

Terry J. Wright

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## Witnessing Christians from Karl Barth's Perspective

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*Academic theology can be spiritually enriching; such is the thesis that Mr Wright, a postgraduate student at Spurgeon's College, illustrates from the writings of Karl Barth.*

**Key words:** Barth; spirituality; theology; witness.

### Introduction

Perhaps more than any other theological writings, I enjoy reading Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*. In this, I see the theological landscape not as a dry, arid desert, where any sign of life is quashed immediately by concept-heavy argumentation, but as a lush, green valley flourishing under the thought of a theologian dedicated to remaining true to a life-giving God who is anything but dry and arid in his relation to creation. The real impact for me is Barth's devotional emphasis, an unforced emphasis that speaks not of how learned or clever he is, but of how gracious God is in allowing one of his creations to make a stumbling attempt to speak of him. So I find *Church Dogmatics* an extravagantly rich work of theology.

Section 71.4, 'The Christian as Witness', in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2,<sup>1</sup> is particularly multi-faceted. Here, Barth seeks to discover what it means to be a Christian, what it means for the Christian to be called by God to be a Christian. 'For what purpose,' he writes, 'do (Christians) exist as those who are called to Him, who are called to His side, and who thus confront the world in the world?' (557). He asserts that a Christian is someone 'called by God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit' (554). Given that genuine Christians exist across the world in a variety of forms, Barth feels that '(t)here is need of basic reflection on what is the primary thing, the common denominator, in the existence of the Christian' (556). In other words, what

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1 All numbers in parenthesis refer to the page numbers in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/3.2, translation editors G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1992 impression.

makes a Christian a Christian?

In answering this question, Barth queries more traditional understandings about the status and role of the Christian before putting forward his own conception, a conception he believes to be based upon the biblical witness. Our task in this essay is not to rush to this conception, bypassing his discussion of the more traditional understandings, as his refutation of them is what makes this section of *Church Dogmatics* so rewarding to the careful reader. Instead, we will run through the section and make comments where necessary, hopefully learning something more about the Christian's calling through the enrichment of our understanding on this matter.

### Looking to the future . . .

So what makes a Christian a Christian? The first answer to this question that Barth considers states that 'Christians are those who, as recipients of the *kerygma* of the eschatological divine act accomplished in the death of Jesus Christ, recognise, affirm and grasp within the world the possibility of their own non-worldly being, and therefore transcend and leave behind the world even as they still exist within it, and to this degree improperly' (558). This answer is based loosely upon Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul writes:

I mean, brothers and sisters, the appointed time has grown short; from now on, let even those who have wives be as though they had none, and those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who buy as though they had no possessions, and those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.<sup>2</sup>

This attitude is not so much over-realised eschatology as an inappropriate, even morbid, interest in eschatology, where the believer is aware that the end has not yet come but is letting its immanence direct life in the present. (Over-realised eschatology is more akin to ignoring the fact that the end has not yet come and believing that it has come, along with its fruit or benefits.) Barth questions this answer, though, because this particular passage does not attempt to describe or define who or what is a Christian; and to base an entire view of what it means to be a Christian called by God on one passage is not representative of the NT as a whole. He also questions whether this tension between what is now and what will soon be is the point of the Christian's existence: 'The question arises, however, whether . . . the being of the Christian may be centrally represented in terms

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2 1 Cor. 7:29-31.

of this dialectic of worldliness and unworldliness and therefore of eschatological tension' (558). Fixing upon the future more than the present is fixing on the results of Jesus Christ's works more than on his person; thus this answer's problem lies not so much in its eschatological aspect as in its emphasis upon it. In writing this, Barth implies that any view attempting to say what makes a Christian a Christian that latches onto a particular aspect of Christian existence and believes it to be defining or central misses the point of what it means to be a Christian. All the answers to which Barth objects do just this in some way or other. So here, 'eschatological tension' cannot be the first thing, the central feature, the common denominator of Christian existence.

**'Thus you will know them by their fruits.'**<sup>3</sup>

We come nearer to the heart of the matter if with the moralism of all Christian epochs we think we see what makes a man a Christian, and therefore the goal of vocation, in a distinctive ethos (558).

So writes Barth, introducing the second answer to our question. This answer seeks to understand Christian existence primarily in terms of living morally, of being moral. '(T)he call of Jesus Christ is decisively an invitation and demand that the men to whom it comes should adopt a particular inward and outward line of action and conduct of which we have the basic form in the twofold command to love God and our neighbours and a normative description in the imperatives of the Sermon on the Mount or the admonitions of the apostolic Epistles' (558-9). Thus Christian existence is here defined as God's calling to command and the Christian's obedient response.

Again, though, Barth queries whether this answer captures adequately the meaning of being a Christian. Although what he calls 'Christian moralism' is a 'justifiable and necessary concern', it 'should not be made the bracket within which everything else, the totality of Christian existence, is to be seen and understood' (559). Barth fears that when Christians see themselves first and foremost as people known by their morality, the danger becomes increasingly real that their moralism detaches from its 'natural context' of obedience to God's calling and command and becomes an abstract, 'Christian' code of ethics. When this happens, 'it loses the distinctiveness, originality and uniqueness' that makes Christian moralism truly Christian. 'Christian' morality, a morality which seeks to make itself the ground of ethics (that is, and by way of example, an ethic that

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3 Mt. 7:20.

might say murdering people is not a good thing to do because it is not a good thing to murder people), 'has always resulted in a relativising and levelling down of the difference between Christian and non-Christian existence and the practical sterilising of the former, i.e., the loss of its offensive and defensive power' (559). Morally speaking, what difference is there between a Christian and a morally upright non-Christian?

This is not Barth's only criticism of this answer. His second objection lies in Christian moralism's tendency to see ethics as a set of *a priori* commands that need to be obeyed rather than the obedient response to a commanding God. On this understanding of what it means to be a Christian, the command to love God and others<sup>4</sup> has to be followed obediently but blindly. There is no possibility of questioning this command, or even of explaining it or understanding it, because it is 'maintained, accepted and acknowledged as a given fact'. Barth writes, 'It seems we cannot avoid the question why and for what purpose this command is made upon the Christian, and why and for what purpose he should obey it' (560). Why should the Christian love God, love others, love at all? Simply because the command is to love.

At face value, this is not problematic. If something is commanded, then assuming that we accept it as a command, we should obey that command. Barth's point is not that we should ignore God's commands or question their validity or sense out of disobedience, but that true obedience lies in realising why God has issued a particular command, an understanding that comes through questioning and therefore by responding to God's command, itself revealing an obedience of the heart rather than an obedience enforced by obligation. The danger in obeying a command considered true in and of itself is that the obedience it produces is reactive rather than responsive: '(w)hat is demanded of the Christian would simply be demanded because it is, and he would have to obey simply because he has. Jesus Christ would thus be his Lord only in virtue of a formal authority to command certain things without any obligation to disclose their purpose' (560). Developing this thought further, Barth writes,

The Christian ethos does not allow itself to be understood as an end in itself. It is not a first thing, but follows from what Jesus Christ and Christians, what He who commands and they who obey, are in themselves and in their mutual relationship prior to their commanding and obedience. The commanding on the one side is more than the assertion of a formal authority, and the obedience on the other

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4 Mk. 12:28-33.

is more than formal subjection to the authority of the One who commands. The "more" consists in the fact that the Christian ethos has its origin, its creative and therefore separate meaning and basis, in the particular being of Jesus Christ in Christians and of Christians in Jesus Christ (560-1).<sup>5</sup>

For Barth, the uniqueness of Christian morality (not to be confused with Christian moralism) lies in its foundation as the command of *God*, and not because the command is good and right in and of itself. 'This means, however, that the reference to the Christian ethos . . . cannot be the first or final word in a relevant definition of the manner of the Christian, of what makes a Christian a Christian, of the goal of vocation.' The conclusion? 'However greatly we may honour the Christian ethos as a determination of the Christian manner, it cannot be the common denominator which we seek' (561).

### The 'classic' answer

Following Christian moralism's unsatisfactory answer to our question, Barth turns to look at what he calls the 'classic' answer. According to this, 'there can surely be nothing more obvious to define the Christian as the man who is distinguished from others by the address, reception, possession, use and enjoyment of the salvation of God given and revealed to the world by God in Jesus Christ' (561). The Christian is a person who has responded in faith to God's offer of salvation and who now responds to his command to go out into the world and to tell of this salvation to those who have not yet heard or responded. As with Christian moralism, this answer seems adequate, and Barth comments that this understanding of what it means to be a Christian is almost universal:

In all the organisation and work of all churches, fellowships and sects, is it not the purpose in some form and with some degree of urgency to save human souls, to show men the way of redemption, to cause them to become Christians for the sake of their personal salvation and the experience of salvation, and with the same end in view to confirm and strengthen and nourish them as such, to maintain, protect and more deeply establish them in their Christianity? (563).

Does not even Jesus Christ exhort his followers to 'make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything' that they have been commanded? Christ even promises that he will

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5 In speaking of the relationship between Christ and Christians as being 'in' one another, Barth hints at that which he believes makes a Christian a Christian. We will see this later.

be with them always as they do just this.<sup>6</sup> People are dying without knowing Christ as their Saviour, and it is the task of the Christian to tell the world about the salvation only Christ can deliver. In receiving the grace offered to all, people are rescued from judgment and punishment. What is it about this answer, then, that warrants caution?

At this point Barth does not imply that what the classic answer asserts is necessarily untrue, simply that it cannot be the basis of what makes a Christian a Christian. Although salvation and all that it entails is given to the Christian as a gracious act of God, it is too much to say that the reason why God calls people to be Christians is simply to save them. The so-called *beneficia Christi* cannot be made the goal of what it means to be a Christian, for Christian vocation cannot be reduced to 'what God has done for me, he can do for you' sloganeering, no matter how sincerely believed. Why not? First, if what makes a Christian a Christian is simply that the Christian is the recipient of salvation, how do we then explain why Christ is considered the Christian's *Lord*? 'How does Jesus Christ as the pure Benefactor of man come to be also his Commander, and how does the Christian as the recipient of His benefit come to be one who is committed to obedience in Him?' (564).

Second, the classic answer, like Christian moralism, removes any real distinction between Christians and non-Christians. Does the Christian 'not sometimes come across non-Christians . . . who do not merely say but demonstrate in astonishing fashion that even without the benefit of Jesus Christ, and in a very different language, conceptuality and terminology, they have something analogous to or even identical with his Christian being, possession and capacity, namely, that they are not strangers to, but enjoy to an astonishing degree, something of the same peace and patience and trust and discipline and freedom in and in face of the world?' (565). If what makes a Christian a Christian is that he or she should receive from Christ assurance of salvation, a certain calmness in the face of the chaos of the world, a morality that makes sense as it is followed through in the world, and so on, then a follower of another faith could claim exactly the same things with respect to his or her own beliefs. A Muslim, for example, can be as assured of the truth of his or her salvation, as calm in the face of chaos, and as moral as any Christian. Barth asks, 'Does not this make it impossible to speak of an absolute uniqueness of the Christian ethos in itself and as such?' (565).

Barth's next comment concerns this assurance of faith. He writes,

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6 Mt. 28:19-20.

If it is really the case that the true and ultimate goal of my vocation is that I as a Christian may exist so well and gloriously for Christ's sake, then in practice everything depends upon my strong or feeble awareness of this with invincible definiteness. Everything depends upon my personal assurance of salvation triumphantly dispelling the constant obscuring of my experience' (565).

It seems, then, that the classic answer seeks to ground the meaning of Christian existence in what God does for each Christian in his or her calling, and that Christians then seek to understand this calling in the light of what God does for them. This means that Christians believe themselves to be first and foremost 'the saved' and that the whole validity and truthfulness of their calling depends upon their being assured that they are 'the saved'. Barth's objection is that in this answer, as with Christian moralism, the meaning of what it means to be a Christian is grounded in itself rather than in God. He writes, 'Now there can be no doubt that the Christian can and should have assurance of his faith and salvation. But can his salvation as known by him be the principle which dominates his Christian experience, the nail on which everything else is hung?' (565-6). Assurance of faith, assurance of salvation, is something grounded in God and not in the person who needs the assurance, and therefore it would be entirely inappropriate for Christian self-understanding to be understood primarily in terms of the self!

Voicing a final difficulty, Barth wonders whether the whole content of the classic answer has been built upon shaky foundations. '(I)t is genuinely human and therefore understandable that the Christian should be supremely interested in the goal of vocation from the standpoint of its personal or "existential" relevance to himself. But this merit of the answer reveals also its limitation. Expressing a human insight, might it not be unfortunately only too human?' (566).

Can it really be the inner end, meaning and basis of my Christian existence, and therefore the goal and end of the ways and words of God to me, that I should be blessed, that my soul should be saved, that I should participate in all the gifts of reconciliation, that my life should be one of reception, possession, use and enjoyment of these gifts, that I should finally attain to eternal bliss, that I should not go to hell but to heaven, and that each of the few or many others who might accompany me should also know the extraordinary exaltation of his human existence mediated in the benefits of Christ, and therefore the satisfaction of his deepest needs and the fulfilment of his most lofty and necessary desires? Does not this wholly possessive being seem to smack of the sanctioning and cultivating of an egocentricity which is only all too human for all its sanctity, of a self-seeking which in the light of what is at stake renders every other form of self-seeking innocuous? To be sure, there is a very legitimate and necessary

Christian 'I' and 'mine'. But does this mean that it can be made the last word on what makes a Christian a Christian? It gives us a very strange relationship if on the one side we have the selflessness and self-giving of God and Jesus Christ in which the salvation of the world is effected and revealed, and on the other hand the satisfaction with which Christians accept this and are thus content to make use of the very different being and action of their Lord. . . . Can the community of Jesus Christ . . . really be only, or at any rate essentially and decisively, a kind of institute of salvation. . . ? (566-567).

Thus the classic answer has a propensity towards an individualism that is potentially and dangerously exclusive; yet this individualism, or egocentricity as Barth puts it, 'may not be its unavoidable consequence. If a strict warning is issued against the danger which threatens in this regard, the answer itself may still be acceptable' (568). There is, therefore, a hint that despite its difficulties, the classic answer could truly define what it means to be a Christian. Up to this point, Barth's aim has been to raise possible difficulties for it to respond convincingly to them if it is to remain a valid answer to our question. So if this egocentricity does not emerge, is the classic answer vindicated? Barth has not said that it is *the* answer. Throughout his raising of its difficulties, he is leading up to the blow that he thinks finally kills it. To deal this blow, Barth looks at the biblical narratives that depict how people conducted themselves when they believed they were called by God. 'We certainly do not have in the Bible stories of conversion such as that which Augustine recorded in his autobiography,' he observes (571). In the biblical narratives, people do not identify their calling with their personal salvation, nor do they testify before others 'what God has done for me'.

(I)n connexion with the calling of man, and in the typical stories of calling . . . the reader is (never) led to think that the existence of the man placed in this state of grace, or this state of grace as his personal experience, is the purpose of the event of vocation recorded, or of the divine action within the framework of which it happens. We surely have to read a great deal into the passages which speak of the calling of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, or in the New Testament of the disciples and later the special calling of Paul, to gather from them that their chief concern is with the saving of their souls, or their experience of grace and salvation, in short, with the establishment of their personal well-being in their relationship with God' (572).

Biblically speaking, those who are called by God never seek to talk of themselves as the recipients of God's grace except as they then go on to talk about the grace of God. The emphasis in the relationship between the called and God is always placed upon God. Where the Bible speaks of someone's calling, the account never implies that the salvation of the person concerned is the sole reason for their calling.



This concern with a person's salvation does not appear in any biblical story of calling, a fact which leads Barth to assert that the classic answer 'is shown to be contrary to Scripture, and is thus to be rejected for this theological if in the first instance formal reason' (573).

### Pointing beyond . . .

If Christians have not been called for their own benefit, then it is probable that God has called them to some kind of task, a task of his choosing. What is their task? '(I)t consists in the fact that with their whole being, action, inaction and conduct, and then by word and speech, they have to make a definite declaration to other men. The essence of their vocation is that God makes them His witnesses' (575). 'According to the general meaning of the term in the New Testament, a *μάρτυς* is one who is present at an occurrence with eyes and ears open to its course but also with insight and understanding for its meaning and significance, so that he is in a position to affirm, indicate, declare and make known to others both as an occurrence and in respect of its scope, there being very little difference in the New Testament between witness to fact and witness to truth' (611). Barth takes Jesus's words of John 18:37<sup>7</sup> to be the starting point of NT witness, that is, Jesus himself is the first witness and those whom he calls follow his example when they witness (612). Therefore, Christians are not those who are saved who then go into the world to exhort others to receive God's salvation; instead, Christians are those who have been called to tell others about God's grace, salvation being 'something secondary and accessory' (574). This is a subtle change of emphasis from that of the classic answer, and something not especially relevant to the eschatological or moral understandings of what it means to be a Christian. 'What God has done for me' becomes simply, 'Here is God.' A Christian is called to witness to God, to point to God, at the expense of the ego but not the self. Again, it is worth quoting Barth at length:

'The called) are made (God's) witnesses: not idle spectators merely watching and considering; not for the enjoyment of a spectacle granted to them; not for the vain increase of their knowledge of men, the world and history by this or that which they now come to know of God; not inquisitive reporters; but witnesses who can and must declare what they have seen and heard like witnesses in a law-suit. Their calling embraces not only the fact that God gives them knowledge concerning Himself and the doing of His

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7 'To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth.' (612).

will, and that He calls them to this knowledge, but also that He summons and equips them to declare what He has given them to know. In other words, their calling means both that He reveals Himself in His action and also that He summons them into the witness-box as those who know. As God speaks His Word to these men in and with what He does, and as He is heard by them, He gives them the freedom, but also claims and commissions them, to confess that they are hearers of His Word within the world and humanity which has not heard it but for which His work is dumb, and in this way to make the world and humanity hear (576).

As his witnesses, Christians hear what God has to say to them and they obey him; in obeying him, they declare to the world that God exists and is active in the world for the world. Conversely, in showing himself through the Christian witness to be active in the world, God draws the world closer to himself. Barth notes that this is how God's calling is conceived biblically, and it is in this calling that the Christian is distinguished from any other person in the world. The Christian is called to witness to God as he has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. For Barth, the OT in its depiction of the history of Israel is a prophetic witness to God and his activity, a witness that can be understood as such only in the light of the event of Jesus Christ as recorded by the NT (583-4, 593). So, biblically speaking, someone is called to see and hear God's activity, and to declare that he or she has seen and heard God's activity (593). Yet the calling of people described in the Bible also applies to those whom God calls in every age; each Christian is called to be 'a witness in analogy' to the great biblical characters such as Moses or Isaiah, Peter or Paul (593). To reiterate a point already well-made, the Christian is someone who is called to witness to God.

Barth wants to go further than this, though. Christians are not called simply to witness to God by their own means. Of themselves, Christians, even though called by God to be his witnesses, do not have the capability to declare God's activity in the world. God is concealed 'from all men normally and in themselves'.

(God's) activity certainly takes place before their eyes and ears. But they do not see, nor hear, nor perceive. . . . The called – and this is the gift of vocation – come to know it by the action of the One who alone can enable them to do so. They are shown it by God (575-6).

Thus Barth says that not only are Christians called to witness to God, but they are called so that Christ may live in them by the Holy Spirit. This, too, is the purpose of their calling (594). Being in Christ does not nullify the Christian's own life or witness to God, simply that Christ takes over as Lord of the Christian. Conversely, Christians are called to live in Christ by the Holy Spirit, meaning that in submitting themselves to his lordship, they discover that they are truly free in

their calling to witness to God (594-5). 'In sum, the self-giving of Christ to the Christian and the Christian to Christ is the goal of vocation, the true being of the Christian (594).

What impact does this conception of what it means to be a Christian have on our understanding? Barth returns to critiquing the classic answer, which emphasises the consequences of calling for the Christian's life. Should the classic answer prove true, the sole purpose of Christ would be to exist for those whom God calls; Christ would be simply 'a supreme and unique means of grace' by which he would call Christians to salvation. 'If Christ were in truth only this, or primarily or essentially this, then the fellowship granted the Christian by His presence in his life would not consist properly and essentially in fellowship with Him, but in participation in the goods mediated by Him.' Therefore, '(w)hat would really count would not be His self-giving to the Christian, but the blessings procured for the Christian by Him (595). The likely implication is that Christians are only interested in the benefits mediated to them by Christ than in anything to do with him or his work. According to this understanding, Christ is merely the supplier of tools to Christians so that they can continue with their evangelistic<sup>8</sup> work (596-7). Instead, true Christian witness is embodied in Christians themselves, for they point 'concretely to Jesus as the Lord' and the 'source and fulness of the grace which God has manifested to the world and all men' rather than to whatever benefits his grace entails, even though grace *does* entail these benefits (614).

### Co-working with Christ

Barth believes that God calls Christians to be his witnesses; but why does he call them to be such? What does being a witness entail? First, God is involved in a work, 'the divinely willed and accomplished renewal, restoration and fulfilment of the covenant which He made with the world in creating it' (598). In calling them to be his witnesses, to point out his activity within the world, God invites Christians to be his co-workers. Graciously, God calls Christians to work with him in the history of salvation, 'of the history of God in and with the world' (598), in such a way that Christians do not act independently of their Lord but with their own activity follow him in his activity.

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8 The classic answer understands the meaning of a Christian to consist in salvation and the presentation of this salvation to others so that they may respond to it acceptingly. It is in this context where emphasis is placed heavily upon soteriology that I use the word 'evangelistic'.

Christians 'work, but (do) so in perfect fellowship with the working of Christ' (597). The work to which God calls Christians is to take precedence in their lives; and in seeking first God's kingdom, they truly participate in God's dealings with the world:

If Christ lives in (the Christian) and he in Christ, if this common life is not just the action of Christ but his own action, then, although the Christian is certainly not the subject and in no sense the author of the history of salvation which takes place in the action of Jesus Christ, although he is not the reconciler or even the co-reconciler, although he is in no sense an independent promoter of the kingdom of God, yet he certainly has a part in that history as a co-operating subject, and in its own place and manner this part is not merely apparent but real, nor is it meaningless and superfluous, but significant and effective (599-600).

Christians participate in Christ's work. They do not initiate his actions, nor do they effect them. It is Christ who works in the world, but because they are in Christ and he is in them, they participate actively in his work (600). If Christ does not live in the Christian, then the Christian would be divinely controlled rather than enabled to follow.<sup>9</sup> Yet the term 'co-operating subject' 'might so easily imply too much', and Barth wishes to find another word that pins down its precise meaning whilst remaining true to the NT (600-1). He finds this in the term 'service' or 'ministry'. According to Barth, 'service' or 'ministry' denote 'not only the action of the Christian who is called but primarily the preceding action of Jesus Christ Himself as the One who calls him. . . . In the New Testament the first and original minister, servant or slave . . . is not the disciple, apostle or Christian, but Jesus Christ Himself' (601). Thus the relationship between Christ and Christians is understood as Christian service following Christ's serving example, something that can be and is done because by the Spirit Christ is in the Christian and the Christian is in Christ. This means that two different subjects are at work in Christian service: there would be no Christian service if Christ, the first subject, did not call people to be involved with him in his work; and there would be no Christian service without the people whom Christ calls to be Christians, the second subject, and to accompany him in his action. (602).<sup>10</sup>

What, then, is this service to which Christ calls the Christian? Barth has already mentioned that the work with which Christ is concerned involves the renewing and fulfilling of his covenant with creation

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9 We must not be tempted to think that following is passive, for following is an action even if it is not necessarily an initiative!

10 We should bear in mind that Barth has not replaced 'witness' with 'service' or 'ministry'. He is explaining what it means to work with Christ.

(598), but in what way do Christians participate in this work? How is their calling to serve executed in the world? At this point, Barth returns to the notion of witnessing, for the reason why people are called to be Christians, the reason why Christians are called to Christian service, is to witness to God. Put simply, Barth writes, 'The Christian is called to be the accompanying and confirming sign of the living Word of God' (609). Christians accompany God's Word – that is, they work with Christ; and they confirm God's Word – they witness to it, declaring this word that they have heard to be *the* Word. Barth notes that '(t)he work of God . . . has also the dimension of the Word of God', that it is Christ who proclaims and declares the divine action within the world; and as he controls and exercises this act of proclaiming and revealing, 'He calls certain men to His side and commissions them to be His disciples or pupils, i.e., Christians' (606). As Christ leads, they follow him even as they are in him, and he in them. Their work is 'to copy or repeat His revealing and proclaiming, to approximate to Him as His representatives.' It is 'the divine Word, the Word of Christ' which is the '*telos* and meaning of their service' (607). Through the self-witness of Jesus Christ, the Christian is called to be his witness (614).

### The human witness

What makes a Christian a Christian? Let us remind ourselves of what has been said so far. First, a Christian is not someone who sees their calling as applying only to the imminent future; there is still a present with which to contend. Secondly, Christians should not define themselves as those who follow a Christian moral code, or as those who act morally; a Christian moral code can become abstract and detach itself from its 'Christian' emphasis, and anybody, Christian or Muslim, religious or non-religious, can act morally. Thirdly, a Christian is not someone who should understand their calling primarily in terms of his or her personal salvation; they are not called to be saved, although salvation is a happy corollary of their calling. So a Christian is not called to live obsessively in (anticipation of) the future, is not called simply to live a moral life, and is not called merely for salvation and to persuade others to receive it also. At no point does Barth say that being a Christian does not entail these three elements, but he continually stresses that Christians cannot find their reason for existence in them.

Instead, Barth asserts that the Christian is called to witness to God, to tell of his activity in the world, that is, to tell of his intention to fulfil the covenant; therefore, Christian calling finds itself rooted not in

a present-denying eschatology, nor in morality, not even in a God-given status, but rather it finds itself rooted in God himself as the one who calls. To enable Christians to witness appropriately, Christ lives in the Christian and the Christian is in Christ. This means that Christians are not left to their own creativity as they witness to God, arbitrarily concocting stories about his activity and declaring what he is not (although it need not be denied that human witness is a creative act), but that because they are in Christ and he is in them, they work with him as he works. He calls them to be his co-operating subjects, his co-workers;<sup>11</sup> and as they work with him, so they serve with him. 'Christ establishes the order of His relationship to His own, not by an authoritarian decree but with inner necessity, by going before them as the One who is first and originally subject to this order, and therefore as the One who serves' (601). As Christians serve, as Christians witness, they accompany in their own words the divine Word spoken to humanity. They do not seek to speak the divine Word of themselves but rather to confirm it by their own witness; and as this is the work of Christ, they do not seek to do it for him or to add to it, for they simply acknowledge him with adoration and gratitude, accepting what he does (605).

Barth asks a further question that may be asked of Christ's calling of Christians: 'Does He have to bring and summon them in this way?' (607). Would Christ's work within the world be ineffective without Christians, so that in some way and for some reason, he is compelled to call them to work with him? 'Now we are certainly well advised not to maintain that disciples, Christians, are in this sense indispensable to their Lord,' warns Barth, 'that He could not tread His way as the Revealer and Proclaimer of the Kingdom of God, of the reconciliation of the world to God accomplished in Him, without their assistance' (607). The only discernible reason as to why Christ calls people to be Christians, and therefore to be his witnessing servants and co-operating subjects, is because he loves them and has for some reason decided that they should work with him. 'In a distinctive overflowing of divine grace it would have it so. He thus calls Christians to Himself, to His side, to His discipleship, to His service, and uses them as His heralds' (608). Despite the possibility that Christians hinder Christ's work, Barth remains confident that the gracious Christ will still cause his work to be accomplished.

The Christian is called to be the accompanying and confirming sign of the living Word of God. It thus follows that he must indicate and attest this Word in the act of his whole existence. He never can nor will speak it

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11 See Barth's discussion of *συνεργοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ* in the NT (600).

himself. But as he is called, awakened and enlightened by Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, it will be effectively spoken to him in a way in which he can and does receive it. And in this way a living seed is sown and a fruitful fact created. The Christian is thus liberated but also summoned to manifest, indicate and attest what is said to him and received by him as a Word of reconciliation directed not to him alone but to the whole world and all men. That he should do this is the concrete goal of his vocation, the meaning of the life of Christ in him and his life in Christ, the *ratio* of his Christian existence' (609).

As Christians are called, they cannot help but witness, as if their calling is woven into the very fabric of their lives, for it is Christ's power with which they witness and not their own. For Barth, the only reason a Christian can witness is because it is Christ who witnesses through them.

It is the μαρτυρία of Jesus Christ Himself which makes possible and actual the μαρτυρία of His own, which makes all the μάρτυρες, the prophets and apostles, indeed, all Christians, fellow-labourers in His work, συνεργοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, and *ministri Verbi divini*. But as the πνεῦμα προφητείας (Rev. 19:10), the self-witness of Jesus does actually do this. It is the sowing of the divine seed, the genesis and divine-human principle of Christian existence and its structure. The self-attestation of Jesus Christ is the vocation of man reaching its goal.' (614)

### Concluding remarks

Today, some of the things Barth mentions perhaps ought to be expanded, and if he said less about other things it would matter little. For example, he devotes four pages to discussing Christian moralism (558-61), which I think is today a very important issue in the Church, at least in certain circles. Many Christians echo, probably unwittingly, the rich man's words, 'Good Teacher, what must I *do* to inherit eternal life?'<sup>12</sup> Personal morality seems to be the centre of living for Christ, but, of course, it is *personal* morality. On this view, is the Church simply a collection of people who acknowledge their sinfulness before God but then seek to make central their moral living? What happens when they fail? Are non-Christians really directed towards Christ by a Christian's lack of, say, swearing or promiscuity, or are they turned away because they feel they cannot meet the moral standards he requires? (This does not exclude the possibility that some may not want to meet his standards anyway!) If Barth were writing today, then I think that he would write somewhat more than four pages.

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12 Mk. 10:17b, my emphasis.

I also think that the emphasis of the classic answer has shifted slightly from the benefits of Christ to the task of evangelism. The classic answer assumes that the basis of being a Christian lies in the Christian's acceptance of his or her salvation, followed by the evangelism necessary to share information of this with others. Barth implies that evangelism for the classic answer is an attempt to persuade people to accept personally the gospel message. This evangelism, though, has two emphases. First, the gospel message is presented by means of alerting people to their future fate (hell) and then by showing Jesus Christ as the one who can save them from that fate. Personal salvation becomes the whole reason of a Christian's calling, and Christ becomes the catalyst that effects their salvation. There is no reason why Christ the Saviour should also be Christ the Lord. However, the second emphasis subtly redirects this concern with evangelism from another's salvation to the self's evangelistic act. If someone is called to salvation and then is told to evangelise, then what is important is that evangelism happens and not whether someone responds positively. Are we told why we evangelise? Is it to encourage people to repent so that they do not burn in hell? On this understanding, our calling to be a Christian is to enjoy our salvation and evangelism becomes an invitation to join the institute of salvation against which Barth warned. (567) My fear is that this approach to evangelism encourages not a concern with the salvation of the other person at all but a brownie-point, scalp-collecting attitude that is symptomatic of the classic answer's individualistic leanings. Had Barth written this section of *Church Dogmatics* today, I feel that he may have written more about this emphasis on evangelism and less about Christ's benefits, although, of course, the two are inseparable and cannot be understood sufficiently apart from one another.

Our intention was never to offer a critique of this section of *Church Dogmatics*. In this section at least, I prefer to listen to Barth's comments on Christian calling, for I find the majority of what he says here to be of value. His insistence that this calling must be rooted in God rather than in any aspect of the calling not only remains true to his own insistence that God is first in each and every matter, but I also believe it to resonate with Pauline teaching about Christ as our foundation.<sup>13</sup> We must never forget that it is *Christ* who calls, *Christ* who lives in us and *Christ* who, through us but through *us*, witnesses to the divine activity. What will be our witness if we do forget?

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13 1 Cor. 3:11.



### Abstract

Why does God call people to be Christians? After considering the different answers that people give to this question, Karl Barth offers his own view of what it means to be a Christian. In refuting many of the common assumptions about this, including views that God calls people to live moral lives or to evangelise, Barth looks back to a more 'New Testament' approach to the matter, one that regards the task of evangelism to be at the very heart of being a Christian and not just something they do.

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