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Barth, the Atonement, and the Preacher

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RECENT translation has made available an English edition of Volume IV, Part 1 of Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. In it the Swiss theologian begins his massive treatment of the central dogma of the Christian Faith, the doctrine of the atonement.

In his own introduction Barth asserts that the doctrine of the atonement is at the very heart of the Christian Gospel. That Gospel "has a circumference, the doctrine of creation and the doctrine of the last things, the redemption and consummation. But the covenant fulfilled in the atonement is its centre,"¹ the point from which we can see all else. Barth also explains that by this atonement which is at the heart and centre of the Christian message he means the "free act of the faithfulness of God in which He takes the lost cause of man, who has denied Him as Creator and in so doing ruined himself as creature, and makes it His own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and in that way maintaining and manifesting His own glory in the world."²

Surveying the atonement, as he has presented it in this and in the remaining two parts of Volume IV,³ Barth states in effect that the content of that doctrine is the knowledge of Jesus Christ as the reconciling God, as reconciled man, and as the One in whom as reconciling God and reconciled man the whole event of atonement took place. In accordance with these three basic Christological concepts—Christ as very God, very man, and as the God-man—Barth develops his doctrine in three forms, the first of which appears in *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1 under the general Christological title, "Jesus Christ, the Lord as Servant." With his customary "fugue-like elaboration" Barth approaches this first form of the doctrine from three directions: (1) "The Obedience of the Son of God," which reveals (2) "The Pride and Fall of Man," but which makes possible (3) "The Justification of Man." Barth concludes each form of the doctrine by considering its "subjective realization" in the Christian Community and the Christian individual.

Barth defies identification with any of the classic theories of atonement. Reference has more than once been made to "the difficulty of finding a place for him in the theological filing system." He has a doctrine entirely peculiar to himself and founded on the distinctively Christological character of his theology. Indeed Barth equates Theology and Christology. He denies

1. Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 1 (Eds. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance; Edinburgh, 1956, T. & T. Clark), p. 3.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

3. On January 5, 1958, Barth himself, in a personal conversation with this writer, insisted that a fair presentation of his doctrine of the atonement should be on the basis of all three parts of Volume IV, of which Part 2 remains as yet untranslated and Part 3 unpublished. According to Barth, however, Part 1, especially the Introduction, furnishes an accurate prospectus and makes clear the general theological character of the argument.

any possibility of a general *a priori* knowledge of God apart from His historic revelation. We must think of God exclusively in terms of Jesus Christ, says Barth. The only true history of God with man is the history of Jesus Christ; indeed this *is* history, the only thing that ever really happened, the one act of God with which Creation, Providence and all else are identified. Man has no independent existence apart from the God who has acted for his redemption in Jesus Christ. It is by way of this entirely original emphasis that Barth develops his doctrine of reconciliation.⁴

If Barth's theory permits any classification at all, it may be called "objective," in fact, more "objective" even than the theories of Anselm and the Reformers. So far as Barth is concerned, atonement is exclusively an act of God, accomplished by God through Jesus Christ in complete independence of man. Man plays no part whatever in his own reconciliation with God; he makes no contribution to it save the very sinful separation from God which necessitates his reconciliation. The initiative, the desire for atonement comes from God, not from man. It happens not only without man, but in spite of him, in defiance of him. It happened at a particular time in history, at a particular place, in the Incarnation, Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and having happened, it need not and cannot take place again. It is a "finished" work, finished in both a temporal and a qualitative sense. Moreover, it is all-embracing, the reconciliation to God not only of certain men, but of all mankind, indeed of the whole cosmos. Man's situation has been objectively changed, radically and decisively. By no flight of the imagination can man annul that change; he may "realize" it or not "realize" it, but even realization comes not from within himself but from beyond himself, as the work of the Holy Spirit.

In so far as the atonement has taken place in the events associated with the historical Jesus, Barth's theory may be called "substitutionary," but not in any way that contradicts the concept of representation. Indeed Barth dwells insistently upon the representative character of Jesus Christ as the original "Adam," as the "man of justification history," the *Man* in atonement. Barth dissociates himself from the older theories of substitution, especially the sacrificial theories which conceived of Jesus Christ as God's "whipping boy" for the sins of men. Barth's emphasis lies not on the transactional or even vicarious aspect of atonement, but on the fact of man's helplessness and on God's gracious condescension in doing for man what he could not do for himself. Jesus Christ is "for us," the "Judge judged in our place," Sacrifice as well as Priest. All things needful to our reconciliation have taken place in Him, the God-man. He is our effective Substitute.

Barth is thoroughly consistent. He will not allow of a human contribution of works or of faith that creates or that complements the atonement. He does, however, present what he considers to be the true "subjective" side of atonement. He calls it the "subjective realization," man's awareness

4. Barth begins with the Christological question; he would disagree with Paul Tillich who approaches the atonement from the side of man's existential predicament. *Systematic Theology*, Volume II.

"that the verdict pronounced in Jesus Christ applies to himself with everyone else, that the justification of sinful man accomplished in Him is his justification and that of all men."⁵ This subjective realization, Barth hastens to make clear, is not by itself a different sphere of reality. It is of the same substance as the objective atoning work of God in Jesus Christ and must be related to it. Because the objective fact of atonement is not the work of proud, sinful, fallen man, neither is the subjective realization his work. "It must be on the basis of a particular address and gift, in virtue of a particular awakening power of God . . . ,"⁶ that is, it must be the work of the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit attests the atonement to man as an objective fact, and this "not as the impartation of an abstract doctrine, but as the attestation of the living Jesus Christ Himself."⁷ Indeed He is as such the Spirit of Jesus Christ, "the power in which Jesus Christ attests Himself, attests Himself effectively, creating in man response and obedience."⁸

Coming to grips with Barth's virile doctrine of the atonement, the minister of a Church very naturally asks, Will this doctrine preach? Is it preachable? Can it be translated into the vernacular and communicated to modern man in language and thought-forms that he will understand? Perhaps the question as such has little importance; it answers itself once the more fundamental issue has been faced, viz., is Barth's doctrine true? Does it represent the real situation about God and man and man's sin? If it be true, if it be in accord with the deepest insights of Scripture, then the preacher has no moral right to weigh it academically as he would weigh conflicting theories of worship and Church administration. If Barth describes the situation that *is*, then the preacher has no alternative but to preach within the framework of that situation and presuppose it as the content of his message.

It helps us to recall that Barth himself started as a preacher, the pastor of a congregation, faced with the pastor's peculiar problem, the sermon. Not "What is the technique?" but "How can one preach at all?" was the question bothering him. He describes it in one of his earlier books. "On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an *expectancy* that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen."⁹ "And here above all," he says, "is a *man* upon whom the expectation of the apparently imminent event seems to rest in a special way. . . ."¹⁰ "And then he will enter the pulpit and—here is daring—*preach*."¹¹ Paraphrasing Barth, Frederick L. Herzog describes the suffering, fate, evil and death in the lives of his people, the human situation to

5. Barth, *op. cit.*, p. 646.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 645.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 647.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 648.

9. *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, translated from *Die Wort Gottes und die Theologie* by Douglas Horton, p. 104.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 106.

which the preacher must speak from "the strange new world of the Bible." "Everything existing in time is subject to chance, and nature is silent. In the face of it all man raises the question whether it is true that God is present and that He is lovingly concerned with His creatures. What is life? Whence does it come? Whither does it lead? These are questions that people cannot answer for themselves. Death, the last things, time and eternity, are problems for which people seek solutions in Church. Even more, rather than solutions, they seek redemption. They yearn for God as the redeemer of humanity."¹² To this situation the preacher must speak an authentic Word of God.

The task of Christian preaching remains unchanged. An economic depression, a world war, the emergence of international communism, and the advent of the atomic age have not removed but only intensified the searching questions for which men, albeit unconsciously, seek an answer in Church. That the Church has evaded these questions may account for its rapidly-declining influence; on the other hand, it may be that men stay away from Church precisely because the Church does have the very answer which they most fear to face. Barth has come to grips with that answer in his powerful doctrine of the atonement, which is hardly a pleasing word designed to comfort men and women in cushioned pews, but is rather a stern, negative word of judgment and despair. Nevertheless, if Barth has spoken the truth, then sooner or later the Church will have to echo him, because until men accept God's judgment they will never discover His grace; until they yield to a negative despair they will never find a positive Gospel. Will Barth's doctrine of the atonement preach? What option has the preacher but to reckon with a doctrine which is so patently a Word of God to the human situation?

1. Barth's doctrine of the atonement speaks to man in his own soul. It speaks to man's aloneness, his lostness, his existential estrangement from God: ". . . man raises the question whether it is true that God is present and that He is lovingly concerned with His creatures." To man, the spiritual orphan, Barth proclaims the good news of an amazingly long-suffering Father God who wants His child even though His child has betrayed Him, who has taken the initiative in man's redemption and for the sake of us men and our salvation humbled Himself to our low estate, come where we are, stooped to our uttermost degradation, made our situation His situation, our peril and misery His peril and misery, and stood beside us even in our perishing condition. Even the atheist in the secret place of his soul longs to know the truth about God. The truth about God, says Barth, is Jesus Christ, the lowly, humble, obedient Son who suffered and died in the far country of man's disobedience; this, not some notion of supreme attributes, *is* God.

"I feel I must atone!" exclaims one of the "flatland" characters in

12. Frederick L. Herzog, "Theologian of the Word of God," An Article in *Theology Today*, Vol. XIII, No. 3, October 1956, p. 318.

T. S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*. Modern man may not be bothered by a sense of sin, but one cannot engage in the cure of souls without being terribly aware of human guilt and its devastating effect on mental health. Precisely because men cannot themselves "atone" for their moral failures, the festering source of neuroses still festers, poulticed but not healed by the inane platitudes of popular psychology. Even the easy assurances of religion, "Throw your sins on God," do little more than palliate, because guilt is at bottom a radical estrangement from One who, if encountered honestly, can only react in judgment and wrath. Barth faces with stern realism the problem of man's deepest self, and the answer which he enunciates, though fearful to contemplate, will alone strike a responsive chord in the hearts of men and women weary of a gospel which is not a Gospel but a half-humanistic compound of Christian ethics and mysticism. God, whether we like it or not, has Himself made atonement. In Jesus Christ our guilt has once and for all been dealt with. In Him our sin has been destroyed and with it *our future as sinners*. This is fact, not theory, and if it be true, then it must be preached.

2. Barth's doctrine of the atonement speaks to man in his social solidarity. It is in his larger relationships with society that modern man feels so bewildered and frustrated. Endless books and articles have been written to describe his predicament, his nuclear maturity and ethical immaturity, his mastery over nature and enslavement to his own passions. Why, thoughtful people ask, must man in every generation mock the flowering promise ahead of him and turn to embrace the ooze which he has worked a billion or two years to escape? The question remains unanswered, because it needs a mirror, not the pious moralisms of ethical humanists, to reveal the radical nature of our perennial predicament. That mirror, says Barth, is the act of God in Jesus Christ. In the light of that act, even our most subtle hypocrisies cannot conceal the basic sin of pride responsible for the strife and suffering of the centuries.

Man's real predicament, however, lies less in his moral duplicity than in his moral complacency, the crass illusion that he can be the man of pride with impunity, the enemy of God and "get away with it." Barth explodes this illusion with thunderous language, reminding man that even in his rebelliousness he cannot escape God, that even as the man of sin he must continue to live in God's sphere, and live, therefore, as the one to whom the grace of God shows itself in the form of wrath, the one who has been rejected, killed in the Cross of Jesus Christ. The preacher would have little popular appeal who ceased making communism the scapegoat for the world's ills and agreed with Barth in quoting Paul that God has concluded mankind and history in disobedience. More realistic, however, than hard-dying easy optimism about man's ability to control and improve his world is Barth's pessimism about "world history," his conviction that world history as such, i.e., "man on his own," has no future because God has concluded it in disobedience.

There is not a Divine "Yes" save that enclosed within the Divine "No." Only when men can look at the Cross of Jesus Christ and see, as Barth has seen, their own death in it, will they have grounds for any hope about life and the world. There is a "beyond" in relation to atonement, but a "beyond" visible only from the dark shadows of atonement itself. Beyond Good Friday is Easter Day, God's sovereign verdict on the obedience of His Son, God's justification of Himself, of His Son, and therefore of all men in Him. We who have died with Christ have also a future and a hope in Him—now in this time in His living presence, and at the end of time in His final manifestation—a faith and a hope "promised from the place whose sureness and unequivocal transcendence gives to the promise a clarity and certainty which are beyond comparison or compromise."¹⁸ If this be the truth about man in his social solidarity, then it is a burning truth which the pulpit must proclaim with life-and-death urgency.

3. Barth's doctrine of the atonement speaks to man as a member of the Christian Community. What does it mean to be a Christian? What is salvation? Is it synonymous with conversion, a *fait accompli* somewhere in the past, or is it an eschatological concept realizable only beyond the bounds of space and history? The question must surely be answered, especially in the light of the Church's renewed concern with evangelism. Nothing could be more disastrous than that "evangelism" should fail to have adequate definition. Answers, however, have been as superficial as they are numerous, ranging all the way from a revival-meeting "decision" to identification with an institution which determines the destiny of souls even beyond the grave. The real dilemma, however, perplexes the man in-between, the conventional Protestant who, like the very human Paul, has made a Christian decision and identified himself with the Church, yet still finds himself in the grip of his old unregeneracy, wretched because of his failure to "measure up." How can a man be *simul peccator et iustus*? That question has reality for the sincere, thinking man in the pew of the average Church today. To that man Barth's doctrine makes sense; it is evangelism in terms that he can understand and accept. He rebels against a concept of salvation manifestly unreasonable and bizarre; but salvation defined in Pauline terms as a "history" of which he cannot be conscious, but which is real because it happened in Jesus Christ—that kind of salvation the modern Christian, and perhaps the modern non-Christian, will "decide for." Convinced of its truth, he *will* live on the basis of it, live as one forgiven, as an heir of God, as the inheritor of a great hope.

Yet not passively. With full admission of his own poverty and with full reliance on the justifying grace of God, the Christian still considers unworthy any doctrine that makes no demands of him, leaves no place for gratitude and self-oblation, no room for growth in sanctification. This fact adds point to a paradox—that man, who aspires to share in his own atonement has neither the power nor, in the last analysis, the will to participate

13. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV, 1, p. 356.

in it. If Barth be accused of neglecting what has been called the "subjective" aspect of atonement, it may well be that as a preacher he became tired of making hypocrites of his own congregation. No higher challenge to growth in sanctification could be presented to any Christian than the challenge to "acknowledgment," "recognition" and "confession," as Barth has defined them. Yet who is sufficient for these things? Christian preaching might again become a Word of God to which men and women would listen if, instead of being a weekly moral "pep-talk," it witnessed to the awakening power of the Holy Spirit.

Will Barth's doctrine of the atonement preach? Not, perhaps, as Barth has formulated it. Indeed simply to "reproduce" Barth in the pulpit would be "Barthianism" of the most unpalatable variety and an injustice to Barth himself. For Barth has written for the theologian and for the preacher. Yet no preacher, having studied seriously his doctrine of the atonement in *Church Dogmatics* IV, 1, can fail to be influenced, perhaps revolutionized by it.