

NOTATIONES

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REVELATION IN SCRIPTURE: SOME COMMENTS ON KARL BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF REVELATION

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THERE IS CURRENTLY a resurgent interest in the theology of Karl Barth, particularly from the evangelical left.¹ Evangelicals seem to

¹ Among the many recent titles on Barth's theology in English, from a variety of theological perspectives, see the forthcoming Sung Wook Chung, editor, *Karl Barth and Evangelical Theology: Convergences and Divergences* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007); also Kimlyn J. Bender, *Karl Barth's Christological Ecclesiology*, Barth Studies (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005); Eberhard Jüngel, *God's Being Is In Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. John Webster (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2004); Kurt Anders Richardson, *Reading Karl Barth: New Directions for North American Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Eberhard Busch, *The Great Passion: An Introduction to Karl Barth's Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004); Joseph L. Mangina, *Karl Barth: Theologian of Christian Witness* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); John Webster, editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, Cambridge Companions to Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Trevor Hart, *Regarding Karl Barth: Toward a Reading of His Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999); Timothy Gorrige, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, Christian Theology in Context (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999); John Webster, *Barth's Moral*

be looking in new directions for tools and methods by and with which to construct a theology that reckons with the presuppositions of (post)modernism. With this swing to the left, evangelicals are reassessing Barth's massive theological project. Part of this reassessment involves the Swiss theologian's unique doctrine of revelation. The earlier, negative evaluation of Barth's conception of divine revelation by evangelicals is naturally once more up for discussion and being reconsidered.

In this short essay I shall briefly state the salient features of Barth's doctrine of revelation, and then offer some comments in assessment of it, particularly pertaining to his view of revelation in Scripture.

In his 1947 open lecture on "The Christian Understanding of Revelation,"² Karl Barth offers in short form his conception of the doctrine of revelation. In Barth's conception, Christian revelation—as distinct from all other revelations—is "the wholly other revelation."³ It is the transcendent revelation.³ What this means is expounded by Barth from a variety of angles. As wholly other revelation, it is revelation humans need absolutely—a revelation that is the foundation of existence or being itself, for God himself is reality. This revelation is not approximate but original and final, not imperiling but salvific, not relative but absolute and ever-new, not esoteric but general or universal in scope, not one of many revelations but the exclusive revelation, not brought about as part of human capability but as a gift, not subject to human mastery but free from human manipulation, not

Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998); William Stacy Johnson, *The Mystery of God: Karl Barth and the Postmodern Foundations of Theology*, Columbia Series in Reformed Theology (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). Many older works on Barth have also been republished.

² Karl Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," Open Lectures given at Bonn University, summer 1947, in *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, ed. Ronald Gregor Smith (London: SCM Press, 1954), 205-240.

³ Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," 207-208.

approximate but complete and final, “an event that has happened, is happening and will happen in the future...”, not speculative but practical, not immanent but transcendent. This revelation, which finds its culminating and definitive expression in the Christ-event, is God acting in his revelation and thus reveals God himself. In short, God acting and speaking is his revelation—God acting as a person, God acting as Subject.⁴

Consequently, God’s revelation of himself can never be an *object* of human knowledge, and so this excludes the notion of a general revelation of God or God revealed by the creation.⁵ According to Barth, within the realm of human conceptions and patterns of thought, no theory of cognition is possible that can embrace revelation in the Christian sense or accept the notion of God in the Christian sense.⁶ God’s Word is simultaneously God’s Deed, that is, an ever-active Word, not a past tense Word. As *Word* it is full of intention and appeal, and demands decision. To be confronted with the Word of God brings humans to one possibility: obedience. Freedom resides there. To not choose obedience is to choose “the impossible possibility”—nothingness!⁷ But then, for Barth, the Word of God is never at human disposal. It is never subject to human choice, for it is never a datum, something static that humans can handle, scrutinize, define, classify, objectify, and manipulate. Quite the converse, it is always a concrete act of God, an event, a truly miraculous miracle, a sovereign free act of grace that speaks to us and confronts us. We can’t reflect on it as an object to take or leave. “Neutrality toward the Word of God is impossible.”⁸ For Barth, revelation is a *success* term; it is never God’s mere attempt to reveal himself. *God’s revelation happens!*

⁴ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 209, 212-214.

⁵ See *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel, with an introduction by John Ballie (London: Geoffrey Bles, The Centenary Press, 1946), 67-128.

⁶ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 210-211.

⁷ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 215.

⁸ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 215.

Barth therefore despises any notion of the Word of God that reduces it to mere speech that imparts information. Rather, the Word of God is divine action; it elects, creates, changes, judges, calls, forgives, saves! It is *God's Word*—powerful and dynamic, to which we respond (and can't help but respond) in obedience! Otherwise, we are talking about something other than the revelation of God.⁹ In short, the Word is the living God himself in his revelation. This Word ever strikes humans afresh in all its *active* power, creating faith in the Word as the Word. Without faith—which entails a listening obedience—no one can know the Word or even acknowledge it as the Word; and, therefore, without faith there is no acceptance of the Word or obedience to the Word *as the Word*. Yet, since the *Word* of God is the Word of *God*, it creates faith in the Word; it needs no defenders or advocates or propagandists.¹⁰ Rather, since revelation is itself salvific, where revelation is known and acknowledged, there the Christian church is.¹¹

As for Scripture, as the special and unique witness among the witnesses to divine revelation, it can never be God's Word in any static sense—the ink on the pages as such. The Word of God can never abidingly exist between the covers of a book, for the Word is an event—a divine act—when and where God in his sovereign freedom chooses for it to happen. The Bible and the proclamation from the Bible are indirect channels of the divine Word. Both are human witnesses to the revelation event.¹² They each function instrumentally as God's Word. When God chooses to use them to reveal Jesus Christ, they become *God's Word*.

That the Bible is a human witness to divine revelation is not, for Barth, to denigrate Scripture. Although the Bible is an altogether human book, “a collection of human documents,” subject to all the frailties and flaws of humanity and subject to all the marks of “human relativity and limitation,” nonetheless, it

⁹ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 216.

¹⁰ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 215-16.

¹¹ Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 232.

¹² Barth, “The Christian Understanding of Revelation,” 217ff.

must exercise the authoritative role in the church's proclamation and all its talk about God. Everything the church says about God must be taken from this book, for the church's theology is judged by this witness.¹³ The words of the text of Scripture however may not be identified with God's revelation. This would be to render God's Word static and subject to human manipulation. Again, *God's Word* is never at human disposal. In point of fact, the Bible does not conceal its human character at all.¹⁴ "When, and because the Holy Spirit has made them [the biblical writers] His witnesses, we hear Him speak to us too, we are empowered by the human words of the Bible to hear the Word of God."¹⁵ Thus dynamically, in the act of the Holy Spirit, Scripture has been God's Word and shall be anew God's Word.

Barth views his own conception of revelation as more biblical than older, Protestant models where *divine revelation* sits ineffectual and impotent as inspired script on paper. This can never be. When God speaks nothing is ever the same again. God's speaking cannot fail. God's *speaking* as *God's speaking* changes and transforms its recipients. It saves! Revelation from God cannot be otherwise. For Barth, divine revelation can never mean anything less than divine achievement and success, for it is *God's work*.

In evaluating Barth's conception of revelation, particularly as it pertains to Scripture as the privileged witness to divine revelation, I first wish to offer three commendations.

(1) Barth rightly wishes to allow God's Word to function in its unique life-giving power. He rightly accents the sovereignty of divine grace and God's freedom in taking the initiative in the work of salvation. Fallen humans are absolutely dependent upon God and his mercy. His is wholly a theology from above. Salvation is a divine gift wherein sinners cannot, according to any capacity within themselves, lift themselves up to God or make a contribution in that redemptive work.

(2) Barth's doctrine of Scripture rightly avoids certain docetic

¹³ Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," 217.

¹⁴ Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," 223.

¹⁵ Barth, "The Christian Understanding of Revelation," 225.

entanglements, wherein the Bible is wrongly conceived as a divine oracle or a series of divine oracles dropped directly from heaven and therefore wholly divorced from human thought-forms and cultural circumstances. Over against certain docetic conceptions of Scripture that have led to various abuses of the Bible (the notion of the Bible as a scientific textbook for example), Barth recognizes the full humanity of Scripture. He even guardedly appeals to the incarnation by way of analogy.¹⁶

(3) There is something genuinely attractive about Barth's coherentism, or what looks like a form of coherentism. The Word of God proves the Word of God. The Word of God isn't dependent upon human apologetics to establish it as the divine Word. It is its own best testimony and defense. It is authentically the Word of God because that is what it is. Although, certain questions remain in this regard, we ought at least to commend Barth for delivering us from the notions of strong foundationalism and futile attempts to ground the Word of God on human reason. Coherentism however also has problems, particularly in its inability to penetrate rival "bubbles" of coherency.¹⁷

These features of Barth's doctrine are highly commendable and are genuinely appreciated. Nonetheless, there are also certain problematic features in Barth's doctrine of revelation and of Scripture as the premier human testimony to that revelation.

(1) Although Barth articulates a fairly high doctrine of Scripture's authority, despite his endorsement of biblical criticism

¹⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969), I/2, 487, 513.

¹⁷ Foundationalism is the theory that knowledge rests on a foundation of indubitable beliefs from which further propositions can be inferred to produce a superstructure of known truths. Thus, strong foundationalism is a kind of evidentialism and rationalism whereby belief is justified only if (a) that belief is true and if either (b) it is self-evident or necessarily true or evident to the senses; or (c) it can be supported in some way by what is self-evident or necessarily true or evident to the senses. Coherence theories for justified belief stands in sharp opposition to foundationalism, and assert that a belief is justified if it fits with a set of beliefs, appropriately specified; but there is no foundation upon which knowledge rests or upon which it is grounded. Cf. Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford, 2000), 81-99.

and the feeble and flawed human character of Scripture, does he perhaps fall into a form of docetism of his own, juxtaposing as he does the divine Word, which is dynamic, active, the activity of God himself as Subject, over against the human testimony of Scripture, which is static, flawed, at human disposal, an object? In other words, although Barth affirms that human words can *become* the Word of God, in Barth's view, the Word of *God* can never *be* a human word as such, not as he conceives of human words. A human word is weak, impotent, relative, broken, capable of being manipulated, abused, ever at human disposal. Not so—indeed, never so!—God's Word, says Barth. But is this the case? At this point, and on this matter, Barth thinks his doctrine is more radical than the historic creedal, Protestant doctrine. But is it? In point of fact, we may legitimately ask which doctrine is more analogous to the incarnation. For all of his talk of the incarnation as the definitive revelatory event, has Barth perhaps missed something? For isn't the incarnation a scandal precisely because the Word-become-flesh is at human disposal, a Word whose glory is spurned, whose teaching is rebuffed, whose glorious works are ascribed to Beelzebub, whose entire life, as light piercing the darkness, is denied by the darkness, the way and the truth and the life being suppressed in unrighteousness by unbelief? Contrary to Barth, what we find in Scripture (from which we must derive all our talk about God) is that the Word-in-the-flesh is in fact subjected to human evaluation and rejection, treated as a mere *object*, spurned as a mere rabbi imparting false information, his own teaching manipulated and misused (even used against him). Indeed the Word-in-the-flesh is horrifically handled, scrutinized, defined, classified, objectified, and manipulated—consider Christ's trial and crucifixion.

The scandal of the incarnation is the very notion, the very reality that a man could be God, that a human word could be a divine Word. Barth's actualistic ontology doesn't seem to conform to the Scriptural testimony at this point. Conversely, however, at just this point the historic creedal doctrine of Scripture as God's Word is scandalous in a way analogous to the incarnation: fully human words are truly God's Word. We ask:

Why is it inconceivable, for Barth, for human words simply to be divine Word, not merely in an instrumental or indirect sense, but truly and abidingly? Following Barth's scheme, shouldn't the incarnation itself be reckoned as inconceivable and impossible? It seems that at just this point Barth's doctrine falls into its own species of docetism.

(2) If the church wants to avoid strong foundationalism, is Barth's coherentism (or something resembling fideism) the only avenue open to it? If we reject Barth's rejection of general revelation, it seems that other paths open up for the church both apologetically and philosophically. In any case, his rejection of general revelation is not convincing and actually entails a less, not a more, radical doctrine of revelation than the historic theological tradition at this point. For the scandal of divine revelation is that God the Creator can commandeer the created order to be his servant, even his witness, declaring and revealing his glory, so that sinners are left without excuse.