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Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Creation

BY COLIN BROWN

IN the twenties and thirties, when Barth's *Römerbrief*¹ was boomeranging round the theological world, it was fashionable to complain that Barth had no doctrine of creation. The criticism was not without its grain of truth. For Barth pictured the Word of God as a bolt from the blue or rather from the God who is so *Wholly Other* that His contact with the world is limited to a series of hit-and-run raids which simply show how lost and godless this world is. Apart from these revelatory, saving excursions, man had no knowledge of God.

But over the years all this has changed as Barth's *magnum opus*, the *Church Dogmatics*, has gradually taken shape. Begun in 1932, it is still going strong. No other modern theological work has been conceived on such a grand scale. Basically it falls into five major divisions or volumes: the Word of God, the Doctrine of God, Creation, Reconciliation and Redemption (by which Barth means eschatology). Each of these volumes is in turn subdivided into part-volumes. Though now in his middle seventies and retired from his teaching post at the University of Basle, Barth is still working on the fifth and final volume. In the meantime a team of English translators, headed by Professors G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, have been rapidly catching up on him. With the completion in 1961 of the translation of the four part-volumes dealing with creation², English readers are now able to see for themselves how far Barth has boxed the theological compass. More important, they are now in a position to assess for themselves the strength and weakness of Barth's approach to creation. The present article is not intended as an exhaustive analysis of Barth's presentation. Rather it is an attempt to bring into focus certain major landmarks on the Barthian landscape.

1. Creation, Christology, and the Covenant

As the volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* began to appear on the Continent, Barth was increasingly accused of going back on his early teaching.³ In some respects this criticism is trivial: every thinker is entitled to change his mind and develop his ideas. But two interwoven strands of Barth's teaching have remained constant down the years. The first is his contention that we have no knowledge of God apart from that which is mediated by the Word of God. The second strand is the christocentric nature of Barth's thinking.

With regard to the first strand of teaching, Barth remains as emphatic as ever that creation is a revealed doctrine. The physical universe may in no way be regarded as a kind of apologetic no man's land upon which the apologist might invite his hearers to step without prejudging the issue by accepting Christian presuppositions. Apart from revelation, human reason remains as much in the dark about creation as it does about every other Christian doctrine.⁴ This does not mean that Barth does not feel the force of such passages as Ps. 19: 1ff; Acts 14: 15-17; 17: 22-30; Rom. 1: 18ff. Rather, Barth contends that the

real thrust of these verses is to exhibit man's *de facto*, culpable ignorance of God.⁶

The other strand of Barth's teaching, his christocentric emphasis, has, if anything, become even more marked over the years. At the same time a notable development has taken place. Perhaps this may best be described as a shift of emphasis from the Word of God to Jesus Christ as the dominant theme of Barth's thinking.⁸ Instead of dwelling on the revelatory aspect of the Word of God, the later volumes of the *Church Dogmatics* are concerned with elucidating the implications of the incarnation. In view of the union of divine and human nature in the person of Jesus Christ, Barth teaches that God has taken mankind into partnership with himself. It is this that Barth has in mind when he uses the term *Covenant*. The scope of the *Covenant* is said to be universal, because the humanity of Christ embraces all humanity. And its significance is decisive for creature and Creator alike. For whilst all human existence depends on the *Covenant*, God would not be God without the incarnation which commits him to become the covenant-partner of man.⁷ Underlying this whole train of thought is the theological axiom that all God's dealings with men are effected in and through the person of Jesus Christ. Hence creation and the doctrine of God are just as much the concern of christology as reconciliation and redemption.

In view of all this it is hardly surprising that Barth's doctrine of creation turns out to be a peculiar blend of universalism and supralapsarianism. Protestant theology goes wrong, he argues, when it teaches that the incarnation was an *ad hoc* counter-measure necessitated by sin.⁹ From the very beginning God determined to take man into partnership with himself on the basis of the incarnation. But in order to have man as his covenant-partner, God must first create him. And in order to exist man must have a sphere of existence. Hence there is a reciprocal relationship between creation and covenant.

All this is elaborated in detail in Barth's typological exposition of the two Genesis creation narratives. This exposition plays the double role of forming the heart of the first part-volume on creation (*Church Dogmatics*, III/1) and of laying the foundation of Barth's subsequent creation teaching.

The first creation narrative (Gen. 1: 1—2: 4a) depicts "Creation as the External Basis of the Covenant".⁹ The second (Gen. 2: 4b-25) regards "The Covenant as the Internal Basis of Creation".¹⁰ The first shows how creation makes the covenant "technically possible".¹¹ The second shows how creation was wrought with the *covenant* in view.¹² But according to Barth the reciprocal relationship between creation and *covenant* does not end there. For the ordinances of creation (admittedly visible only to the eye of faith) typify the ordinances of the *Covenant*. The creation of the firmament (Gen. 1: 6-8) depicts not only the physical separation of the waters, but the metaphysical creation of a barrier against chaos.¹³ Similarly, the separation of light from darkness, of dry land from the sea, and of day from night reflects the relationship between God's grace and His wrath.¹⁴ This typological exposition reaches its climax with the creation of man. Turning his back on everything he had previously written about the loss of the

Imago Dei through the Fall,¹⁵ Barth now interprets the Image of God in terms of the I-Thou relationship.¹⁶ It consists in an *analogia relationis*. On the basis of the plural subject in Gen. 1: 26, Barth sees an analogy between the mutual relationships within the divine Trinity and the relationship between man and wife. The fact that the image is expressed in bi-sexuality corresponding to that of the animal kingdom leaves Barth unperturbed. For he argues that bi-sexuality belongs to creatureliness rather than to divine likeness.¹⁷ The full significance of this train of thought comes to light in Barth's exposition of Gen. 2: 18f. and Eph. 5: 22-33.¹⁸ On the one hand, the creation of male and female to live in mutual relationship creates both the sphere for grace to operate in and also acts as a sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church. On the other hand, the divine plurality and the relationship between Christ and the Church serve as prototypes of human creaturely relationships.

But if creation is typological, it is also historical. For all created reality is orientated around the history of the *Covenant*.¹⁹ This helps to explain why Barth is anxious to claim Genesis as saga and not myth. For myth, according to Barth, expresses certain recurrent general relationships clothed in the form of an apparently historical narrative, whereas saga records actual history though expressed in the form of a symbolic tale.²⁰ We are not to think of the early chapters of Genesis as man's groping attempts to come to terms with his environment. Admittedly, what we read in Genesis is symbolic. Its underlying truth is, moreover, inaccessible to the techniques of the scientific historian for the simple reason that scientific techniques are incapable of apprehending the actions of God. Nevertheless, the narratives of Genesis deal with events in time, for what is recorded here is the beginning of salvation history.

2. Man

Having outlined the general theme of *Covenant* and creation in III/1, Barth devotes the whole of III/2 to the subject of man. Again Barth's starting point is the *Covenant*. Since God effects all his dealings with man in and through the person of Jesus Christ, Barth takes the humanity of Jesus as his paradigm for understanding human nature in general.²¹ To see Christ in all men is no mere pious sentiment with Barth. The existence of all men in Christ (whether regenerate or not) is the very ground of their existence.²² Because Jesus Christ is the archetypal man, we must turn to him first if we want to know what it means to exist before God²³ and with our fellow men,²⁴ and to exist in time²⁵ and space.²⁶

But if anthropology is founded upon christology, it is not to be equated with it. The disparity is twofold. On the one hand, Jesus is not simply the arch-type of believer that he is in Schleiermacher whose perfect God-consciousness qualifies him to be the prototype of divine-human relationships.²⁷ Jesus Christ is God incarnate. On the other hand, although he took upon himself fallen human nature, Jesus Christ remains sinless.²⁸ Nevertheless the axiom remains: "It is either through Him that we know what we truly are as men, or we do not know it at all".²⁹ Jesus Christ is the perfect man, and as such he is the

perfect revelation of man. He is also the man by whom "the reality of each and every other man is decided".⁸⁰

3. The Problem of Evil

Of the subjects handled in III/3 under the general heading of "The Creator and His Creature", perhaps the most breath-taking is Barth's treatment of the problem of evil. In view of the creation-covenant relationship all created reality has Jesus Christ as its ground and goal. As such, reality is fundamentally good. It is as the reverse side of reality that Barth intends us to understand the nature of sin and evil which emanate from what Barth calls *Chaos*. Or rather, *Chaos* (alias *nothingness*, alias *negation of grace*) is that which lacks reality precisely because God rejected it by not creating it.⁸¹ Nevertheless, *nothingness* possesses a quasi-reality in virtue of the fact that God has rejected it. As such, *nothingness* is the proper object of divine wrath, since it owes its nature to the divine judgment which is the reverse side of God's election of creation in Jesus Christ.

When Barth turns to the question of sin, he defines it in terms of *Chaos* or *nothingness*. Sin is "the self-surrender of the creature to nothingness",⁸² "the irruption of chaos into the sphere of creation".⁸³ As such, it is an *ontological impossibility*.⁸⁴ But when Barth thinks of the *ontological impossibility* of sin, he is not thinking of the metaphysical problem of reconciling the existence of evil with the idea of an omnipotent, benevolent deity. Revelation in Christ, he argues, leaves no room for abstract metaphysical speculation. Sin and *nothingness* are rendered ontologically impossible by the prior gracious relationship established between God and man once and for all in the person of Jesus Christ. The godlessness of sin is therefore only a pseudo-godlessness. Sin and godlessness do exist, but because of man's fundamental being in the covenant, their existence is only relative. They exist by way of reaction against grace. But because of the priority of grace in the covenant, they can neither nullify the covenant nor destroy the goodness of creation.

Barth's use of the terms *nothingness* and *ontological impossibility* must not be taken to mean that he wishes to minimize the seriousness of sin. Barth parries this charge himself by insisting that the gravity of sin can only be appreciated in the light of the cross. On the other hand, the cross and resurrection rule out the ultimate seriousness of sin.⁸⁵ More serious is the charge of C. G. Berkouwer who accuses Barth not of neglecting sin, but of saying too much about it.⁸⁶ Is not Barth here explaining what Scripture leaves unexplained? Would his doctrine of evil still stand as a piece of biblical theology, if his doctrine of creation and covenant were to prove untenable?

4. Ethics

Barth's final part-volume on creation, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, is devoted entirely to ethics. In the general scheme of the *Church Dogmatics* each of the volumes on God, creation, reconciliation, and redemption has its own section on ethics. For ethics in Barth's eyes forms a necessary appendix to doctrine. In the volume on reconciliation the doctrinal discussion naturally leads on to a discussion on the

life of faith and the life of the church. Here in III/4 Barth is concerned with questions which arise directly out of creation: the Sabbath, prayer, confession, marriage, family and communal life, capital punishment, war, and vocation. In view of the limited scope of this article it would be invidious to single out any one of these items for preferential treatment. And, in fact, it will be more instructive if we try to see Barth's ethics in the wider context of his covenant theology.

Two questions in particular weigh heavily on Barth's mind. One is that of the origin of ethical principles. The other is that of the addressability of man.

With regard to the first of these questions, Barth remains adamant that ethics must be grounded in revelation. The well-worn Kantian type of ethics which bases everything on the dictates of conscience is simply an insidious attempt to side-step the Gospel of grace. Instead of being ethics, this is none other than sin in disguise.³⁷ But Barth's point is not simply that ethics should be an up-to-date version of biblical injunctions. In view of the covenant, in view of the axiom that all God's dealings with man are effected in and through the person of Jesus Christ, Barth is concerned to show that ethics originate from the one who is man's covenant-partner in Jesus Christ.³⁸ It is only when we realize this that we may rest assured that what God commands is good, that what he teaches is freedom and life.

But this leads us to the second point, the addressability of man. Again Barth reverts to his notion of *covenant*. Because Jesus Christ is the representative of humanity in the *covenant* with God, he accepts and fulfils the demands of the Law on man's behalf. The basis of ethics is therefore "the Word and work of God in Jesus Christ, in which the right action of man has already been performed and therefore waits only to be confirmed by our action".³⁹ What this means for us today was outlined by Barth as far back as 1935 in a paper entitled *Evangelium und Gesetz*.⁴⁰ It proved to be one of those periodic bombshells which Barth launches on the theological world. In it he insists that we should revise and reverse our traditional notions of Law and Gospel. The Gospel comes first because it is the good news of Christ's fulfilment of the divine will and of God's acceptance of mankind in him. As such, it provides the basis of God's claims upon man. Law, on the other hand, is simply the expression of these claims. And ethics is none other than God's summons to men to be what they already are in Jesus Christ.

5. Conclusion

In this article it has been possible to do no more than sketch some of the principal motifs of Barth's thought. In fairness to him it must be pointed out that no attempt has been made to deal with his full and suggestive treatment of such questions as time, angelology, demonology, and providence. Each of these merits separate consideration. But inevitably one cannot say in 3,000 words what Barth takes to say in nearly 3,000 pages. Nor has it been possible to do even scant justice to the wealth of biblical and historical material which Barth masses in support of the points he makes. But without denying the value of much of Barth's teaching, it is impossible to stifle certain misgivings

which inevitably arise when we consider that this teaching is presented as a contribution to biblical theology. Two questions in particular give rise to concern: (i) Barth's apparent universalism, and (ii) his conception of election and the covenant. The former concerns the goal of creation, the latter its foundation.

(i) *Universalism*

At several points the above discussion may have given the impression that Barth is a universalist. Barth himself, on the other hand, emphatically repudiates any such suggestion on the grounds that universalism compromises the freedom of God.⁴¹ Yet when we read about the universality of the covenant, that "predestination is the non-rejection of man"⁴² and that Christ took "upon Himself the divine rejection of all others",⁴³ it appears that Barth is hovering on the brink of universalism. Of course, Barth is well aware of such passages as Mt. 13: 37-43; 25: 31-46; Mk. 8: 38 and Rom 1: 18ff. But he tries to turn the edge of such criticism by claiming that since Christ died for all (since all are in the *covenant*), the man who rejects Christ is rejecting the impossible. For there is no escape from the covenant-love of God. The worst man can do is to try to live as if he were not in the *covenant*.⁴⁴ The reader may judge that Barth's explanation is legitimate exegesis. On the other hand, he may conclude that Barth has allowed himself to be driven into an impossible corner by a christocentric but unbiblical speculation. But if he rejects the *universalistic* implications of the *covenant*, he has to reject Barth's version of the *covenant* altogether. And if he does that, he will have undermined the foundations of Barth's creation teaching.

(ii) *Election and the Covenant*

The whole edifice of Barthian theology stands or falls by the *covenant*.⁴⁵ And in turn, the doctrine of the *covenant* stands or falls by the doctrine of election. More than once we have attempted to express the underlying axiom of Barthian thought by the formula: All God's dealings with man are effected in and through the person of Jesus Christ. When applied to election it means that Jesus Christ is both elect and reprobate. As elect, he is the representative of all in the making of the *covenant*. As reprobate, he is the substitute for all as the one who bears the wrath of God.⁴⁶ Exegetical support for this is sought from such passages as Isa. 42: 1f; 49: 8; 53: 9f; Lk. 9: 35; 23: 35; Jn. 1: 1f; 17: 24; 19: 5; Acts 2: 23; 4: 27f; 1 Pet. 1: 20; Heb. 2: 11f; 9: 14; and Rev. 13: 8.⁴⁷ Yet none of these texts provides the missing link in Barth's argument which would prove that the biblical writers envisaged the election of all in the election of Christ. In view of this it is hardly surprising that in his chapter on "Creation and Covenant",⁴⁸ which was given the rôle of laying the foundation of Barth's creation teaching, Barth has virtually nothing to say about the covenant in its historical forms in Scripture. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Barth has a natural theology on the basis of a biblical core.

Away back in the seventeenth century Barth's Reformed forebears were in the habit of speaking about two covenants: the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.⁴⁹ By this they meant that God deals

with men according to two principles. By the covenant of works God deals with man as he is in Adam.⁶⁶ By the covenant of grace God deals with man as he is in Christ. They arrived at this teaching by exegesis of such passages as Gen. 3; Lev. 18: 5; Neh. 9: 29; Ezek. 20: 11, 13, 30; Hos. 6: 7; Lk. 10: 28; Rom. 5: 12-21; 7: 10; 10: 5; and Gal. 3: 12. The natural corollary was that election in Scripture refers only to that of believers in Christ (cf. Mt. 11: 27, Jn. 6: 37, 45, 65; 17: 6, 9, 24; Rom. 8: 29f.; Eph. 1: 4f.). To this way of thinking christology is the basis of soteriology. It impinges on creation only in so far as Christ is the agent of creation (Jn. 1: 1ff.; Heb. 1: 3). To say more than this is to say more than Scripture. But to eliminate the historicity and headship of Adam is to say far less. Today it is unfashionable to believe in Adam as a historical person. Today it is unfashionable to make much of the covenant of works. Perhaps the theologians of the seventeenth century were less christocentric than Barth. But perhaps their understanding of creation and grace was not so wide of the mark after all.

¹ 1st edition 1918; 2nd completely revised edition 1921; ET *The Epistle to the Romans* by Edwyn C. Hoskyns, 1933.

² *Church Dogmatics*, volume III, *The Doctrine of Creation*, 4 parts, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh, 1958-1961. Hereafter in this article the *Church Dogmatics* will be referred to by their volume numbers followed by the part-volume numbers, thus, III/1 etc. Page references are to the ET.

³ Cf. Emil Brunner, "The New Barth" in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 4, No. 2, June, 1951.

⁴ III/1, 3ff (cf. Heb. 11: 3); cf. *Dogmatics in Outline*, 1949, 50ff.

⁵ II/1, 101f.; 118ff.

⁶ Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Karl Barth*, 1951, 124.

⁷ II/2, 3-506 (for a particular statement cf. p. 7); IV/1, 22-66.

⁸ IV/1, 47.

⁹ III/1, 94-228.

¹⁰ III/1, 228-329.

¹¹ III/1, 97; cf. III/4, 39f.

¹² III/1, 232.

¹³ III/1, 134.

¹⁴ III/1, 142.

¹⁵ See his debate with Brunner published in translation by Peter Fraenkel under the title *Natural Theology*, 1946.

¹⁶ III/1, 191-206.

¹⁷ III/1, 196.

¹⁸ III/1, 320ff.

¹⁹ III/1, 42-94

²⁰ III/1, 80ff.

²¹ III/2, 3ff, 19-54; cf. II/2, 7.

²² II/2, 203ff; II/2, 3-506.

²³ III/2, 55-202.

²⁴ III/2, 203-324.

²⁵ III/2, 437-640.

²⁶ III/2, 325-436.

²⁷ IV/1, 49.

²⁸ III/2, 48ff; cf. I/1, 152ff.

²⁹ III/2, 53.

³⁰ II/2, 203.

³¹ III/1, 101f; III/3, 349-368.

³² IV/1, 79.

³³ IV/1, 436.

³⁴ III/2, 136ff.

³⁵ IV/1, 83f.

³⁶ *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 1956, 221ff, 246.

³⁷ II/2, 509-551.

³⁸ II/2, 509f; III/4, 32-46.

³⁹ II/2, 543.

⁴⁰ ET by J. S. McNab in *God, Grace and Gospel*, 1959, 3-27.

⁴¹ II/2, 417, 422.

⁴² II/2, 167.

⁴³ II/2, 123.

⁴⁴ II/2, 352f. This teaching forms a parallel to the doctrine of the ontological impossibility of evil.

⁴⁵ II/2, 94-194.

⁴⁶ II/2, 123, 172f.

⁴⁷ II/2, 117f.

⁴⁸ III/1, 42-329.

⁴⁹ cf. H. Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1950, 281-300, and the *Westminster Confession*, art. VII.

⁵⁰ For Barth's rejection of the covenant of works see IV/1, 59. His own view of Adam as everyman is set out in his paper *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (ET by T. A. Smail, 1956) and in IV/1, 478-513. The former has been devastatingly criticized by John Murray in *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. I, 1960, 384-390.