathen' since this is the work of God alone but it is to bear testimony to this work and to do so by serving and never by mastering or ruling.²³

The purpose of 'missions' must be to make known the Gospel. No other purpose, such as the extension of a European or American culture, must be allowed to predominate or even be admitted.²⁴ In its mission the Church must maintain a sincere respect and also an equally sincere lack of respect for other religions; that is to say, it must reject the 'crass arrogance of the white man', but must equally reject any compromise of the Gospel by attempts to locate 'points of contact and the like'.²⁵ 'Missions' must be concerned with the establishment of the whole ministry of the Church, contributing to general education and medical care, though such tasks must never become ends in themselves.²⁶

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But while all this demonstrates the crucial and irreducible place of mission in Barth's understanding of the Church, it does little to throw light on the original question. Does Barth's concept of mission tend to confirm or deny the suspicion of 'Universalism'? Is the proclamation of the Church the means through which the Holy Spirit causes a real change to occur in the lives of the hearers or is it merely the declaration that this change has already occurred in a manner that is inclusive of all men?

If we are to understand Barth correctly, we must realize that this question poses a false and artificial alternative. For Barth the response to both possibilities can only be 'Yes'. At the heart of Barth's theology there is a tension that various critics of Barth have sought to resolve in one way or the other. Barth is properly interpreted only when this tension is recognized as irresolvable. When it is recognized not as an 'either . . . or . . .' but as a 'both . . . and . . .'. When it is recognised, in fact, as being a wholly illusory and imposed tension in the first place.

For Barth the theological definition of all men is determined by the doctrine of election. Man's being is not some autonomous state determined by man's own being and actions, it is rather determined by God's gracious decision of election. This eternal decision has been made actual in Jesus Christ who Himself has borne the divine rejection on behalf of all men. All men are ontologically defined as elect in Him since He alone is the true definition of authentic humanity.²⁷

The Christian community consists of those who know this truth, both for themselves and for all men.²⁸ Therefore the content of their proclamation is that this decision concerning the being of man has been made:

In Jesus Christ thou, too, art not rejected - for He has borne thy rejection - but elected. A decision has been made, in Jesus Christ, concerning the futility of thy desire and attempt to live that life; and it has been decided that thou canst live only this other life.²⁹

Ontologically both the Christian and the non-Christian are defined as elect in Jesus Christ: their election is that which has happened 'to' rather than 'in' their human nature and history. The Christian is one who has recognized this fact while the non-Christian is one who has not yet recognized or no longer recognizes it. Thus far the distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian is noetic rather than ontological.³⁰

This same noetic distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian is continued in the fourth volume of *The Dogmatics*.³¹ That which makes a man a Christian is his knowledge of his being as a reconciled man. The individual addressed by the Church in its proclamation is one who 'lacks the knowledge of the Gospel and is thus supremely needy',³² one who 'suffers by reason of ignorance'.³³ The call to faith is a call 'to acknowledge' (*anerkennen*), 'to know' (*erkennen*), and 'to confess' (*bekennen*).³⁴

As this human act it has no creative but only a cognitive character. It does not alter anything. As a human act it is simply the confirmation of a change which has already taken place, the change in the whole human situation which took place in the death of Jesus Christ and was revealed in His resurrection and attested by the Christian community.³⁵

But to dismiss Barth's view of the distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian as being 'merely' noetic would be seriously to misrepresent him. Knowledge in this context, both for Barth and for the Bible, cannot merely mean the

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'acquisition of neutral information'. It is rather the process in which that which is known comes to man and totally transforms him. The event of the knowledge of salvation is itself an event of salvation; the 'total alteration of the one who it befalls'.³⁶ More than merely an enlightenment to knowledge, man's calling creates a 'distinction and alteration' of man's being and is thus both noetic and ontic in character.³⁷ It is such because, as a true event of proclamation and hearing, it is an event of the Holy Spirit.

Just as the work of the Son is no mere addendum to the eternal decision of the Father, so also the work of the Holy Spirit is no mere addendum to the completed work of the Son. Barth expounds man's salvation as a fully Trinitarian event. As a work of the Holy Spirit, man's reconciliation is an event not only *de iure* but also *de facto*.³⁸

The human act of faith has a cognitive rather than a creative character but, since this act can only occur in the power of the Holy Spirit, it is also a creative event: the positing of a new being, a new creation, a new birth, a total change in man's whole situation.³⁹ The work of the Holy Spirit in the 'calling' of the elect is the 'objective' difference (*die objektive unterscheidung*) which 'corresponds objectively' (*entspricht objektiv*) to the distinction which is peculiar to the elect.⁴⁰ The work of the Holy Spirit in the calling of men is that by which 'their election is accomplished in their life' (*zur Vollstreckung ihrer Erwählung in ihrem Leben*).⁴¹ For Barth, the Holy Spirit is the 'divine Noetic which has all the force of a divine Ontic'.⁴²

The ontological definition of all men as elect in Christ is not therefore some 'static Platonic form invalidating the genuine history and decisions of men'.⁴³ God's eternal decision of election, which is made actual in Christ, includes man's actual participation in that event of election. The relationship between Jesus Christ and other men is not merely ontological it is also dynamic and ontic. Reconciliation is an act of God, not a state but an event.⁴⁴

That all men are ontologically defined as elect in Jesus Christ implies that, in its mission, there is no other valid way for the Church to address men or to view men than according to this definition. There is no other valid definition of the being of man. The Church's testimony must be unequivocal. Its message is good-news. It must proclaim to every man that Jesus Christ died and rose again for him also. It must never reverse the ordained relationship between election and rejection, promise and threat.⁴⁵

But the election of man in Jesus Christ is not a decision of the eternal past that is 'left behind' by human history: this would be to totally misunderstand Barth's view of the nature of eternity as God's authentic temporality. The event of election includes an eternal decision of the Father, the actualization of that decision in the death and resurrection of the Son, and the realization of that decision in the life of the Christian in the power of the Holy Spirit. For Barth there is no tension here, still less a contradiction. There is an ontological definition that applies equally to all men. There is an ontic event in which the Holy Spirit remains the free Lord.⁴⁶

The Church is commissioned by God to declare this ontological definition; to proclaim the good-news of man's election in Jesus Christ. The Church does not possess the power to make any man one of the elect nor even to make it clear to any man that he is elected. This is the prerogative of God alone.⁴⁷ But when the Church's proclamation is truly proclamation, when it is truly a form of the Word of God, then not only a noetic human event but also an ontic and creative event occurs in the power of the Spirit. It would not be possible within this brief essay to give a comprehensive account of the manner in which Barth avoids the charge of 'Universalism'. It is rather the purpose of the essay simply to question whether his account of the Church's mission is consistent or inconsistent with a 'universalistic'

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scheme. In the expectation of a genuinely creative event taking place within the Church's proclamation in the power of the Holy Spirit lies an incentive for the Church's mission that it would be hard to reconcile with any form of 'Universalism'.⁴⁸

NOTES

1. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (hereafter C.D.), vols. I-IV, Eng. trans. eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh, 1956-75), I 2, pp.743ff.
2. C.D. I 2, p.752.
3. *ibid.*, p.755.
4. C.D. I 1, p.88.
5. *ibid.*, pp.89ff.
6. C.D. IV 1, p.152.
7. *ibid.*, pp.152f.
8. C.D. IV 3, p.681.
9. *ibid.* p.762.
10. *ibid.*, pp.763f.
11. *ibid.*, p.769.
12. *ibid.*, p.771.
13. *ibid.*, p.769.
14. *ibid.*, pp.787ff.
15. *ibid.*, pp.830f.
16. *ibid.*, pp.835f.
17. *ibid.*, p.843.
18. *ibid.*, p.863.
19. *ibid.*, p.872.
20. *ibid.*, p.873.
21. *ibid.*, p.874.
22. *ibid.*, p.875.
23. *ibid.*, p.876.
24. *ibid.*, p.875.
25. *ibid.*, p.875.
26. *ibid.*, pp.875f.
27. C.D. II 2, pp.94ff.
28. *ibid.* pp.318ff.
29. *ibid.* p.322.
30. *ibid.* p.321; cf. John E. Colwell, *Actuality and Provisionality: Eternity and Election in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1989), pp.259ff.
31. C.D. IV 1, pp.90ff.
32. C.D. IV 3, p.806.
33. *ibid.*, p.809.
34. C.D. IV 1, pp.740ff.
35. *ibid.*, p.751.
36. C.D. IV 3, p.510; cf. pp.183ff & 218ff.
37. *ibid.* pp.650ff.
38. C.D. IV 2, p.511.
39. C.D. IV 1, pp.751ff.
40. C.D. II 2, p.345; cf. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik, II 2* (Zurich, 1942), p.380.
41. C.D. II 2, p.348; cf. *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik, II 2* p.383.
42. Philip J. Rosato, S.J., *The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh, 1981), p.126; cf. John E. Colwell, *op. cit.*, pp.283ff. For this distinction between the ontological and the ontic, see John Macquarrie, *An Existentialist Theology: A comparison of Heidegger and Bultman* (1955), p.30; cf. also E. Jüngel, 'Das Dilemma der natürlichen Theologie und die Wahrheit ihres Problems: Überlegungen für ein Gespräch mit Wolfhart Pannenberg' in *Denken im Schatten des Nihilismus: Festschrift für Wilhelm Weischedel zum 70 Geburtstag*, ed. A. Schwan (Darmstadt, 1975), pp.419-440 (p.429).
43. John E. Colwell, *op. cit.*, p.282.
44. C.D. IV 1, p.6.
45. C.D. II 2, pp.320ff.
46. C.D. IV 3, p.942.
47. C.D. II 2, p.320; cf. pp.410ff.
48. For a fuller defence of Barth against the charge of 'Universalism' see J. D. Bettis, 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 20 (1967), 423-436; also John E. Colwell, *op. cit.*, pp.264ff.

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