

The Doctrine of God

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IT happened during the last world-war. The Nazis had lost their cause; yet they decided to build a wall of defence along the coast of Western Europe against possible invasion. For this purpose the population of many towns and villages along the shore had to be evacuated. One can well imagine what this meant for many who had lived there for generations. At a certain hour of the day everybody had to be ready with a suitcase containing only the most essential articles. A fisherwoman who found herself in the company of a clergyman while being transported inland on a truck, asked: "If God is our Father, how can he allow this thing to happen?" She had probably been a faithful churchgoer all her life, like many who live close to the sea. Now she went through a crisis and wondered if her faith could survive.

Similar situations occur in every pastoral charge in any country and at any time, when inexplicable events occur, like disasters, accidents, sudden deaths—particularly of young people. All ministers have been asked at some time during their pastorates: "If God is a God of love, why does he do this to me?" And the minister-theologian realizes one thing in such situations: belief in the Fatherhood of God is not the conclusion to a logical argument. Acceptance of the Fatherhood of God on so-called logical grounds may last for awhile, as long as times are peaceful and life is rosy. Then we may go so far as to say: "Behind all we see around us there must be some power we can call our Father, because nature and history give evidence that he cares for us. Life as a whole, although it has its dark sides, shows a wonderful pattern."

This, however, is not faith. It is rather a world-view in which we give God a place we consider suitable for him. In times of crisis this world-view collapses, just as in Job's situation, the rational world-view of his friends, based on the doctrine of retribution, could not stand up. This leads us to our first point:

1. The Fatherhood of God is a part of God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three-in-one.

In biblical thought God is not in the first place our Father, but the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of the Son. He is Father in himself first of all. The Fatherhood of God and the sonship of man, even in the Old Testament, are not general truths, but a relationship grasped in faith. Israel's sonship is a matter of election and adoption. "When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (Hosea 11:1).

When Malachi asks the question: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?" (2:10), this is said against the background of the covenant-relationship in which Israel has been chosen by God to be a partner, as it is immediately followed by the words: "Why then are we faithless to one another profaning the covenant of our fathers?" Paul connects sonship with the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15).

In Jesus Christ alone do we really know God and are we able to grasp something of the mystery of his Fatherhood, as he is the Father who did not spare his Son on the cross. The cross remains a folly or a scandal for the natural man until the Spirit of God opens his eyes to this mystery so that in it he sees the very heart of God laid open. The Spirit removes the veil from men's minds (2 Cor. 3:14ff.).

Jesus Christ is the objective and the Holy Spirit is the subjective self-revelation of God, who is the hidden God (*deus absconditus*) but who in Christ has made himself somewhat visible.¹ Here we are right at the heart of the doctrine of God. He who says "doctrine of God" must say "doctrine of the Trinity," which implies that true knowledge of God from the beginning to the end is the work of God. We cannot know the Father except through the Son and the Holy Spirit.

God is our Father in Christ, through the Holy Spirit. The Fatherhood of God is not part of a world-view but a relationship grasped in faith by the human being as a whole (not just by his reason), on the basis of God's self-disclosure in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—in spite of everything which can point to the opposite. On the basis of revelation alone are we able to say with the Apostles' Creed: "I believe in God the Father . . ."

There is a great deal of unitarianism in our churches.² There is first of all the kind which speaks of God the Father as Creator-God, apart from his revelation in Jesus Christ. According to this type of Faith, Jesus the teacher came to tell of the outgoing love of this Creator-God whom we can call our Father, as he did in the parable of the prodigal son. It is forgotten that this parable is a parable of the Kingdom of God, told by Christ, who is God's kingship in the flesh, and who is fulfilling his mission which will end on the cross. In repeating the Lord's prayer it is often forgotten that this is the prayer taught by Jesus in whom we know God as our Father. Although we do not use the phrase "in the name of Christ" in this prayer, it cannot be prayed except in the Spirit of him through whom we know and come to the Father.

There is, in the second place, the kind of unitarianism which worships Jesus Christ in a way that excludes the Father (much more the Holy Spirit) as in certain types of pietism and Jesus-worship. There is, in the third place,

1. Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I, 1, ch. II, 1. Cf. I, 2, ch. II, 2, 3.

2. Cf. H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," in *Theology Today*, III, 3, Oct. 1946, quoted by C. Welch, *In this Name*, (New York, 1952), p. 227.

the kind which worships only the Holy Spirit and values personal experience above anything else. There is a fourth kind of unitarianism which we might call "ontological." It claims to take seriously the "symbols" of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but in a Sabellian sense, so that they actually express what is behind them, which is the One, called being itself, the God behind the God of Theism. "The God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt," as Paul Tillich says.⁸

The Christian year is an excellent test of our doctrine of God. If we are unitarians of the Creator-type of religion, we shall have very little use for Christmas and Easter, except as celebrations of the winter-solstice and the return of spring. If we are unitarians of the Jesus-type of religion, we may celebrate Christmas and Easter, but we have no use for Pentecost. If we are unitarians of the Spirit-type of religion, we divorce Pentecost from the other Christian festivals, or use Christmas and Easter as illustrations of what life in the Spirit can accomplish. In none of these cases is there place for Trinity Sunday, following Whitsunday or Pentecost. The symbolic significance of the order is precisely that with Pentecost God's self-revelation is complete. Christmas is the festival of Emmanuel. In "God with us" we know that God is for us. "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). In the way he is with us we know how he is for us. Without Pentecost the celebration of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection would be mere commemoration; through Pentecost they become participation. Christmas becomes our new birth in him; Good Friday our death to sin in him; Easter our rising to eternal life in him; Ascension our life being hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-3). Without Pentecost there might have been a group of followers of Jesus today, inspired by his example (as Socrates has always had admirers and followers) but no idea of the Christian Church as the Body of Christ. Pentecost means that God himself becomes the link between Christ and us so that we are not left to ourselves in following his example. The Holy Spirit is the divine love which is poured out into our hearts: God as he comes closest to us—the breath or kiss of God. Trinity Sunday expresses that true knowledge and service of God is his own work from the beginning to the end.

The second point we have to consider is the centrality of Christ in God's revelation.

2. God's self-disclosure is centred in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, by whom all things were made.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a secondary doctrine. The case is not that by ourselves we are capable of saying a number of true things about God which we finally clarify with the concept of "father" to make everything more personal. Revelation is not sublime speculation; it is an act of God.

Nor is it the case that our "natural knowledge" of God forms a kind of

3. Conclusion of final chapter in Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (London, 1955).

vestibule to our faith in him as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three in one, as though the doctrine of the Trinity were the crown God himself places on our human thinking. Thomas Aquinas held it possible for human reason to come to a general idea about God. We may recall his famous arguments for the existence of God: the arguments from motion, causality, contingency, perfection and design.⁴ The doctrine of the Trinity for him is revealed doctrine but rests upon this general idea of God in the way of an extension. His theology presupposes a relationship between nature and grace as the lower and upper levels of a two-story building. Grace perfects nature.

The reformation rejected this type of structure for two reasons. In the first place the reformers emphasized that grace and nature are not two components. Grace is an attribute of God and nature the work of his hands. Opposite to grace is God's anger or wrath. Grace for the reformers does not perfect but recreates nature. He who is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17). In the second place they objected on the basis of the doctrine of the Image of God and the Fall. If grace recreates nature, faith is not merely a *donum superadditum* which has been lost in the fall without causing any further damage on the natural level. Man may have a *sensus divinitatis* or the *semen religionis* in his heart, but this does not necessarily mean that he of himself is able to ask the right question, let alone come to a preliminary answer which merely needs an addendum.⁵

At this point we are in the very middle of the problem of "natural theology and "natural revelation." These terms are not always used in a careful manner so that a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding among theologians has arisen. Much discussion has been stimulated by the controversy between Barth and Brunner on this point. Let us begin with saying that natural theology and natural revelation are not the same thing. One may accept natural revelation without necessarily believing that natural theology is a possibility. Revelation is an act of God. Theology is the work of man, in response to revelation. The Bible undoubtedly teaches that God reveals himself in nature, history and the human conscience. But does this imply the possibility of a natural theology, in the sense of the formulation of truth about God either as a preliminary statement or as final truth, discovered by man as he is without God's regenerating grace? The terms "general" and "special" knowledge of God are misleading for this very reason.⁶

When we say that God reveals himself in nature, history and man's conscience, we have to clarify our statement further. We do not mean that these are open books from which man, without help, can read the truth or even part of the truth about God. This mistake is frequently made in Christian Education. A satire of a nineteenth-century novelist, Multatuli, tells the

4. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 2, art. 1-3.

5. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I, Chapter 3.

6. H. Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*, London, 1956, Chapter 20. Cf. also Chapters 17 and 18 on the exegesis of Romans 1 and 2.

story of a father who took his son for a walk in the woods and started to explain to him how everything in nature tells us of God's love: the flowers, the trees, the birds, etc. After a while they saw a bird picking a worm out of the ground. The child pointed at the worm curling itself in agony around the bill of the bird, and asked his father: "That worm, too, daddy?" There is concealment as well as revelation in the realm of God's creation. An honest poet called nature "red in tooth and claw." The seventy-third Psalm is true of life on the international as well as on the personal scale. One can be misled by the good fortune of the wicked, and one remains confused until one enters the sanctuary of God.

When we say that God reveals himself in nature, history and the human conscience, we say this on the basis of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, the Word, who made everything. As Calvin said, the revelation of God through Scripture provides us with a pair of glasses with which we are able to read God's revelation elsewhere. The poet who wrote the nineteenth Psalm saying that the heavens declare the glory of God was speaking of the God whom he knew from the Torah which is perfect, converting the soul and making wise the simple. On the basis of God's self-revelation in Christ we can say with the Apostle: "Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good and gave you from heaven rains and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness (Acts 14:17).

It seems to me that this interpretation is in keeping also with Paul's teaching in the well known opening chapters of the Epistle to the Romans. What Paul says there about the revelation of God to the gentiles is stated in the light of the revelation of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ. The interesting aspect of his argument is that it is not straight logic but dialectic. On the one hand he says that God reveals his wrath, his deity, the work of the law. He admits their knowing and perceiving to some extent. On the other hand he does not go on and say: therefore they have a good though imperfect understanding of God. He rather states the opposite: They never come to the right response in the sense of the true knowledge of God, implying gratitude and service. The same applies to his teaching on the work of the law. Although these are pointers to God's work, man does not come to repentance because of them but is rather filled with pride which is his original sin. These pointers to God lead in unregenerated man to idolatry. Knowledge of God in the Bible is never abstract knowledge, but concerns man as a whole. Because of sin man is kept from the right response which implies obedience. Paul's conclusion is based on the fifty-third Psalm:

The fool says in his heart: there is no God,
 They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity;
 There is none that does good.
 God looks down from heaven
 Upon the sons of man,
 To see if there are any that are wise,
 That seek after God.

They have all fallen away;
 They are all alike depraved.
 There is none that does good, no not one.

The words "fool" and "wise" are not used in a rational sense, but indicate the existential character of man's decision in response to God's seeking after him. The matter of knowledge of God is often dealt with in much too abstract a manner. Revelation in the Bible is not merely imparting information but transformation at the same time. Unless God breaks through our vicious circle of self-interest, we cannot truly know him or serve him. This break-through is called "revelation" in the full sense of the word: the personal encounter (in I-Thou relationship) in which we are no longer the subject and he the object. As long as we, with our man-centred questions, try to find out things about God, we make him in our own image and inevitably come to idolatry. In the act of revelation in Christ through the Spirit we come to know him and serve him as sons. He gives our lives a new centre. In making them God-centred he restores us to his image. This is revelation as complete act, including the subjective response in man, worked by the Holy Spirit.

For our attitude toward the non-Christian religions this means that we take seriously the word of the Apostle: "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Knowledge of God in the Bible is saving knowledge. The religions of the world do not only point to God's seeking after man; they at the same time express man's distorted response to God's work. This is also true of Christianity as a religion. As a religion it often has demonic features, as the Jewish religion had also.⁷ We cannot possibly accept a picture like that of the ladder in which the various religions form the lower rungs while Christianity is the top one. It is not a matter of "You have a bit, I have more." Whether our religion is Christian or not depends on God's grace which we do not have at our disposal. It depends on the Holy Spirit who alone can work the right response to the saving acts of God.

This leads to our third point:

3. The Spirit of God and His Spirit alone makes us receptive and open for the objective revelation of God as the Father in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of adoption who also conforms us to the image of God in Christ.

Let us go back for a moment to the question asked by the woman mentioned at the beginning of this article: "If God is our Father, how can he allow this thing to happen?" Why did she have trouble in calling God her Father? Because she had some idea of what a father is or should be, and she found difficulty in reconciling this picture with the way in which God dealt with her. Our picture of a father is often that of a kind and rather indulgent type of a person, more like a grandfather.

7. Cf. Barth's definition of all human religion as "lack of faith," in op. cit. I, 2.

The difficulty can also be of the opposite type. Two years ago in a youth camp in Saskatchewan there was a youngster who, whenever the Lord's prayer was repeated, stopped his fingers in his ears and refused to say it. His counsellor after some time found out that the boy's father was a habitual drunkard who used to come home at night and beat up the family. The boy could not bring himself to use the word "father" for God because for him "father" meant tyranny, capriciousness and cruel behaviour.

Noetically speaking, human fatherhood comes first. We came to know earthly fatherhood before we can grasp the divine. But from the ontological point of view God's Fatherhood is first. God is first of all the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is Father in himself and all earthly fatherhood is but a vague and dim mirror of this aspect of divine life. Paul is quite explicit about this in Eph. 3:15, "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named."

When divine revelation takes place God takes into account our human experience, but something happens which is comparable to the new wine making the old wineskins burst. Concepts are filled with an entirely new meaning; not only that, but he applies them in our lives. The Holy Spirit makes the analogies live and applies them in the new meaning which is the original meaning.

It is, then, not the case that if I come from an ideal family, I have little or no difficulty at all in accepting the doctrine of the divine Fatherhood because I can easily climb up from the experience of the love of my parents to the love of God. The Holy Spirit can use this experience but when he does, changes take place even in the best families. Regarding the Holy Family words were heard like these: "Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour has not yet come" (John 2:4); "Did you not know that I must be in my father's house?" (Luke 2:49); "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother" (Mark 3:35). It is often to people with the most strongly developed family-consciousness and a happy family background that Jesus comes and says: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife . . . , he cannot be my disciple (Luke 14:25). The Holy Spirit reveals the analogy from case to case.

In objecting to the manner in which the doctrine of the *Analogia Entis* is used in natural theology we do not deny that this world is the world of God's creation and that the world of human relationships and human speech is part of God's creation. What we object to is the idea that we have the analogies at our disposal. Man of himself, starting from the world of creation, is not able to come to true statements about God simply along the way of eminence or negation.

We ought not to use the so-called analogies of the Trinity in such a manner as to give the impression that man looking at the world around and within can discover the Trinity or attempt to make the Trinity acceptable because of trinitarian traces (*vestigia*) in the world of creation. The most well known analogy is that of Augustine: the trinity of memory, intellect and

will in man's mind.⁸ The best modern one is that of Dorothy Sayers: the plan in the artist's mind; the work of art produced, and the effect on the minds of the admirers.⁹ All these analogies can only be illustrations used by the Holy Spirit who, in using them, comes to his own, the world of his creation. He makes us share in God's knowledge of himself with the help of the things he has made.

The doctrine of the *Analogia Entis* as employed in natural theology tends to separate the knowledge of God from justification and forgiveness. It actually splits God up and leads to a denial of the "Simplicity of God."¹⁰ We may recall Luther's struggle about the meaning of the righteousness of God as revealed in the Gospel. His trouble was that he came from the scholastic concept of righteousness: *suum cuique*, which was applied to God in the degree of perfection. Only when it had been revealed to him that the righteousness of God is helping righteousness, the righteousness revealed in Jesus Christ, did he share in the saving knowledge of God. The doctrine of the knowledge of God cannot be separated from the doctrine of justification.

This truth has far-reaching consequences for the doctrine of the Divine Attributes.¹¹ The division into communicable and incommunicable perfections (relative and absolute) based on the idea that the communicable ones are shared by God and man, but present in God to the degree of perfection, while the incommunicable ones, belonging only to God, are to be defined by way of negation, is doubtful.¹²

The immutability of God, for example, was understood as an incommunicable quality of God, indicating that God does not change. The Bible, however, does not give us the impression that God's immutability is the same as his inability to change. It rather means his faithfulness within the covenant by which he remains loyal to his people and which allows them to pray (Gen. 18).

The eternity of God does not merely mean the negation of time. God in Christ has actually entered human history and given it new meaning. He gives us eternal life. The infinity of God is not the same as the philosophical concept of denial or negation of space. In Christ he takes upon himself human finiteness and in Christ we share in the heavenly places.

The almighty power of God is not human or absolute power to the nth degree. It is the power in weakness revealed in the cross of Jesus, the power to which Paul refers in I Cor. 1. The wisdom of God is revealed in the foolishness of the cross. The righteousness of God is expressed in his justifying the ungodly.

God as he is in himself (*aseitas*) is no other than God in his self-revelation. God in his freedom is no other than God in his love. He is always the one

8. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Liber X, Caput XI.

9. Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker*, (New York, 1956).

10. Cf. K. Barth, op. cit., II, 1, ch. V.

11. *Ibid.*, ch. VI.

12. Cf. Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Chapter V.

who loves in freedom. The goodness of God is severe and his severity is good.

Revelation, then, is never merely the imparting of abstract knowledge. It is the Spirit of adoption transforming human lives to the image of God in the Son. He does not merely show us the righteousness of God in Christ but makes us share in it. In other words, there is no doctrine of the knowledge of God which does not lead to the doctrine of Sanctification.

Here we touch perhaps one of the most crucial developments of theology in these days—the rediscovery of the oneness of theology and ethics. Theology means knowledge of God, but knowledge in the deepest sense of the word: fellowship with him, implying obedience. Where the two are separated both are distorted: knowledge of God becomes abstract and ethics legalistic. There is a widespread legalism in our churches which separates the law from the gospel. Its inevitable consequences are the pharisaism and hypocrisy, connected with an inability to experience the joy and peace of the Holy Spirit. It also stands in the way of reaching people in need. The church will not be able to do its task as long as the minister is identified with the moral judge. Every minister who takes his counselling task seriously knows that this is one of the the most difficult humps for people to overcome. In Christ we know that the goodness of God is severe and that at the same time his severity is good, kind and understanding.

Christian ethics occupies itself with the practical application of knowledge of God in human life. Revelation implies transformation. What the love of God the Father is—what God's righteousness, his goodness, his power, his eternity, etc., are—all has been expressed in the new humanity of Jesus Christ, on this earth and under these skies, and humanity has now been taken up into the life of God. The Holy Spirit alone, in making us share in Christ's death and resurrection, can cause us to reflect the very attributes of God in this human life, in anticipation of the revelation of perfect sonship in the life to come. The Holy Spirit is the down-payment of this future glory (Eph. 1:14). Thus our Christian ethics stands or falls upon our doctrine of God. And what else is our worship than the offering of our lives in new obedience to God? It is an offering in the Spirit through Christ to the Father, so that the words of Abelard's hymn still express the essence of adoration:

Low before him with our praises we fall,
 Of whom, and in whom, and through whom are all;
 Of whom, the Father; and through whom, the Son;
 In whom, the Spirit, with these ever one.