John Thompson: Interpreter of Karl Barth

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John Thompson has written two full-length works on Barth, and several articles. His expositions of Barth are patient, thorough, complimentary but not uncritical. He is attracted by the central trinitarian and soteriological teachings of Barth. John Thompson is equally at home in writing for the student and the academic specialist and has practised theology not just in a collegial or denominational, but also in an ecumenical context.

How should we approach the task of interpreting Karl Barth? There are plenty who will find this question puzzling, evidence, perhaps, of the wretched habits of those theologians who have nothing better to do than to convert the obvious into the opaque. Interpreting Karl Barth, while it may take us many a decade, because there is so much of him, is surely not any different from interpreting any other thinker. So whence the problem? Well, the fact is that the task is a very demanding one. As the post-Barth years have rolled on, there are voices that tell us that we are only now beginning to catch up with and really understand him. A generation of contemporary interpreters, including many from the English-speaking world, is devoting vast resources of time to the task, telling those of us who thought that we understood Barth, to think again. Serious exposure to Barth explains this state of affairs. Barth's *oeuvre* is a subtle and complex affair. Subtle: for example, what looks like a straightforward set of issues thrown up by Emil Brunner on the subject of natural theology take on a new dimension when Barth gets to grips with them. Complex: for example, what unpredictably comes round the corner on a reading of *Church Dogmatics* throws unexpected light on the terrain covered up to that point.

For anyone, then, to establish a serious reputation as a reliable interpreter of Karl Barth, is no mean feat. John Thompson has achieved just that. As a theologian, he is, and doubtless will in future be, associated especially with Barth. As I shall indicate later,

this fact must not mislead us into thinking that he is a mere commentator. He has devoted much energy to interpreting and expounding Barth precisely because he finds in Barth a guide to true and faithful theological understanding. John Thompson, in other words, seeks to render Barth truly to us in order to appropriate the Gospel faithfully with us. Whether or not we are persuaded by Barth in this, that or the other matter, we can not deny the importance of what is going on in these expositions nor withhold gratitude for them.

Over the years, John Thompson has produced two full-length accounts of Barth's thought: *Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: St Andrew Press, 1978) and *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick, 1991). The first of these was the fruit of his doctoral research, the second, a contribution to the Princeton Theological Monograph series. In addition, there has been a number of essays on Barth. A sample of these titles points us to something significant, as we shall see. There are pieces on 'Christology and Reconciliation in the Theology of Karl Barth' and 'On the Trinity'.[1] With regard to this second piece, it should be added that it was included in a collection edited by John Thompson himself, where he fielded a fine team of fine Barth scholars like W.A.Whitehouse, Martin Rumscheidt, Thomas Torrance, Ray Anderson, Alasdair Heron, Colin Gunton and Geoffrey Bromiley.[2] This very substantial collection has never got the attention that it has deserved, through no fault of editor or contributors.) Then there are pieces that bring Barth into dialogue with others, as with von Balthasar and P.T. Forsyth.[3] An essay on

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1 The first of these was published in T.Hart and D.Thimell, *Christ in our Place: the Humanity of God in Christ for the Reconciliation of the World* (Allison Park, Pa/ Exeter: Pickwick/Paternoster, 1989), the second in John Thompson ed., *Theology Beyond Christendom* (Allison Park, Pa: Pickwick, 1986).

2 My apologies to equal worthies amongst the contributors whose names I have not included.

3 See 'Barth and Balthasar: 'an Ecumenical Dialogue' in B.McGregor & T.Norris, *The Beauty of Christ: an Introduction to the Theology of Hans*

'Jungel on Barth' offers a critical exposition of a major interpreter of Karl Barth and is, in fact, the longest essay in an important collection devoted to Jungel's work.[4] Another full-length volume written by John Thompson, on *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, understandably furthers the work of expounding Barth, though as one amongst many.[5] Barth is no *éminence grise* in this account, but given some explicit pride of place from the first page of the 'Introduction', something which illustrates not any undue partisanship on the part of the author, but the sheer fact of life in modern theology.

So what exactly is significant about this authorship, other than the obvious fact that the above account (which is brutally selective) demonstrates great industry? This: the themes under consideration are always major ones. Trinity, Christology, soteriology - we are always at the heart of the Christian message. There is an internal unity to the authorship, an integration of the thinking about Barth. For example, we note the way the conclusion of John Thompson's second volume on Barth is related to his first: 'The clear impression that a study of the doctrine of the Spirit makes is that it is integrated by means of christology into the structure of Barth's total perspective...'[6] But more significant still is the internal unity of the authorship in regard to its concentration on major themes. There is a variety of different theological styles on offer these days. Doubtless, one can justify some of them. But the Church is never better served than when the *central* themes of her proclamation and teaching are the object of theological attention. So we draw attention to a simple

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Urs von Balthasar (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994) and 'Was Forsyth Really a Barthian Before Barth?'in T.Hart ed., *Justice the True and Only Mercy: Essays on the Life and Theology of P.T.Forsyth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995).

4 In J.Webster ed., *The Possibilities of Theology; Studies in the Theology of Eberhard Jungel in his Sixtieth Year* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994).

5 Op.cit., n.3 above.

6 *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth*, p.209.

fact about John Thompson's authorship which might easily be overlooked: he has reflected on the greatest of all themes in the company of one of the greatest of all theologians. We are never, then, in the domain of the trivial and the nugatory, the flashy or the superficial. We are always at the heart of things. This is a demonstrable truth, not an extravagant plaudit.

Four features of John Thompson's expositions merit special attention.

1. He aims to be sober rather than spectacular, unobtrusive more than intrusive. Barth's own language is rich and sometimes, I dare say, indulgent. Talk of indulgence is certainly best placed on the margins of any fair characterisation of Barth, for it is the substance and the weightiness of the subject-matter that commands the reader's attention and dictates the flow of discourse. But what Barth can do, and can do effectively, is for Barth to do - it is not necessarily for others to imitate. Too often, systematic and philosophical theologians get mesmerised by words and concepts which obscure rather than illuminate their putative themes. The best thing that an interpreter of Barth can do, one often feels, is to put things as simply as the matter permits. And this John Thompson does, somewhat as does Geoffrey Bromiley can do in his expositions of Barth. But it is a deceptively difficult thing to accomplish. Not only must we understand Barth aright, in order to do it; we must so render his thought that its content is maintained, nuances and all, without sacrificing substantive depth to surface intelligibility. It is a consistent, not just an occasional, feature of John Thompson's writing that he succeeds here. Those who think that this is easily done without dialectical frustration are welcome to try their hand at it.

The notes repay attention, as well as the text, in John Thompson's work. It is intriguing, for example, to find comparison between Barth and Denney which reveals how the former more than the latter could sustain belief in 'a bodily and real presence of the man Jesus with his own after his rising from the dead.' Where Denney found something 'not only incongruous but repellent in the idea of

the Risen Lord eating...Barth seems able to combine this conception with that of a change of form in the being of the Risen Lord.'[7] Solid exposition in the text combined with scholarly adumbration in the notes makes for amply rewarding reading.

2. Where controversial points of interpretation arise, John Thompson is able to move surely but quietly, softly but firmly. It is the test of mastery that a writer can both convey material simply, when required, and engage with detailed interpretation, when required. John Thompson has been equally successful in reaching the student (e.g., *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth*) and the specialist (e.g.'Jungel on Barth'). Interpreting Barth requires a capacity for sustaining theological distinctions and a willingness to calculate the merits of the different angles that are possible on this or that feature of his work - including central features. Most readers of *The Holy Spirit in the Theology of Karl Barth* may not guess how significant it is when John Thompson gently remonstrates with Torrance or Gunton, Rosato or Jenson, for example.

Whether John Thompson will ever speak to me again if I compare him with Thomas Aquinas, I do not know![8] But one point of comparison is, I think, possible. Aquinas works through the arguments with meticulous and relentless precision. 'There are those who say this; there are those who say its opposite; I say this; here are my reasons and objections to those who say otherwise; conclusion'. After a while, Thomas can generate a confidence in the reader: no matter what comes up, he will see his way through it. When we come to a difficulty in the interpretation of Barth, the reader of John Thompson's work gradually acquires a similar confidence that the matter will be succinctly and convincingly resolved. As is the case with Aquinas, there is an economy - more, we might say, an efficiency - in the disposal of matters.

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7 *Christ in Perspective*, p.178, n.63.

8 Barth had some severe things to say of those theologies that took the Angelic Doctor as their guide in matters epistemological, soteriological etc.

3. John Thompson is not uncritical of Barth. It is contrary to the letter and the spirit of Barth's writings that there should exist any 'Barthians' at all; still, if people insist on calling others 'Barthian', it would doubtless be fair to name John Thompson amongst their number. It would be fair - but fair only if it was not taken as a sign of uncritical allegiance. Let me give just one example, coming from the close of his essay on 'Karl Barth on the Trinity'. [9] 'Where one has queries about Barth's exposition is in one part of his section on the Holy Spirit...[T]he use of analogy...is somewhat overdone and strained in Volume IV/2 [of *Church Dogmatics*]. The problem of transition from Jesus to ourselves is seen by analogy as pointing to a problem in God...but it is a dubious way to state that God has a problem with himself which he has to deal with and solve...This kind of approach and bold language were better avoided' (p.30). Certainly, the criticism is modified, but it is there, interestingly paralleling a criticism made of some theologies of the atonement in the lineage of Anselm, which present the matter of forgiveness as a problem for God.[10]

There are two reasons why John Thompson does not give Barth unreserved allegiance. Firstly, he is observing a general principle: we do not serve the Church or its Lord if we call any man master. Second he is expressing a particular conviction: at points, John Thompson simply thinks that dissent is called for, and says as much. It is true, I think, to say that dissent normally falls into one of three categories. Firstly, it can be a matter of disagreeing over formulation rather than substance - spotting the danger rather than straightforwardly opposing. Secondly, it can be a matter of disagreeing on some secondary aspect of the treatment of the theme under discussion. Thirdly, it can be a matter of using the thrust of Barth's own work to correct some feature of the application Barth himself makes. All this does indeed indicate how deeply sympathetic John Thompson is to Barth, of course, but if we agree

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9 In *Theology Beyond Christendom*, op.cit.

10 I am not sure whether John Thompson would endorse this comparison, however.

with someone and are convinced by them, it is no virtue to distance ourselves artificially or refrain from promoting the point of view in question.

4. There are brief characterisations that speak volumes, but almost slip by us in pacific and unpretentious prose. Two examples come to mind. In the first, John Thompson is treating of Barth's position on the suffering of God, in his *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*.[11] These are difficult waters. 'Barth...maintains throughout his writings that God lives in the perfection of life, in the fullness of his triune being as love. If then God is God without us yet only wills to be God with us and enters completely into and takes upon himself our suffering and alienated state, how, in the light of the foregoing theological perspectives, can we try to understand the suffering of a perfect God?' The answer? 'The inner being of God is that of the obedience of the Son to the Father, and this self-giving is seen in time and space in Christ's obedience unto death. There is therefore a direction downward in God, a humbling aspect which makes possible incarnation and atonement. Suffering is not, as with Moltmann, in God, but God has in his triune nature those aspects that enable him to remain himself while entering into our situation and being our reconciler in the passion and death of his Son by the Holy Spirit.' But in between these two quotations, we read the simple sentence: 'Jungel correctly, though obliquely, interprets Barth here.' That's just it! Many of us, reading Jungel, will say to ourselves that he seems to be on to something important, but the exposition is tortuous here and there, so we just don't know. John Thompson exemplifies patience in his reading, but does not let Jungel get away without a caution.

Another example can be given, this time in relation to Thomas Torrance. Here John Thompson is dealing with criticisms of Barth's position on christology and reconciliation. 'Torrance also believes there is a dualism in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation which surfaces particularly in his views on baptism as two separate acts. The first is baptism by the Holy Spirit as a divine act; the second

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11 Op.cit, p.50.

baptism with water as a purely human act and confession.'[12] Where does John Thompson himself stand? 'There is certainly a question mark to be put opposite Barth's views on baptism but whether this is due to a defect in his main doctrine of reconciliation is questionable.' And then the sentence: 'Torrance does not indicate where he thinks the source of the fault is to be found.' Those of us who know Torrance's work will understand the response immediately. Greatly as I admire his work (as does John Thompson) I confess to occasional frustration as great strides are taken in exposition or criticism without the intermediate steps being clearly marked out. Between the alternatives of keeping silence or expressing exasperation in such matters, there is the possibility of putting things as John Thompson does here!

What is it that has drawn John Thompson to Karl Barth? Any answer to this must be partial and tentative - indeed, both partial and tentative for one and the same reason. For the factors that draw one of us to another in this respect are bound to be embedded in a host of different kinds of things, including biographical, even intimately personal, factors. So I must be quite general here. John Thompson stands in the tradition of orthodoxy. His account of modern doctrines of the Trinity reveals the orthodoxy of his own convictions on the Trinity, for example, and he is committed to belief in an atonement objectively wrought on our behalf by the second Person of the Trinity, who fully assumed our humanity. Yet perplexities arise in some features of the account of this found in the tradition. How are we to understand the relation of God in himself to God as he appears? How are we to understand the relation of God's being to God's act? How is divine election truly a matter of good news, and not a matter of very good news for some, very bad news for others? How are we to understand our ability to speak and think objectively of God and His Word? Barth offered a kind of revisionary orthodoxy, one which sought to keep the big building-blocks in place, but redesign the structure that emerged from them. The resulting edifice is architecturally different but quarried of the same stone as the earlier building, insisting that its one material is

12 In the essay in Hart and Thimell, op.cit., p.222.

the one stone on which the Church is built, Jesus Christ and the triune God. In Barth's uncompromising christocentricity, in his refusal to think from any other point than Jesus Christ and conclude anything at variance with what is revealed there, John Thompson has found his own theological convictions moulded and nourished.

Yet we must emphasise that John Thompson's concerns arise from his direct engagement with and concern for the substantive issues at stake, not primarily an interest in Barth. A striking example of this, to my mind, occurs in his discussion of the *filioque* question. Both on account of his moderatorial responsibilities and on account of his sustained convictions, John Thompson has been involved with ecumenical aspects of the theological task and ecclesial life. Barth, too, for all his criticisms of Roman Catholicism, was ecumenical in spirit and interest. The Western Church, Catholic and Protestant, is divided from the Eastern by more things than one, but the badge of theological distinction is often advertised as the *filioque* question, the question of whether, within the Trinity itself, the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone or from the Father and the Son. The East has taken the former, the West the latter, position. John Thompson's position is expressed as follows. 'It is my considered opinion and conclusion that the inclusion of the *Filioque* in the original Nicene Creed at a later date was and is undesirable and unnecessary as well as harmful ecumenically. Nonetheless, it expresses the reality of the relationship of the persons in God more adequately than some alternatives and as a theologoumenon should be accepted.'[13]

This is, by any standards, a balanced statement: theologically, the *filioque* is defensible, but its credal inclusion is not. But those who have read widely in John Thompson's work should, I believe, be arrested as much by his manner of expressing his conviction as by the conviction itself. 'It is my considered opinion.' That formulation in a writer often betrays a sense of self-importance. Certainly not so in the case of John Thompson, whose writing is humble, not pompous. This phrasing is not typical of his writing. It reveals something of the pondering that underlies the theology, and the

13 *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives*, p.154.

intense seriousness with which the theological task is regarded. The issue is important; therefore it has been given due weight; this is the conclusion of deliberation. Shortly afterwards, we have a quotation from the BCC report which alludes to Barth's defence of the *Filioque*, but the whole spirit of the discussion signals how John Thompson will only go along with Barth to the extent that he does after giving matters his own, independent consideration. I have previously made the point that John Thompson is not uncritical of Karl Barth; what I want to say here is that it is the intrinsic importance of the issue that engages John Thompson's theological attention, not just the fact that Barth - or anyone else - had something to say about it. It is a case of theological and ecclesiastical statesmanship.

Is this essay an exercise in conventional politeness, the kind of thing you say on the occasion of somebody's eightieth birthday but deny or forget at any other time of the year? The question is simply answered. Let the reader of this article read for himself or herself those works to which I have alluded - and many others to which I have not. Then the answer will take care of itself. And there are things which can be said that will not be read in these works. At a certain prestigious conference (which will remain unnamed) a certain prestigious theologian (who will remain nameless) gave a paper on an aspect of Karl Barth's theology (which I shall not specify) and did a poor job of it (which I shall not describe). Recounting this incident to me, the conference chairman said that the day was saved when John Thompson got up to give a response and said in short compass everything that should have been said in the original paper. It is not that John Thompson has no weaknesses as a theologian. It would be rather strange if he did not, and he would deserve the attention of several issues of *Irish Biblical Studies* if that were the case, as he would be the first perfect theologian in existence, far excelling Karl Barth and anyone else. But sound judgement surely impels the unprejudiced reader of his work to say that what he has set out to do, he has done in an exemplary fashion, and what more can we ask, especially as what he has set out to do was important to do?

Let me close with a personal tribute. When I spoke briefly on my appointment to the Chair of Systematic Theology at Union

Theological College, as John Thompson's successor, being both rather nervous and unacquainted with the conventions of what exactly one was expected to say on such occasions, I omitted to pay tribute to the occupant to the Chair, who had just retired. Others, of course, were and are better equipped to do so as regards his theological work in the College and the Church over the years of his tenure of that Chair. But over these last eight years, I have enjoyed not only the personal support and friendship of John Thompson, but a fair measure of his grace. For I possess neither his expertise in Barth nor his ability to communicate lucidly, yet profoundly.[14] He must know it, but has put up with it! So it is a great pleasure to be able to join other essayists in these numbers of *Irish Biblical Studies*, which we dedicate to John Thompson, gentleman as well as scholar, with gratitude, affection and respect in this, his eightieth year.

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14 I refrain from flaunting any more comparative weaknesses at this point!