

UNIT 4: RESURRECTION AND SALVATION

The manner in which the cross and resurrection events can be said to be the 'events of salvation' is, of course, a topic which addresses a whole range of doctrines as well as basic questions as to how theology is constructed. All three of the theologians whose views are highlighted here hold these 'events' to be the centre from which we begin to construct an understanding of 'salvation' as the reconciled relation between God and humanity.

Karl Barth

For Barth, the cross and resurrection are the events of salvation in that it is in the incarnation, the cross and resurrection that God and humanity are reconciled. Seen together, these events reveal humanity to be what it is, they present a perfect humanity lived out in our stead, and they announce that communion with the Father is now possible. In Barth's terms, the Son is the Judge who has been judged in our place on the cross and the 'verdict' of God in this judgement, through the raising of the Son, has been shown to be positive: these events secure reconciliation.

What seems to be distinctive in Barth's approach as to why these events accomplish salvation is the strength with which he emphasizes that they are from God. Efficacy for salvation, assurance of salvation and the possibility of sanctification all rest upon the fact that these events were God's events for us. They are the fulfilment of God's fidelity to fulfil his covenant of election to be in relationship with humanity. God has elected to do these things because 'God does not will to be God without us'.¹ In the incarnation, God has elected solidarity with our darkness. His subsequent life and death are the bearing, in his own person, of the judgement (separation from God) or the consequences of fallenness.

But it is in the 'awakening of the crucified' ² that we are shown that this was the case. The resurrection of Christ was both the revelation of judgement

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956), p. 7.

² John Thompson, 'Christology and Reconciliation in the Theology of Karl Barth', in Trevor Hart and Daniel Thimell (eds), *Christ in our Place: The Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1989), p. 215.

and the revelation of its satisfaction in Christ. It was both ultimate conviction and ultimate assurance. As 'the grace which was for man when, because man is wholly and utterly a sinner before God, it can only be against him, and when in fact, even while it is for him, it is also plaintiff and judge against him, showing him to be incapable of satisfying either God or himself'.³

Barth's emphasis on the cross and resurrection as the pinnacle of the offence of our humanity, the rock upon which all our self-containment or presumption to capability is broken, serves to lay a foundation for the more positive steps back towards the goal of this judgement, which is the assurance of life in communion with God. The cross was not only a revelation of judgement but also the place where a perfect humanity was revealed. The resurrection is the Father's 'yes', his acceptance and affirmation of his Son whom he has judged to be righteous. In light of this resurrection, we recognise what true humanity is and accept the gift of this new being for ourselves.

The absolute centrality of the cross and resurrection as events within God (events between the Son and the Father) that nevertheless involved the world is the ground by which we can assuredly call these events salvation. We submit to this no/yes verdict and in this submission we know the forgiveness of our sinfulness.⁴ As Thompson notes: 'In the representative humanity of Jesus all are ontologically related to God ... In this way Jesus' vicarious humanity has a cosmic, representative character'.⁵ The cross and resurrection events are salvation events because they are the events from and within God through which we are met and addressed by God as well as reconciled with him.

A strength of Barth's position is the rigour with which he elucidates the fact that the cross is salvation because it is judgement rendered in the light of promise. The cross and resurrection together signify God's ultimate love and beneficence to keep the covenant of relationship with us, a covenant entered into for our benefit. These events uniquely reveal that to do this,

³ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 11.

⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/1*, p. 94.

⁵ Thompson, 'Christology and Reconciliation in the Theology of Karl Barth', p. 220.

for our freedom to be real, we must be taken seriously and revealed for who we truly are. And yet in doing this, God is simultaneously saying that we have already been accepted in his Son.

The question which might arise from Barth's account regards the relationship between the cross and resurrection events and humanity as effected by the Holy Spirit. Does Barth's explication of the cross and resurrection adequately take into account the relationship between the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit at work in the church/world? How might Acts 2 be interpreted in the strict terms of God's decree in the cross and resurrection?

Karl Rahner

The historical event of the cross and resurrection are central for Rahner but he articulates their significance with reference to anthropological categories rather than strictly theological ones. In some ways, his focus is the doctrine of humanity rather than the doctrine of God. Stylistically, it would appear that Rahner is asking the question 'who is this new man?' while Barth was asking 'who is this God?' Of course, both are asking both questions, but there does seem to be a difference in weight of emphasis or terminology employed.

Like Barth, for Rahner the significance of the life and death of Jesus is understood only in light of the resurrection. Christ's death would have been like any other except that, because of the resurrection, we see here the one time when death does not signal the annihilation of the validity of a person's life. Those responding to the original event itself have their own intelligible horizon through which they then recognise that this crucified and now risen Jesus signified their salvation. We, too, have an intelligible horizon through which we interact with this event. This horizon is the 'transcendental hope for resurrection'. Resurrection being 'the term which, in view of man's concrete situation, promises the abiding validity of his single and entire existence'.⁶ This aspiration naturally searches for a place and time in which it is confirmed as a concrete, tangible, and categorical

⁶ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1978), p. 268.

experience and thus we hear the witness of the apostles within our own hope for resurrection.

In Christ, we find this aspiration historically mediated in a complete and final way through which it casts light on what signifies meaningful existence. In other words, the resurrection is not about life or survival after death. Instead it is about the fact that in Jesus we see one saved and accepted by God and see the absolute and abiding affirmation by God of the unique validity and 'cause' of a person. We see, in Christ, the unique life of one 'who achieved the permanent and final validity of his life precisely through his death in freedom and obedience'.⁷

Here we recognise that God's affirmation is real and that this affirmation is indication that the aspirations that are truest to our humanity do have an end or *telos*. In Christ we are shown a new humanity which is liberated from all negative powers of finitude, which bind us in guilt and fear to believing that our 'cause', our unique personhood, is threatened by the annihilation of death. In Jesus there is a new and absolute nearness of God. The fact that we will still die, that we still face an existence that challenges this aspiration, the fact that there is a 'reciprocal, although variable, relationship of conditioning between the transcendental experience of grace and the experience of salvation history',⁸ is inevitable. Given the inevitability of our own death, the establishing of 'eternal life' in our midst can occur only through 'the experience of the final and definitive fulfilment of the aspiration of another person'.⁹ 'We are saved because this man who is one of us has been saved by God, and God has thereby made his salvific will present in the world historically, really and irrevocably'.¹⁰ Salvation history becomes, for Rahner, the theatre in which the fulfilled aspiration in Christ finds a correspondence with our own life.

Salvation for Rahner, then, is God's gift, in the resurrection, of the establishing of the ultimate and satisfying validity of our existence, and this of the establishing of 'eternal life' in our midst. Despite the true finality of

⁷ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 266.

⁸ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 273.

⁹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 273.

¹⁰ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 284.

death and that the invasion of the 'eternal', the 'beyond death' of the resurrected Christ is not beyond time but is the affirmation that comes from God to 'be in time as its own mature fruit'. In the resurrected Christ we see 'a mode of spirit and freedom which have been actualised in time'.¹¹ Eternity in this view is not a time or a place, but the possibility of a way of existing in which we are no longer in fear of finitude, despite its inevitability. 'In the temporal duration of life which is to end completely, eternity is actualising itself towards its fulfilment'.¹²

Rahner, then, understands the cross and resurrection to be central to our salvation in that our salvation is to exist in the world confident of the final and meaningful affirmation by God of our particularity. In the resurrection, we see that God's affirmation is given to the only one who has lived his life in the obedience and freedom to live in correspondence with his true 'cause' or particularity. We then see the cross as the outcome of Christ's obedience to his true being and the resurrection is the revelation that God does indeed accept and affirm this obedience. Our lives are given ground in the transcendent affirmation of God and we 'have life within a hope which has already experienced fulfilment'.¹³

The strength of Rahner's position seems to be the way which it incorporates a doctrine of humanity in which relation with God is the intention of human existence. For Rahner, too, the resurrected Christ both revealed fallen human aspirations for what they are and at the same time healed or fulfilled them. Rahner's category of 'transcendental hope' is helpful in articulating the ways in which human beings have a horizon of expectation which is both met and transformed by the event which is definitive for true humanity.

However, a question that might be posed is if Rahner's understanding of the cross and resurrection take our dependence on the coming of God, not just his affirmation, seriously enough. Moral conflict, moral choice, the struggle to be true to one's particularity in the face of temptation by fear to do otherwise is shown to be that which is given new (eternal) life because

¹¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 271.

¹² Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 272.

¹³ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, p. 269.

of the cross and resurrection event. There is an 'exemplarist' tone in which the assumption might be that given hope we now possess the freedom to choose what is right. Indeed, the universality of grace in Rahner's work tends to take away the importance of salvation history and of the cross and resurrection as *saving* events.

Wolfhart Pannenberg

For Pannenberg, the cross and resurrection are central to salvation in that in them we are given confidence that our 'own death will not mean definitive exclusion from God and his Life'.¹⁴ On the cross, the 'innocent suffered the penalty of death, which, as the harmful result of sin, is the fate of those in whose place he died'.¹⁵ This death is expiatory and removes the enmity between humanity and God. The removal of enmity constitutes freedom for all humanity from the natural consequences of sin. 'Through the death of the Son ... God gives us room alongside himself even after death. Because the Son dies in the particularity of his human existence, all others in their otherness are not crowded out by him as though his human particularity were the measure of all things and excluded all others'.¹⁶

What is distinctive about Pannenberg's approach is his emphasis on the particularity of Christ not excluding our particularity. In contrast to Barth, Pannenberg tries to articulate an inclusivist view of Christ's representation that does not result in the notion that 'Jesus Christ alone is man before God, that he has so taken our place and acted and suffered in our favour that we can add to what he has done nothing of our own'.¹⁷ For Pannenberg, this view is concurrent with the suppression of those very ones who the Son of God came to save. Pannenberg gives shape to this distinctiveness through a doctrine of the Spirit in which the Spirit enables faith in Jesus Christ (as the risen, confirmed human) through which we are given to, as he did, accept our finite existence before God and so participate in the kind of sonship which was established in the person of Christ. Because of this particular death, resurrection and ascension we are given 'room' to attain to the

¹⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994), p. 427.

¹⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 427.

¹⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 434.

¹⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 431.

independence of our own relation to the Father.¹⁸ This independence is the true expression of our existence. Its possibility has been established in the Sonship of Christ; its actualisation is by the Spirit of Sonship in believers.

For Panneberg, Jesus only becomes the Son 'through the death of his particularity'¹⁹ and his resurrection by God. It is only because he chose to resurrect him (and thus that we gain a glimpse of the End) that we can say that God himself is revealed in him. Although Pannenberg places this understanding within a Trinitarian framework in the effort to maintain both Christ's distinctiveness and our own, it does seem that the incarnation is not particularly significant for this view of salvation.

Conclusion

The cross and resurrection, as hope, as the events of salvation, are events that promise an end but thrust us into history with a new directedness. They promise freedom from determinism but not freedom from the ambiguities of contingency and history. They promise a personal God and they compel us to live in a new kind of humanity that comes from bearing up under response to the transcendent. The invasion of the eschatological in the resurrected Christ is not primarily about the future or about what lies beyond death. It is confirmation that beyond death God has and will confirm our immanent existence. This confirmation involves the response on our part of moral and ethical choice, of will and directedness. The significance lies not in the idea of Christ's resurrection, but on the fact of its occurrence, the fact of the promise of God's nearness to the actuality of our human existence, and the import of this occurrence for how we view our life before death.

¹⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 454.

¹⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology II*, p. 436.