

UNIT 5: THE CHRISTOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

If you are completely unfamiliar with the life and thought of Karl Barth, a good basic introduction is John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2nd edition, 2004), or D. Densil Morgan, *The SPCK Introduction to Barth* (London: SPCK, 2010).

Key text: Karl Barth, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, *Church Dogmatics* I/2 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), §15.¹

The Reformed articulation of Christology is represented most clearly in the thought of the Swiss Protestant systematic theologian, Karl Barth. However, if you pick up any good introduction to Barth's thought (and there are plenty) it is quite unlikely that you will find a single chapter entitled 'Christology'. Why? Quite simply because the whole of Barth's massive oeuvre, including the six million words of the *Church Dogmatics*, is Christological.

If dogmatics cannot regard itself and cause itself to be regarded as fundamentally Christology, it has assuredly succumbed to some alien sway and is already on the verge of losing its character as church dogmatics.²

Jesus Christ is the one who reveals God, and God's self-revelation is the very beginning of Christian dogmatics. As a theologian, Barth is not concerned with what we might think about God, or with what we think we might experience of God. In this sense, he utterly rejects 'natural theology', namely that variety of theology which refers to our natural reason rather than revelation. Barth is focussed on what God says in and through himself; that is, in and through the incarnate Word. Another crucial corollary to this is Barth's rejection of liberal Protestantism. This tradition would tend to refer theology to (or even subsume theology within) another discourse such as sociology, anthropology, history or philosophy. For example, one might grant along with Barth that theology begins with revelation, but look to anthropological or sociological categories to identify the locus and nature of revelation (e.g. can we measure Church attendance and thus demonstrate that an increase in congregation indicates the special receipt of a certain revelation). Barth finds this unacceptable *for theological reasons*. God's self-revelation, for Barth, is its own authenticator. In other words, we do not look outside revelation for some guarantee of revelation. God is his own guarantor in his self-revelation in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit (see part I.2).

¹ Please note that in this text the Greek term *egeneto* (egeneto) means 'became' (i.e. the Word

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), §15, p.123.

This last statement indicates the Triune structure of God's self-revelation. The way in which God reveals himself is the way God is. There is no disjunction between the medium and the message. God is revealer (the Father), the revelation (the Son, the Word), and that which teaches us that the Son is the revelation of the Father (the Holy Spirit).

This means that Barth begins his *Church Dogmatics* with God's self-declaration in what he very deliberately calls the *event* of the Word of God. What does Barth intend to emphasise in speaking of the Word as *event*? He wants to avoid any sense that the Word of God is a static deposit of truth which one just picks up and reads. The Word of God is not 'data'. Put another way, Barth does not equate the Word of God with the written text of the Bible *in any straightforward fashion*. Rather, the Word of God is dynamic. It is the Bible *preached* in the Church under the direction of the Holy Spirit. One should not think simply of a minister, pastor or priest stood in a pulpit. For Barth, the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are also a form of preaching in that they declare the Word of God, or God's address to humanity. This leads to a central role for ecclesiology in Barth's system: the Church is the witness to God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ. The Church is called to proclaim dynamically that which it has received and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit (i.e. not of our own power), understood. As Christians we are, first and foremost, those who have been addressed by God.

We can delineate three aspects of Barth's understanding of the Word of God. First, the Word of God is the Word preached, and this introduces an unavoidably human dimension to the life of the Church and the articulation of its dogmatics. The question of the fidelity of the Church's preaching to the self-declaration of God in Christ demands the Church's continual scrutiny of itself. Secondly, the Word of God is the Word written; it is the canon of Holy Scripture. Finally, the Word of God is the Word revealed, and it is this final sense of the Word which renders scripture and preaching authentic. Scripture and preaching are the Word of God in their fidelity to *the* Word, namely God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ. This entails God's absolute majesty and freedom. His revelation is not grounded on anything other than his own self-revealing. As Barth puts it, 'God is Lord in the wording of His Word.'³ Barth can make these claims because of his insistence that Christ is risen and living in his body, the Church, which itself lives under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Revelation cannot be subsumed under the category of historical events (i.e. things that happened two thousand years ago, making the authentication of their historicity a crucial exercise). Revelation – God's self-declaring – is on-going in the living Church now. It is the Church's continual

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, trans. G. Bromiley, (London: T&T Clark, 2004), p.139.

witness (rather than, say, a certain dogmatism concerning the Bible or the Church's tradition) which authenticates its reception of the Word into its midst.

How does that Word of God, God's self-revelation, come to the Church? Typically, modern theology begins an answer to that question with an examination of where humanity happens to be culturally and historically, and the kind of criteria which God must fulfil in order to capture our attention. What would God need to do in order to reveal himself? So typically modern theology, particularly in its liberal Protestant guise, will begin by speaking about human experience and the extent of our self-grounding knowledge (i.e. what kinds of knowledge can we achieve by our own powers prior to revelation by which we might then measure or judge whatever we supposed to be revealed by God?). In other words, as John Webster puts it, modern theology tends to ask how God can make himself real or relevant in the modern world.⁴ Barth utterly rejects this methodology. For him, it is not a question of God being relevant to the world, but of the world being relevant to God. The self-revealing of God is God's reality and is borne of his sovereign freedom and majesty. God does not have to find a sneaky way in to human history or creation and compete for our attention with all the other aspects of culture and history which captivate us. God declares himself, and in that declaration we are revealed as his creatures who are addressed.

The self-revealing of God is found, first, in the incarnation of the Son in Jesus Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. Christ is the ontological, and the Spirit the noetic, possibility of God's self-revelation. In other words, Christ is the one who, in his incarnate being, reveals; and the Spirit is the one who enables us to know (noetic) that Christ is the revelation of God. In this context, Barth insists on the priority of what God actually does in Christ over the possibility of what God might do, or might have done. What does this mean? It means that theology does not seek to describe how God might or should reveal himself, and then finds that Jesus fits the bill. Theology – or the dogmatics of the Church – begins with what God has *actually* done in Jesus. God sets the agenda, not us.⁵

We are now close to seeing something of the extent of Barth's Christological concentration. What does he have to say about the form of God's self-declaration in the incarnation? First, it must be stressed that Barth follows Chalcedon. He regards the Chalcedonian declaration not as a definition of the incarnation, but an attestation to the incarnation's mystery.

⁴ Webster, *Karl Barth*, p.61.

⁵ See Joseph Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), p.39.

Secondly, one of Barth's key claims – reflecting a much earlier patristic debate – is that Christ is *anhypostatos*. What does this mean? Put simply, Barth wants to claim Jesus' humanity has no existence in its own right independent of the divine Logos. In other words, the Logos did not look from heaven and see the man Jesus and *then* assume that humanity to itself. This would make Christ's person *anhypostatos*. Rather, Barth states that the Word assumes human flesh and therefore there is the man known as Jesus. Why does Barth insist on this way of talking about the incarnation? Again, his reasons concern the sovereign freedom of God. Barth wants to avoid any sense that salvation is latent within something created and human itself which God then assumes to himself in the incarnation. There is no point in the story of salvation when God has not been the sovereignly free initiator. So the Son of God assumes human flesh, and then there is the man Jesus. This leads him to agree with Orthodox and Roman Catholic theologians that Mary is *theotokos*, or the God-bearer, or even the mother of God. Where he departs from Orthodox and Catholic theology is in his insistence that there cannot be a category of theology known as Mariology, for Mary's role in the economy of salvation is simply of function of Christology.⁶

There are two further aspects of Barth's Christology which should be highlighted in this brief introduction. First, Barth insists that Christ is not incarnate into some kind of pre-lapsarian, perfect state. Although Christ is indeed sinless and does not sin, nevertheless he is incarnate in our flesh. The body of Christ is therefore, in being what St. Paul calls 'sarx' (*sarx*), subject to wilful opposition to God. Barth writes,

The fact, too, that the Word became flesh, we have had to establish in its generality. But what the New Testament calls *sarx* includes not only the concept of man in general but also, assuming and including this general concept, the narrower concept of the man who is liable to the judgement and verdict of God, who having become incapable of knowing and loving God must incur the wrath of God, whose existence has become one exposed to death because he has sinned against God...The Word is not only the eternal Word of God but "flesh" as well, i.e., all that we are and exactly like us even in our opposition to Him. It is because of this that He makes contact with us and is accessible for us. In this way, and only in this way, is He God's revelation to us.⁷

⁶ 'The content of the biblical attestation of revelation does not give us any cause to acknowledge that the person of Mary in the event of revelation possesses relatively even such an independent and emphatic position as to render it necessary or justifiable to make it the object of a theological doctrine ... or even of a mariological dogma.' (*Church Dogmatics* I/2, p.139).

⁷ Karl Barth, *CD* I/2, p.151.

Christ is sinless and obedient, but nevertheless subject to real temptation. It seems that Barth is merely extending St Gregory of Nazianzus's teaching that 'what is not assumed is not redeemed'. Christ took upon himself our fallen nature, not our Edenic nature.

Secondly, Barth's Christology is often described as 'dialectical'. What does this mean? It is essentially a repeat of the emphasis on the 'event' of Christ. The Lutheran tradition has tended to equate Jesus with the Word of God in what Barth calls an 'ontic-static' way. If one were to put a pejorative spin on Barth's claim, he is implying that Lutherans think of Christ as 'a thing' or an object. By contrast, Barth prefers the Reformed view that Christ is 'dynamic-noetic'. This is to say that Christ is the performative event of the proclamation of God's Word. The term 'noetic' means 'knowledge'. Christ makes God known. This dialectical sense of the 'dynamic-noetic' Christ (i.e. a dialect in which there is an addressor and an addressee) can allow Barth to claim that the incarnation is on-going in the body of Christ, the Church. In so far as the Church remains 'dynamic-noetic', it embodies the dialectical *event* of the preaching of Word.