

CHAPTER 8

Barth on Natural Theology

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Karl Barth defines “natural theology” as any approach to dogmatics in which claims about God are grounded on an account of divine revelation other than God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. This kind of theology typically operates on the basis of two related presuppositions: (i) God’s act of creation establishes a union between God and humanity that is distinct from the saving union God establishes with humanity in Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit; and (ii) humans possess a natural capacity to know God that remains intact after the human fall into sin. Barth rejects natural theology because he rejects these presuppositions. In contrast, he believes (i) the only union between God and humanity is the saving union that God establishes in Christ and the Spirit; and (ii) due to the effects of sin, humans have no capacity to know God rightly apart from God’s saving grace in Christ and the Spirit. The best way to understand Barth’s rejection of natural theology and its underlying presuppositions is to tell the story of how Barth developed and refined these two convictions over the course of his career.

Theology of Crisis

Barth’s early theology is shaped by his belief that if theologians derive knowledge of God by reflecting on creaturely realities, then this knowledge will be determined by human ideals rather than the reality of God. Barth’s conviction on this matter solidified during World War I after many of his former professors publicly endorsed the German war policy on the basis of their theology. Their theology had been shaped by a general account of human religious experience, a historical-critical approach to Scripture, and a perceived connection between culture and religion. Now Barth saw them appealing to these same things to justify their political position, and he was deeply disturbed. As he wrote at

the time to his former professor Wilhelm Herrmann: “we learned to acknowledge ‘experience’ as the constitutive principle of knowing and doing in the domain of religion ... Now, however, in answer to our doubts [about the war], an ‘experience’ which is completely new to us is held out to us by German Christians, an allegedly religious war ‘experience’, i.e. the fact that German Christians ‘experience’ their war as a holy war is supposed to bring us to silence, if not demand reverence from us” (Schwöbel 1981, p. 115). Barth’s remark implies that Herrmann has allowed his political ideology to shape his theology instead of allowing his theology to shape his ideology. This reversal leads to idolatry, because human ideals have determined his claims about God. As Barth later reflected, it was during this period that Protestant liberal theology finally “unmasked itself” to him as a human-centered enterprise (Barth 1968, p. 264).

As Barth searched for an alternative, he tried to explain how God can be known by humans while remaining beyond human manipulation or control. He addressed this problem by offering a theology of crisis where the transcendent God judges and negates creaturely history by breaking into it from the outside. This divine act occurs as “a pure, absolute, vertical miracle” that takes the form of an “undimensional line of intersection” between God and creation (RII, p. 60). At the center of this miracle is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The risen Christ exposes humanity’s unrighteousness and reveals the righteous God who is totally distinct from creation and thus unknown by humans. “The Resurrection is the revelation,” Barth says, “the disclosing of Jesus as the Christ, the appearing of God, and the apprehending of God in Jesus” (RII, p. 30). Because the resurrection is an event in history that cannot be understood on natural or historical terms, both God’s self-disclosure and the humans’ apprehension of it are beyond human manipulation. Human knowledge of God is an “impossible possibility,” Barth says, meaning that it “exists as the possibility of God and as his possibility only” (RII, 62).

Barth’s theology of crisis makes natural theology impossible because no union between God and humanity exists other than the union God establishes in and through the risen Christ who remains beyond creaturely history at every moment. Indeed, the relationship God establishes with humanity in Christ can hardly be described as a “union” at all, because it does not take material form and cannot be described in historical or tangible terms. “There is here no merging or fusion of God and man,” Barth insists, “no exaltation of humanity to divinity, no overflowing of God into human nature” (RII, p. 30). Because knowledge of God derived from any source other than Christ is by definition not knowledge of God but an exercise in idolatry, the possibility of any such theology is ruled out.

As the years progressed, Barth began to worry that his theology of crisis left him no basis from which to make positive claims about God. He later acknowledged that, by closing the door to any kind of tangible or visible manifestation of God’s grace in creaturely history, his early theology failed to account for the reality of John 1:14 (CDI/2, p. 50). He also admitted that, in his quest to distance God from creation and avoid idolatry, he actually ended up defining God according to the limits of human rationality. The problem was that his claim that knowledge of God is impossible for humans depended upon a prior determination of what kind of knowledge is conceivably possible. By so strongly linking God’s being with the “mystery” that exists at the limits of human knowing, Barth’s early theology allowed these limits to determine the parameters of

divine being (see Schmidt 1927; Asprey 2010, pp. 11–13). His early theology thus fell into the very error he was trying to avoid (CD II/1, pp. 634–635).

Early Dogmatics

Barth attempted to overcome these problems when he began delivering his first lectures on dogmatics at Göttingen in 1924. He sought to demonstrate how God's revelation can occur within creation without being transformed into creation and thus leave humans with no real knowledge of God at all (GD, pp. 58–59). Barth found the way forward by utilizing the dialectic of veiling and unveiling that he derived from the *anhypostatic-enhypostatic* christological formula (see McCormack 1995, pp. 327–328; Jones 2008, pp. 19–26). This formula, which originally arose in the Alexandrian tradition in response to the adoptionistic tendencies of the Antiochian tradition, expresses the idea that the human nature of Christ has no personhood prior to incarnation when the Son of God assumes a complete human nature. This means that the person of the hypostatic union is one and the same subject as the Logos, the second person of the Trinity. Barth uses this idea to say that although humans encounter the real, eternal, and transcendent God as he unveils himself in Jesus Christ, they do so only indirectly because God remains hidden in the veil of Jesus' human flesh. This dialectic enables Barth to affirm God's revelation within creation while preserving God's distinction from creation.

Barth applies this doctrine to the problem of knowledge through the concept of the Word of God (GD, pp. 45–69). God's revelation in Christ is a Word-event, an address that occurs as an "encounter between an *I* and a *Thou*, between one person and another" (GD, p. 59). This is even true of the incarnation: "even in the humanity of Christ," Barth says, "the content of revelation as well as the subject is God alone" (GD, p. 90). The Word became flesh, but the revelation is not the flesh but the eternal and transcendent God who speaks while hidden in the flesh. "If God *speaks*, then *God* speaks, and we have to do with the one Logos that the prophets and apostles received, the one revelation *in* the incarnation which the people of the Bible know and attest as either promised or manifested" (GD, p. 92). All revelation thus is eschatological: in whatever creaturely-historical means humans encounter it, they are encountering the eternal God who transcends creation and history. The same revelation the prophets received before Christ – and the apostles received in Christ – humans now receive in the present through the proclaimed Word of Christ, a Word that breaks into time and history from above. Because this Word is a revelation of *God*, Barth insists that it cannot be seen as a "constant" feature of creaturely existence. Rather, God's revelation stands in discontinuity with creaturely existence at every moment. Humans receive this revelation, not as a "given" of their existence, but as a disruptive Word that breaks into history and summons them to faith and obedience (GD, pp. 180, 191–198).

As in his theology of crisis, Barth's early dogmatics rules out natural theology by opposing the first presupposition that undergirds it. He still insists that God's being is utterly distinct from creaturely being and that the only union between God and

humanity is the union God establishes in Jesus Christ. He also believes that reflection on creaturely being in distinction from Christ produces an idolatrous projection of creaturely ideals rather than knowledge of God. But Barth's refined account of divine revelation also produced new tensions in his theology in regard to the second presupposition undergirding natural theology, the one regarding the natural human capacity to know God. In his early theology, Barth simply denied that humans possess any capacity to know God at all. But now that Barth had to explain how God speaks to humans in history, he found it difficult to describe the event of divine revelation without also affirming the existence of a natural human capacity to receive this revelation.

For example, during Barth's lectures on the doctrine of God in the summer of 1925, he considers the possibility of a limited "natural knowledge of God" involving the human "capacity for coming up against the mystery" of God (GD, p. 349). He explains that the fact that God speaks to humans indicates that humans must possess the capacity to hear him. After all, if God speaks to humans – and God does nothing in vain – then humans must be "possible hearers of [God's] Word" (GD, p. 340). "We have to be taken seriously," he says, "as those whose blind eyes and deaf ears are still eyes and ears that can be opened for revelation." He argues that "[t]o be capable of this knowledge is to be capable of participation in God's self-knowledge, of standing in the relation of revelation." This capacity involves our "being aware of the limit of our knowledge in regard to God," an awareness that "we can run up against the mystery of God, the mystery of the object, the mystery of our own limit, the mystery of our own necessary asking. The fact that we can do this can be for us a pointer to God" (GD, p. 341). These arguments indicate that Barth believes that humans can obtain limited, negative knowledge of God by reflecting upon their creaturely being because the capacities God gives humans in creation serve as the presupposition of God's revelation in Christ. Indeed, Barth acknowledges that his new approach "seems to agree with philosophical epistemology," but he denies that the actual content of the knowledge of God provided by philosophy is the same as that of revealed theology (GD, p. 341). On the basis of this difference, Barth believes that his rejection of natural theology remains intact.

Barth deploys similar arguments in his dogmatic lectures in Münster delivered in the winter of 1926–1927. There he makes the case that "the hearing human is included in the concept of the Word of God just as much as the speaking God ... One does not speak of the Word of God if one does not, at the same time, speak of the human who receives it" (GA 14, p. 148). This means that any account of God's revelation always must be considered alongside an account of the created human capacities which serve the presupposition of this revelation. As in his theology of crisis, Barth still openly denies the possibility of a natural theology because he still rejects the existence of union between God and humanity other than the one established in Jesus Christ. And like his dogmatic lectures in Göttingen, Barth does not think that the affirmation that humans possess an innate capacity to reflect on the mystery of God undermines this denial, because he believes that the knowledge of God produced by such reflections is strictly negative rather than positive in character.

Analogy of Being

Barth's judgment on this matter changes after an encounter with the Catholic theologian Erich Przywara. Barth invited Przywara to visit his seminar on theology of Thomas Aquinas in Münster in February 1929. In preparation for Przywara's visit, Barth and his students read the first two parts of *Religionsphilosophie katholischer Theologie*, where Przywara develops his doctrine of *analogia entis* (Przywara 1962, pp. 376–459). Przywara builds his version of the *analogia entis* on the foundation of Aquinas' account of the distinction between essence and existence (*Summa Theologiae* I.3.3–4). Przywara summarizes this distinction by arguing that, like God, the creature has a unity of essence and existence, but unlike God, the creature's unity is one of "tension" rather than identity. This tension, he says, stems from the fact that the creature's essence is realized only "over or above [its] existence," meaning that the creature cannot be considered as creature apart from its relationship with God, in whom it has its existence (Przywara 1962, p. 403). On the basis of this idea, Przywara concludes that humans are similar to God because they possess a unity of essence and existence, but even in this similarity, they are utterly dissimilar to God because – although the unity of essence and existence is one of identity in God – the unity of essence and existence is one of tension in humans. As he puts it, "since the relation of essence and existence is the essence of 'being,' so God and the creature are in 'being' similar and dissimilar — that is, they are analogous to one another, and this is what we mean by *analogia entis*, analogy of being" (Przywara 1962, p. 403).

For Przywara, a key implication of this analogy is that, because human existence can be understood only in light of the human relationship with God, human existence itself serves as a revelation of God. He explains this idea by describing the human relationship to God as "open upwards" (Przywara 1962, p. 400). This phrase means that, on the one hand, the very fact of humanity's existence testifies to God as its source; and, on the other hand, this testimony indicates that God is utterly distinct from humans because they remain dependent on God for their existence at every moment. So humans can reflect on their own being and know that God is both within *and* infinitely distinct from creaturely existence. Przywara worked out the implications of this idea for the knowledge of God by appealing to the Catholic principle "grace does not destroy but supports and perfects nature." He argues that God's revelation in Christ does not mean that creaturely nature is "abolished," as if it has no role to play in the knowledge of God. Instead, God's grace must be seen "doubly," such that God's grace in Christ presupposes, and perfects, God's grace in creation (see Johnson 2010a, pp. 89–91). God's grace in creation allows humans to derive knowledge of God through philosophical reflection, and this knowledge perfectly corresponds to the knowledge of God revealed in Christ. So although humans cannot know God fully through philosophical reflection alone, they can reflect on creaturely being and know something true about God; this knowledge then can be perfected and fulfilled by God's revelation in Christ. Indeed, the *analogia entis* reveals that humans live in an "incarnation-cosmos" where the pattern of God's relationship with creation as a whole is one and the same as the pattern of God's relationship in Christ. Once humans recognize the pattern through Christ, they can look

elsewhere – including the human consciousness – and recognize it there as well (Przywara 1962, p. 442).

Przywara presented Barth with a version of natural theology that Barth had never encountered before. Although Przywara joined Barth in affirming that God is distinct from creation, he used this distinction as the basis for a comprehensive metaphysics that unites all philosophical and theological thinking into a single system. The key to this unity is the identity between God's grace in creation and God's grace in Christ. This identity means that a human knower can reflect on either created being or Christ and discern the pattern of God's relationship with humanity. The *analogia entis* describes this pattern, and Przywara's account of the human as existing "open upwards" showed how reflection on one's own human being could lead to limited but true knowledge of God.

Analogy of Faith

After his meeting with Przywara, Barth remained convinced that any knowledge of God derived through reflection on creaturely being would be determined primarily by human ideals rather than God's being. He also still believed that the union God establishes with humanity in the act of creation does not provide a second source for the knowledge of God alongside God's revelation in Christ. But Barth now realized that he could not defend these convictions simply by appealing to God's distinction from creation, because Przywara's version of natural theology operated on the basis of this distinction.

Barth developed a refined approach to the knowledge of God in his lectures on "Fate and Idea in Theology" and "The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life," both delivered after his encounter with Przywara in 1929. Przywara is Barth's silent conversation partner in both lectures, and they represent Barth's first sustained criticism of Przywara's *analogia entis* and his initial alternative to it. He argues that Przywara's version of the *analogia entis* assumes that God's revelation in Christ confirms and reinforces a "presupposed human capacity ... given with our existence as such" (FI, p. 38). This assumption is problematic, Barth thinks, because it misunderstands both the content of divine revelation and the effects of human sin. God's revelation in Christ does not reveal something that humans "basically already know" as a result of their creation. Instead, "God's Word announces something new to them. It comes to them as light into darkness. It always comes to them as sinners, as forgiving and thus as judging grace" (FI, p. 39). This grace reflects the fact that sin does not merely cause a "disturbance" in the human's ability to know God that "can quite as easily be ... removed again" (HSCL, p. 24). Rather, sin produces an "irreconcilable contradiction" between God and humans. This means that God's grace in Christ does not perfect and fulfill creaturely being but instead "cuts *against* the grain of our existence all through" (HSCL, p. 32). Humans cannot derive knowledge of God by utilizing their natural capacities to reflect upon their own created being. This knowledge takes place "only as a second marvel of God's love, as the inconceivable, undeserved, divine *bestowal* on his creature" (HSCL, p. 5). Barth describes this bestowal as the human's "openness or preparedness for God's grace," which occurs as "the special work of God the Spirit" as the human is "made fit by God for God" as God relates to the human through his Word (HSCL, pp. 6–7).

Barth develops this account further in CD I/1 by appealing to the concept of faith. He explains that true knowledge of God occurs as God speaks his Word to humans who receive it through the faith that arises “independently of [their] inborn or acquired characteristics or possibilities” (CD I/1, p. 236). This faith is given to the human by God in the event of God’s revelation, and it serves as the “point of contact” between God and humanity. Here Barth appeals to the concept of the *analogia fidei* as an alternative to the *analogia entis*. He explains that humans would not be able to hear the Word of God unless there were “something common to the speaking God and the hearing person, an *analogia*, a similarity in and with this event for all the dissimilarity implied by the difference between God and humanity – if we may now adopt this term – a “point of contact” between God and humanity” (KD I/1, p. 251; see CD I/1, p. 238). This “point of contact” is not located in the human’s created capacities but in the faith that God grants the human in the event of God’s self-revelation. “In faith,” Barth argues, the human “is created by the Word of God for the Word of God, existing in the Word of God and not in himself, not in virtue of his humanity and personality, not even on the basis of creation, for that which by creation was possible for [the human] in relation to God has been lost by the fall” (CD I/1, p. 239). Although sin renders humans incapable of knowing God by utilizing their natural capacities, God gives humans a new capacity to receive divine revelation as God speaks his Word to them. Barth describes this as the “capacity of the incapable,” and he insists that it is a “miracle that cannot be interpreted anthropologically” (CD I/1, p. 241).

With this argument, Barth’s rejection of natural theology has become more comprehensive than in his earlier thought. He still denies the existence of a union between God and humanity apart from the saving union God establishes in Jesus Christ. But now Barth also explicitly rejects the notion that humans possess a natural capacity to obtain knowledge of God.

German Christians

Barth’s refined approach to natural theology explains the nature of his opposition to the “German Christian” movement in the early 1930s. Hints of the coming conflict can be seen in Barth’s preface to CD I/1, written in August 1932. He laments that the “confusion” within modern Protestantism about theological method has led many Protestants to discover a “deep religious significance in the intoxication of Nordic blood and their political *Führer*” (CD I/1, p. xiv). Barth’s concerns about this trend grew in the following months as prominent German Christians openly utilized natural theology to defend the application of Nazi policies in the German Church. For example, in “The Original Guidelines of the German Christian Faith Movement,” Joachim Hossenfelder argued that racial distinctions reflect the order of God’s creation and the Christian faith “does not destroy race, but instead deepens and sanctifies it” (Hossenfelder 2015, p. 50). Similar arguments were used to defend the Nazi Party’s “Führer Principle,” which claimed that the Führer’s word stands above any written law and that the government’s policies and practices should reflect this reality. Within the context of the German Church, the principle effectively placed the word of Adolf Hitler alongside Scripture as a source of

authority. After Barth publicly opposed these arguments, theologian and Nazi sympathizer Emmanuel Hirsch responded by insisting that divine revelation cannot be limited merely to Scripture. Rather, “by observing the signs of God’s presence in the historical reality in and around him, [the Christian] receives faith in the gospel, and in turn, out of his faith in the gospel he hears and understands anew God’s presence in the reality of life in and around him” (Hirsch 2015, p. 107). The implication of this appeal to natural theology was that the Christian’s interpretation of history – and particularly, the German Christians’ interpretation of the historical movement led by Hitler – should stand alongside Scripture a source for the church’s understanding of God.

During this same period, Barth noticed similar patterns of thought among figures associated with the so-called “dialectical theology” movement. This movement referred to the theologians who aligned with Barth’s early criticisms of Protestant liberalism and joined him in seeking a new way forward. The unifying force for the movement was the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (*ZdZ*), which Barth had founded together with Eduard Thurneysen and Friedrich Gogarten in 1922. The journal served as one of the primary venues for Barth and his allies to publish their work. By 1932, however, Barth was concerned that several figures in the dialectical theology movement were turning back toward liberalism by embracing philosophical and anthropological premises that undermined the centrality of God’s revelation in Christ. This problematic theology was showing up in the pages of *ZdZ*, and in response, Barth sought to distance himself from several figures who published in the journal. To this end, in the preface to CD I/1, Barth emphasizes that his new dogmatics should not be associated with the dialectical movement or the figures within it (CD I/1, p. xv). Later in the volume, he makes it clear that Gogarten is one of figures with whose work he no longer wants to be associated (CD I/1, pp. 125–131). He specifically criticizes Gogarten for affirming that God can be known “in the orders of the reality of our creatureliness” alongside God’s revelation in Christ. This embrace of natural theology is problematic, Barth argues, because it undermines the centrality of Christ, ignores the effects of human sin, and allows human capacities to determine the content of dogmatic claims about God (CD I/1, pp. 127–128).

In the year immediately after the publication of CD I/1, Barth’s worries about Gogarten’s natural theology began to converge with his concerns about the German Christians. Barth was particularly disturbed by two essays Gogarten published in *ZdZ* that employed natural theology to explain the church’s relationship to the state and the created order (Gogarten 1932a,b). Barth thought these arguments gave support to German Christian leaders, and he was concerned that readers of *ZdZ* might believe that he himself tolerated their policies. Barth’s concern was heightened in the summer of 1933 after his anti-German Christian lecture, “The First Commandment as an Axiom of Theology,” was printed in *ZdZ* alongside writings from a German Christian theologian (Barth 1969). But the final straw came when Gogarten publicly endorsed the political theology of Wilhelm Stapel, who had argued that the law of God is one and the same as the law of the German people (Gogarten 1933a, p. 448; Stapel 1932, pp. 174–185). Shortly thereafter, Gogarten embraced the leadership of Hossenfelder and Reich bishop Ludwig Müller and reiterated his endorsement of Stapel’s thesis (Gogarten 1933b, pp. 8, 23).

Barth viewed Gogarten's embrace of the German Christians and their theology as a betrayal of everything for which they once had stood. In response, Barth decided to break ties with *ZdZ* rather than continue to publish his own work alongside that of Gogarten and other theologians who aligned with the German Christians. He explained this decision in his final essay, "Farewell" (GA 49, pp. 492–515). There he argues that the errors of the German Christian are merely a "concentrated form" of the same kind of theology he had been fighting for over two decades. "I cannot see anything in German Christianity but the last, fullest, and worst spawn of the essence of Neo-Protestantism." He laments that, instead of remaining alongside him in opposition to these errors, Gogarten had retreated by embracing Stapel's thesis. "I regard Stapel's dictum about the law of God as the complete betrayal of the Gospel," Barth says. "I believe that this dictum is today much worse, because it is much more fundamental and much more concrete than it was in the era of Harnack and Troeltsch, which represents the erection of the anthropocentric-god of the 18th and 19th centuries" (GA 49, p. 504). Yet Barth also insists that Gogarten's betrayal should not be that surprising, because his embrace of German Christians ideology was the fulfillment of his earlier embrace of natural theology: "Gogarten's entire path has led him with the highest degree of consistency to condone everything" (GA 49, p. 503).

Barth issues similar criticisms of Emil Brunner in the same essay. Although Brunner joined Barth in opposing the German Christian movement, Barth believed that Brunner's embrace of natural theology emptied this opposition of its power. He accuses Brunner of "a grievous return" to the theology they previously had rejected (GA 49, p. 501; see Brunner 1929). Their disagreement continued into 1934, when Brunner and Barth exchanged essays on the subject of natural theology. Brunner argued that Barth's denial that humans possess a natural capacity to know God undermines the integrity of God's act of creation. "Wherever God does anything," Brunner insists, "he leaves the imprint of his nature upon what he does. Therefore the creation of the world is at the same time a revelation, a self-communication of God" (Brunner 1946, p. 25). Although the human capacity to receive this natural revelation is "adversely affected" by sin, this capacity remains intact and operative. "The Word of God does not have to create man's capacity for words," Brunner says. "He has never lost it, [and this capacity] is the presupposition of his ability to hear the Word of God" (Brunner 1946, p. 32).

Barth had encountered this kind of thinking in the theology of Przywara, but now the stakes were far higher because German Christians like Hirsch were using similar arguments to support their views. Barth responded with an angry essay that accused Brunner of offering a "theology of compromise" that will win the "loud applause" of the German Christians (Barth 1946, p. 72). He argues that, by affirming that humans have a natural "capacity for revelation," Brunner no longer has any ground to oppose the German Christian arguments or their policies. "It is now purely arbitrary," Barth says, "to continue to say that only Holy Scripture may be the standard of the Church's message, that [the human] can do nothing for his salvation, that it takes place *sola gratia*, that the Church must be free from all national and political restrictions" (Barth 1946, p. 87). Barth insists that the only way to avoid the errors of the German Christians is to reject the possibility of any kind of natural theology. In light of the lessons he learned from Przywara, Barth knew that this rejection can be maintained only by

arguing that humans are incapable of knowing God rightly at all apart from the saving grace of Christ. “The fact that we become hearers and doers of the Word of God signifies the realization of a divine possibility,” he says, “not of one that is inherent in our human nature. Freedom to know the true God is a miracle, a freedom of God, not one of our freedoms” (Barth 1946, p. 117). This “miracle” occurs as the Holy Spirit creates a capacity for knowledge *within* the human that never becomes a possession *of* the human (Barth 1946, p. 121). As Barth puts it later: “The miracle does not cease to be a miracle. It will remain a miracle to all eternity of completed redemption” (CD I/2, p. 245; cf. pp. 242–270).

Creation and Covenant

During the same year of Barth’s dialogue with Brunner, Catholic theologian Gottlieb Söhngen offered an insightful criticism of Barth’s *analogia fidei*. Söhngen argued that, even though Barth concedes the existence of a point of correspondence, an analogy, between God and humans, by basing this analogy on the human’s faith in Christ rather than human being, Barth ends up setting “faith against being” (Söhngen 1934, p. 120). This opposition undermines Barth’s affirmation that believers participate in Christ, because a participation in Christ is by definition a participation in *being*, namely God’s being, in and through Christ (Söhngen 1934, pp. 131–133). For Barth’s claims about the analogy of faith and participation in Christ to work, therefore, he must presuppose an already existing analogy of being between God and humans. As a result, Söhngen concludes that Barth’s account of divine revelation still operates under the implicit assumption that humans possess a natural, created capacity to receive God’s revelation.

In CD II/1, Barth acknowledges Söhngen’s point: “we can only observe that there is every justification for the warning that participation in being is grounded in the grace of God and therefore in faith ... we certainly must not neglect to take heed to this warning and comply with it” (CD II/1, p. 82). Even so, Barth still rules out the idea that the insights of natural theology can be brought together with knowledge derived from God’s revelation in Christ: “We cannot be sufficiently eager to insist, nor can it be sufficiently emphasized in the Church and through the Church, that we know God in Jesus Christ alone, and that in Jesus Christ we know the one God.” Barth sees this claim as the key to practicing theology faithfully, and he insists that every theologian is summoned again and again to make a “decision on this point” (CD II/1, pp. 318–319). A theologian’s claims either will be grounded in their own creaturely ideals or these claims will be grounded on what God has revealed in Christ. “Any deviation,” Barth says, “any attempt to evade Jesus Christ in favor of another supposed revelation of God, or any denial of the fullness of God’s presence in Him, will precipitate us into darkness and confusion” (CD II/1, p. 319). Yet Barth knows that, in order to maintain both his affirmation of Söhngen’s argument and the exclusivity of God’s revelation in Christ, he has to explain how humans can possess a created capacity to receive God’s revelation while *also* holding that human knowledge of God is determined solely by God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and not also by knowledge of God gained through the exercise of these capacities to reflect on God’s revelation in the created order.

Barth addresses this challenge by arguing that both the created order and human being are determined by God's decision to reconcile the world in Jesus Christ. He develops this answer most fully in CD II/2, where he claims that Jesus Christ is both the subject and object of election and thus the beginning and end of all created works. He argues that every created thing is determined in its inner depths by God's decision to enter into covenant with humanity in Christ. "There is no such thing," Barth says, "as a created nature which has its purpose, being or continuance apart from grace, or which may be known in this purpose, being or continuance except through grace" (CD II/2, p. 92). This means the created order is intrinsically defined by the covenant of grace, because it exists to be the space where this covenant is executed (CD III/1, pp. 42–329). Likewise, human being is intrinsically defined by the covenant, since Jesus Christ himself is the ontological ground of human existence, and true human being is found only in him (CD III/2, pp. 132–202). "It is not that [God] first wills and works the being of the world and [the human], and then ordains [the human] for salvation", Barth says. "But God creates, preserves and overrules [the human] for this prior end and with this prior purpose, that there may be a being distinct from himself ordained for salvation, for perfect being, for participation in his own being" (CD IV/1, p. 9). So humans are intrinsically determined by their relationship to Christ, who as the fully human and fully divine mediator, also remains distinct from them in his unique relation to the Father. This means that although Barth can say that humans have a created capacity to receive the revelation of God, he also can hold that this capacity is not a human possession but resides in Christ himself as Christ relates to humans in grace in order to bring them to the destiny for which they were created.

On the basis of this account of the relationship between creation and covenant, Barth argues that rational reflection on creaturely being in distinction from God's revelation in Christ does not even give humans true knowledge of creaturely being much less knowledge of God. Human knowledge of God must be based solely upon God's revelation in Christ rather than the claims derived from natural theology. "The meaning of [God's] deity ... can be learned only from what took place in Christ," Barth says. "Otherwise its mystery would be an arbitrary mystery of our own imagining, a false mystery" (CD IV/1, p. 177).

Other Lights

Barth's account of the relationship between God's covenant of grace and his act of creation not only allows him to maintain his affirmation about the centrality of Christ for the knowledge of God, but it also enables Barth to argue that the "divine form of life is not alien" to creaturely being (CD III/1, p. 185). He argues that, because creation was made in, through, and for Christ and the covenant of grace fulfilled in him, the being of creation must correspond to the work of Christ in the world. On the basis of this correspondence, Barth embraces a qualified role for natural revelation in theology without embracing natural theology (CD IV/3.1, pp. 3–165). Barth explains that, because both creation in general and human being in particular are defined by God's saving decision in Jesus Christ, any account of God's revelation to humans must begin

with Christ (CD IV/3.1, p. 38). A proper account of Christ's saving work must include his ongoing action to make the reconciliation accomplished in him "concretely active and perceptible" in history (CD IV/3.1, p. 10). Because Christ is present and active within the created order that is intrinsically defined by him, it must be the case that he can and does declare himself in and through this order. It is "perhaps incontestable," Barth explains, "that there are real lights of life and words of God in this sphere too, that He alone is the Word of God even here, and that these lights shine only because of the shining of none other light than His [light]" (CD IV/3.1, p. 96).

Barth cautions that not everything in creation reveals Christ. Although Christ can and does take up created realities to declare himself, the created order has "its own light and truths and therefore its own speech and words" that are distinct from Christ's revelation (CD IV/3.1, p. 139). So although natural revelation is both possible and actual, the church must carefully test the truths it receives from nature before it accepts them as revelatory of God. The criterion of this testing is "the whole context of the biblical message as centrally determined and characterized by Jesus Christ" (CD IV/3.1, p. 126). For Barth, three implications follow from this claim. First, because insights drawn from natural revelation stem from Christ's action, they "cannot be combined" with the biblical revelation of Christ to form "a system superior to both Him and them" (CD IV/3.1, p. 101). Second, because any natural revelation occurs through the agency of Christ, any purported revelation can be counted as true only when it corresponds to what already has been revealed about Christ in Scripture (CD IV/3.1, p. 98). This means that God's revelation in Christ, as attested in Scripture, still strictly determines the church's knowledge about who God is, what God is like, and the nature of God's relationship with humanity. Third, because Christ is the active agent of any revelation that occurs in and through the created order, the church must be willing to pay attention to this revelation and incorporate the insights it receives from it into the church's own faith and practice. These insights may even serve to "illuminate, accentuate or explain the biblical witness" more clearly for the church within its own particular context, leading it "to preach the one Word of God in its own tongue and manner" better than it could otherwise (CD IV/3.1, p. 115).

These arguments show that Barth remains consistent in his rejection of natural theology even as he embraces the possibility of natural revelation. As in the beginning of his career, Barth believes that true knowledge of God must be grounded on God's revelation in Jesus Christ and this revelation alone. He rejects the idea that God's act of creation establishes union between God and humanity distinct from the saving union God establishes in Christ and the Spirit because he believes that the whole of creation, including human being, is determined by this saving union. He also thinks the notion that humans possess a natural capacity to know God that operates in distinction from God's grace in Christ is based upon an abstract picture of human being. Humans have the capacity to receive God's revelation, not because they possess an intrinsic quality given to them in creation, but because the resurrected Jesus Christ determines the true nature of human being. Although Barth now can embrace insights drawn from external sources, he refuses to accept a role for any kind of natural theology in dogmatics.¹

¹ This chapter incorporates material previously published in Johnson 2010b, pp. 632–650; Johnson 2012, pp. 1–23; Johnson 2013, pp. 129–156.

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