

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Irish Biblical Studies* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ibs-01.php

Holy Scripture and Holy Spirit in the theology of Karl Barth

John Thompson

1. Revelation and Scripture

Traditional Protestant dogmatics generally began its writing either with arguments about natural and revealed religion or with the doctrine of Holy Scripture. This was in line with the Reformation emphasis on the sole authority of the Scriptures as the only infallible rule of faith and practice. Karl Barth diverges from this in two ways:

(a) He begins his Dogmatics with the Trinity and points out that he is following one of the few in the past who took the same route, namely Peter Lombard in the Middle Ages. He does so because he feels that anterior to our understanding of Holy Scripture and its nature must be our knowledge of God in his revelation. To be sure this revelation comes to us in and through Holy Scripture but it is not Scripture itself that is our authority but God speaking in and through it. Barth, therefore, can summarize his position by saying that while the Bible gives us the answer about revelation in this way "it has attested to us the Lordship of the triune God in the incarnate word by the Holy Spirit." /1/ He adds immediately "but in so doing it has answered the question concerning itself which we have not yet asked." /2/

(b) Barth indicates his desire to remain true to Reformation insights about Holy Scripture, but departs at important points from their tendency towards a too literalist approach. For it is only in the light of revelation that we can understand what Scripture is, though on the other hand revelation comes to us through Scripture. The two, of course, belong together. Hence, in his Dogmatics, his treatment of Scripture comes chiefly within and in fact towards the end of his treatment of revelation. J.K.S. Reid exaggerates slightly but his view of Barth's position is basically correct when he writes, "this represents a notable departure from the tendency especially evident in Calvinism to set the doctrine of Holy Scripture prominently in the forefront. Barth's presentation makes it clear from the start that a clean break has been made with the tendency in Protestant orthodoxy to identify revelation with Holy Scripture." /3/

It is therefore obvious that for Barth Scripture does not

stand alone however much one emphasizes the Reformation sola scriptura , by Scripture alone. It is related to the life of the church, first through preaching based on it, and secondly as pointing us to the meaning and significance of it, namely, the place where God speaks his word to man. Barth can, in his early writings, speak of three forms of the Word of God - preached, written and revealed. The order does not indicate an order of importance but more of experience, though of course it must be said that the last is the primary form of the Word of God. Following Luther (and perhaps reflecting his own pastoral experience in preaching) proclamation comes first. This is grounded in and expounds Scripture, and this again has its meaning and basis in God's act of revelation in Israel and in Jesus Christ. By this way of speaking Barth means to say to us: here are three interrelated and interdependent ways by which the triune God revealed in the incarnate Lord, speaks to us by the Holy Spirit.

In his later writings, Barth drops this way of speaking and uses the term "Word of God" primarily, indeed, exclusively, for God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. The Holy Scriptures and preaching both bear witness to this, each in its own different way, the Holy Scriptures by being the permanent and inspired record of revelation and preaching being based again on this. Barth's interpreters dispute at this particular point whether this is a correction or a modification of his basic position and earlier emphases. The latter would seem to be more correct and can be expressed in this way: "Barth's answer is clear. There is only one Word of God and definitive testimony is given to it by the Apostles and prophets in the Old and New Testaments. Since, therefore, Jesus Christ declares himself through this testimony in a way that has binding authority for his community, preaching is bound to this and must, by the Holy Spirit, express it. One can therefore speak either of three forms of the one Word or of the one Word attested in Bible and church. The Bible and church stand together, the latter building on the former and both coinciding and agreeing in an intimate way with the Word spoken in Jesus Christ. The former is, however, the definitive witness by which the church exists." /4/

So since Barth increasingly uses the word 'witness' as he

continues his writings in the Church Dogmatics, we can say that the Scriptures are the primary authority, the witness to revelation; the Church's proclamation becomes this in a derivative sense from the Holy Scriptures by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the danger of the former way of speaking was that it could be misunderstood in the sense of a too immediate, almost direct identity between revelation, scripture and preaching. For Barth the reality and possibility of such revelation rests only in God as he speaks and uses these means by the Holy Spirit. Walter Kroek, /5/ a Reformed theologian, strongly influenced by Barth, states that shortly before his death Barth spoke to a small group and indicated that he would no longer speak of the three forms of the Word of God. He used for preaching the illustration of the server at the Mass, who rings the bell which indicates the change that takes place when God comes and speaks his Word through Scripture and proclamation but it is not the preacher who actually performs and brings the Word of God. He is the medium of revelation.

2. The Nature of Scripture

We have already indicated that Scripture is not the thing signified but points to it and by the Word and Spirit conveys it. This is sacramental language and Barth sees the relationship between revelation and Scripture in this instrumental or sacramental light. Scripture is thus to be defined as the primary, definitive, authoritative witness to divine revelation. At this point it is necessary to say what Barth means by witness for it is not simply a human word with merely human authority. It is indeed a human word, that of the prophets and apostles of the OT and NT, but it is a word which stands in a unique relationship to the object of testimony. G.W. Bromiley /6/ explains the particular and very specialized way in which Barth uses this word when he writes, "the word 'witness' is a dangerous one if used in its ordinary sense but if we think of the Bible as a witness in the way in which the Bible itself describes the prophets and apostles as witnesses - "he who receives you, receives me", it is perhaps not quite so objectionable as some critics of Barth suppose." Indeed it scarcely can be called objectionable at all, and is now widely accepted by modern scholars as the best way to describe the Holy Scriptures.

The Scriptures are to be distinguished from revelation as a human word but at the same time to be regarded as identical with it as revelation is its basis and object. There is this twofoldness about it and there is, therefore, an indirect identity between Bible and revelation or the Word of God. Barth's favourite way of putting this is to say that the Scriptures become and so are the Word of God as God by his Spirit takes and uses them to speak ever and again to men. And since Jesus Christ is the content of revelation, he is the key, centre and meaning of the Scriptures. They bear witness to him. Let us look, therefore, at these two points briefly in turn to see their significance, (a) the event character of the Scriptures and (b) their relationship to Jesus Christ.

(a) The Scriptures as an event

The Scriptures become and so are the Word of God. We can therefore say the Bible is the Word of God but only in this sense. As a testimony they indicate, point to, are a sign as a special type of testimony and God takes and uses these in a special way to come and speak. Their authority is not simply in their words but in and through the human words. They are not per se revelation but instrumental thereto.

The point that Barth makes here, as he does again and again, is that our hearing and receiving the Word of God does not come by our own doing, not even our reading of the Scriptures, but is the miracle and mystery of God's grace, of his sovereignty and at his disposing. We cannot control revelation. He does. Now this does not mean that we do not use the Scriptures but simply sit back and wait. Quite the opposite. In fact, since Barth urges a listening to, a wrestling with the Scriptures to hear what God the Lord will say to us, we must use them diligently again and again. For here he who spoke in the past, promises to speak in the present and we await his speaking now. Scripture has, therefore, a unique superiority for us and the church as the place of God's promise, his presence in act, his speaking to us, the happening of his Word.

Barth writes /7/ , "it is round this event that the whole doctrine of Holy Scripture circles and with it all Church dogmatics and with it, too, preaching, sacraments

and proclamation." J.K.S. Reid (8) interprets Barth thus, "round this matter of event, the whole problem of Holy Scripture turns as does that of dogmatics, preaching, sacraments, proclamation. In the reality and truth of this event, there is nothing already past or only future, nothing that is pure recollection or pure expectation in this event. This original witness is the Word of God." What this means is that, as we have experienced through the testimony of the Scriptures God's revelation in the past and expect it in the future, so these two, as it were, come together in God's act and speaking, and we hear it as the Word of God now. Barth is saying clearly here that only God can speak his Word and he does it ever and again through the Holy Scripture.

(b) The Relation of the Scripture to Jesus Christ.

Since Jesus Christ is for Barth the centre of faith and knowledge, and since the Scriptures testify to him, who he is will determine what Scripture is. Just as he is God and man in one, so the Scriptures have a divine-human aspect. The error of the older theology was to make the words too literally the Word of God, though they did not forget or omit the work of God's Spirit in illumining the holy pages. Yet the parallel, as Barth readily acknowledges, /9/ is only an imperfect one, for the words become the Word ever and again, whereas the union of God and man is permanent in Jesus Christ.

There are two points of difference: (i) there is no unity of person between God and the humanity of prophets and apostles; (ii) the humanity of prophets and apostles is not taken up into the glory of God as is the case with that of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Barth can say of the Bible /10/ , "it too can and must, not as though it were Jesus Christ, but in the same serious sense as Jesus Christ, be called the Word of God: the Word of God in the sign of the word of man, if we are to put it accurately."

3. The Inspiration of Holy Scripture /11/

In what has been said to date, a particular view of God's relationship to and use of the Scriptures by the Holy Spirit is implied. Barth does not deny but affirms divine inspiration and seeks to give it a broader basis and interpretation than previously. He argues that this was in fact the

intention of the Reformers even if it was not always actually carried out nor indeed could be fully carried out at the time of the Reformation. He agrees that the primary author of Scripture is God the Holy Spirit, whereas the writers are secondary authors, secundarii auctores, yet real human authors. How then are the two related? Barth sees Scripture, Holy Spirit and human response and receiving the Word, as three aspects of the one work of God by the Holy Spirit and it is this, in its totality, that is theopneustia (divine inspiration) .

Barth believes that there are three stages in the total process of revelation: (a) the fact of the revelation of God in Israel and in Jesus Christ, the hidden wisdom of God there manifest; (b) there is the authoritative interpretation and speaking of it by the Holy Spirit. We have the mind of Christ, the thought of Christ on God's revelation as it is stated in 1 Corinthians 2. This eventually was crystallized through both oral and written tradition and became Holy Scripture; (c) the act of the same Spirit, taking the written word and enabling us to understand. Barth himself describes it, /12/ "with all other men the witness stands before the mystery of God and the benefit of his revelation. That this mystery is disclosed to him is the first thing and that he can speak of it the second....But the mystery of God will still remain a mystery...if the same Spirit who has created the witness, does not bear witness of its truth to men, to those who read and hear." And here we have Barth's strong emphasis when he writes, "This self-disclosure in its totality is theopneustia, the inspiration of the word of the prophets and apostles." /13/

The weakness of much traditional teaching (both Catholic and Protestant) , is that it took one aspect, the second, namely, the inspiration of the words and made it primary and almost exclusive. The tendency was to make the truths of Scripture a truth we can easily grasp and not a miracle of free grace. Indeed the main criticism of Barth from both sides is that the human element, as the divine word from God, is undervalued at the expense of an exclusive emphasis on the act of grace - the event character of his speaking to us in Holy Scripture. For Barth, however, to put an additional reason in place of the reason God has given, questions and endangers God's own way of acting. Barth agrees with Luther

more than Calvin in this respect and states /14/ , "as Luther insisted in innumerable passages the word of Scripture given by the Spirit can be recognized as God's word only because of the work of the Spirit which has taken place in it, takes place again and goes a step further, i.e., becomes an event for its hearers or readers. How else will God be recognized except by God Himself?" This well expresses and underlines the characteristic emphasis of Barth throughout the whole of his theology. "Only by God is God known."

This does not mean any minimizing of the importance of the actual words. Barth accepts verbal inspiration but rejects what he calls verbal inspiredness. In other words there is no inherent efficacy in the words themselves. He believes that it was precisely this mistake that post-Reformation Protestantism committed. It destroyed the mystery and the Bible became a part of the natural knowledge of God. It sought a certainty that was tangible, of works and not of faith. The human, rather than being exalted in this whole process, is really minimized and scarcely visible. For God speaks and gives by his Spirit (according to this view) even matters that we would know by ordinary means and this was certainly not the intention of Holy Scripture. The end result was that no discrepancies or errors at all could be admitted, and the Bible became a "paper Pope", as Barth says /15/ , and "unlike the living Pope in Rome, it was wholly given up into the hands of its interpreters. It was no longer a free and spiritual force but an instrument of human power." As a counterblast to this kind of literalism, perhaps as hyperbole, or to show the untenable nature of this position (which one would regard today as fundamentalism), Barth posits the thesis that, even if the witnesses were at fault in every word, the true word of grace would and could be spoken in their human erring and fallible words. /16/ This is not a position that one can really defend, since the witnesses must surely be reliable in their interpretation, else their testimony is not valid. The best reason one can think of for this line of argument is that Barth is arguing ad hominem. In other words he is saying, if you take the words of the Bible to be wholly infallible, this does not prove the truth of revelation - it is God speaking through it that does - any more than the view that they are wholly

fallible and errant, does. It is God who uses this testimony, and He alone who speaks His Word. Nevertheless, because of the very nature of the relationship of the witnesses to the original revelation, one must say that it is a trustworthy and reliable witness and to speak in this way is an excess, if not erroneous.

What Barth is always concerned to counter, is not a merely historical reading of Scripture which, while necessary and proper in its place, and while using all the means of literary, historical and other forms of criticism, is but a preliminary to a real theological exegesis, to a listening to and saying after him what God the Lord is saying to us.

Further, if we ask why this book alone, why a canon - Barth answers /17/ that it was not brought about by us but was simply recognized by the church. The church is not the author of the canon. The central fact that made the church accept these, and not other books, was the fact that they so impressed themselves upon the mind of the church by the Holy Spirit as divinely inspired, that it was felt one could not do otherwise than acknowledge their authority. To that extent they are self-authenticating.

4. Scripture and Tradition

Barth is aware of the fact that there is a question of importance here, and that it is not simply enough to state sola scriptura or speak of the divine authority of Scripture without indicating how he sees the relationship between scripture and tradition. The Scriptures are the supreme authority, or rather God speaking through them, Dei loquentis persona, as Calvin said. Hence one cannot set up beside them or over them any equal or higher authority. Neither the church in its life and tradition, nor human reason must equal or be judge of the Word of God. God Himself is his own witness and interpreter of it, and our attitude must be one of obedience. The church in its life and tradition is always challenged anew by this higher court, this authority, and yet strengthened at the same time by the promise of Christ's presence in and with the biblical testimony. So the church and its tradition "does not claim a direct, absolute and material authority either for some third court of appeal or for herself." /18/ Barth follows this by saying /19/ , "but for Holy Scripture as the Word of

God." But the church under it as obedient to the Word, does have a relative authority in its life, witness and tradition.

The phrase which sums up Barth's own attitude towards tradition in the church is this: "respectful freedom in relation to tradition." The respect comes first in relation to decisions and people in the church. There are three areas where this respect should be manifest: /20/ (a) in the decision about the Canon in which the church points beyond itself to the Word; (b) in respect of the Fathers of the church, particularly the Patristic witness and the Reformers. There can be no question of going back on, but rather, completing the Reformation. This respect arises because of the relative authority of these Fathers and their work, for they stated as clearly and as biblically as possible, the essence of the apostolic faith. There is respect too for the Communion of Saints as a living reality today, and these are not simply dead voices but living ones in the church of Jesus Christ, giving a testimony to which we must faithfully listen, and give heed as interpreters of the Word. (c) This tradition of our forefathers has been enshrined in creeds and confessions in which was set forth what they believed the Scriptures taught. They were to be a testimony for truth and against error, and to serve as a bond of union between members of the church. They sought to expound the Scriptures and be a testimony to their authority.

Yet this respect for tradition and traditional statements is, and must be, combined with a freedom of the Word and under the Word, a freedom to look at past statements and formulate them anew. It may be that we will come to exactly the same conclusions as did our forefathers at Chalcedon, for example, in their christological statement. But the very nature of Confession in the Reformed tradition makes the possibility of revision ever open. Barth writes /21/, "if divine infallibility cannot be ascribed to any church's Confession, then in practice we have to recognize that every church Confession can be regarded as only a stage on the road which can as such be relativized, and succeeded by a further stage in the form of an altered Confession. Therefore, respect for its authority has necessarily to be conjoined with a basic readiness to envisage a possible alteration of this kind."

So the ultimate authority is the Word of God, spoken again and again in and to the church on the basis of the biblical testimony. This in turn creates a tradition of faith, fellowship and confession, all of which have a relative authority as they seek faithfully to reflect the true light of the Word.

Notes

1. Church Dogmatics (CD), 1/2, p457
2. ibid.
3. J.K.S. Reid, The Authority of Scripture, London 1957, p195.
4. J. Thompson, Christ in Perspective, Edinburgh 1978, pp116-117.
5. Walter Kreck, in Berthold Klappert, Promissio und Bund, Gesetz und Evangelium bei Luther und Barth, Göttingen 1976, pp272-3.
6. G.W. Bromiley, Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration, quoted by Colin Brown in Karl Barth and the Christian Message, London 1967, p32.
7. CD, 1/2, p503.
8. Reid, op.cit., p214.
9. CD, 1/2, p513.
10. ibid, p500.
11. ibid, pp514ff.
12. ibid, p516.
13. ibid.
14. ibid, p521.
15. ibid.
16. ibid, pp529-30.
17. ibid, pp473ff
18. ibid, p541 (Italics mine - JT.)
19. ibid, p538.
20. ibid, pp597ff
21. ibid, p659.