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The Christological Analogy of Scripture in Karl Barth

Introduction

In dealing with the divine and human elements in Scripture scholars have been confronted with the question of the “and-and” quality of Scripture, as Berkouwer calls it, namely being Word of God and word of man.¹ In trying to get to grips with this twofold nature of Scripture theologians have referred to a certain parallelism between Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God and Scripture, the written or inscripturated Word of God.

To look at Karl Barth’s position on this issue seems rewarding since Barth not only has been described as the “*main initiator* of a ‘postmodern’ paradigm in theology”² but also as one who seems to offer a more adequate position for contemporary Evangelical theology than Fundamentalism.³ This even more so since it has been said that “the possibility of an analogy between the Word-Incarnation and the Word-inscripturation is present in the general structure of Barth’s description”.⁴ This claim promises to provide an interesting area of investigation because it is an acknowledged fact that the decisive mark of his theology is his christocentricity.⁵ Therefore, we will begin our investigation into the concept of the Christological analogy of

¹ G. C. Berkouwer, *Holy Scripture*, Grand Rapids 1975, 197.

² So H. Küng, Karl Barth and the Postmodern Paradigm, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 9 (1988) 19.

³ So B. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology*, San Francisco 1983, 48–49. Cf. also the discussion in the recent issue of *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, vol. 17/4 (1990) and here esp. R. A. Mohler, *Bernard Ramm: Karl Barth and the Future of American Evangelicalism*, 27–41.

⁴ P. R. Wells, *James Barr and the Bible. Critique of a New Liberalism*, Phillipsburg 1980, 12.

⁵ In 1938 Barth himself spoke of the “Christological concentration” of his thinking which from 1932 on found expression in his *Church Dogmatics*. K. Barth, *Parergon. Karl Barth über sich selbst*, *EvTh* (1948/1949) 272; in 1948 Barth confirmed his christological approach and wrote that he would be obliged to it in the future too. *Ibid.*, 282. In this context A. Come even speaks of “Christomonism,” in Karl Barth. Cf. A. B. Come, *An Introduction to Barth’s Dogmatics for Preachers*, Philadelphia 1963, 133–142, 79–80.

Scripture in Karl Barth with a look at his understanding of the nature of Christ.⁶

Barth's Understanding of the Nature of Christ

Traditionally it is held that Jesus Christ was fully divine before the Incarnation and that in his Incarnation we also assumed human nature. The Council of Chalcedon has described this relationship in its central affirmation with the words that in the person of Christ we have two natures unconfounded and undivided. It insisted that Jesus was fully God and fully man, not some form of hybrid or a split or dual person.

It was Regin Prenter who has shown that for Barth despite his Chalcedonian language the humanity of Jesus in principle has to be separated from his divinity.⁷ In Barth the traditional understanding of Christ's Incarnation has been changed to that end that the unification of son of God and son of man in Jesus Christ is no longer a static Being but a dynamic history which continually progresses. Thus the divine nature of Christ is not an inherent quality in Jesus Christ but an act, a history. The same holds true for his human nature.⁸ Furthermore, Prenter has shown that Barth understands Jesus Christ's humanity in a certain analogy with the being of God.⁹ The *man* Jesus Christ "reflects", "illustrates", "portrays" in an analogous way the eternal inner-trinitarian relationship.¹⁰ The relationship of the man Jesus Christ to the Trinity is seen by Barth in so far as he not only speaks about the Son of God as preexisting before the Incarnation but also about the man as actually being in the beginning with God. That is, the Son of God is one with the Son of man as fore-ordained from all eternity.¹¹ The two natures in the one person

⁶ Since Barth has produced an enormous amount of literature we will limit our investigation mainly, though not exclusively, to the crowning achievement of his scholarship, namely his *Church Dogmatics*, 13 vols., ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, Edinburgh 1936–1969. Hereafter this work will be abbreviated as CD. Although Barth's title *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, transl. by D. Horton, Grand Rapids 1935 seems to commend itself to the topic at hand, the book has no explicit reference to the Christological analogy.

⁷ R. Prenter, *Karl Barths Umbildung der traditionellen Zweinaturenlehre in lutherischer Beleuchtung*, StTh 11 (1958) 19.

⁸ Ibid. 11.

⁹ Ibid. 30–37.

¹⁰ Ibid. 31, 40–41. See also CD IV/2, 166, 248.

¹¹ CD, II/2, 104, 114–117, 145.

of Jesus Christ are designated by the two names: Son of God and Son of man.¹²

Despite the similarity in language¹³ Barth eventually clearly distances himself from the traditional understanding of the nature of Christ.

We have given a relative preference to the Reformed because of its... decisive concept of the *unio hypostatica*. But there can be no doubt that in our departure from this whole concept we have left even Reformed Christology far behind.¹⁴

For Barth the relationship between the two is not seen as something “static”, as if God and man really were one, but it is rather a “dynamic history”, that is continually progressing.¹⁵ There is a confrontation in the person of Jesus Christ between the divine and the human. Says Barth:

It cannot, therefore, be that His human nature as such also receives the divine, ... In Jesus Christ there is no direct or indirect identification, but the effective confrontation, not only of the divine with the human, but also of the human with the divine essence, and therefore the determination of the relationship of the one to the other which, without altering its essence, takes place in this confrontation.¹⁶

This confrontation with the divine can be understood only “as an event” [Ereignis].¹⁷ Because of his emphasize on the “event-character” of Christ’s Incarnation Barth is not interested in a direct or indirect identification of the two but rather in the confrontation of the human with the divine.¹⁸ In Christ, God identifies His being with that of man, and in Jesus, man participates in

¹² Cf. CD II/2, 104, 109–110, 140, 145; CD IV/2, ch. 15, 64.

¹³ On Barth’s christology see CDIV/II, ch. 15, § 64. On the problem of Barth’s idiosyncratic language see the discussion in F. M. Hasel, Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* on the Atonement: Some Translational Problems, Andrews University Seminary Studies 29/3 (1991) 205–211.

¹⁴ CD, IV/2, 106. On this whole question see especially the article by Prenter, 4, 13, 19 and *passim*. Cf. also A. V. Bauer, Inspiration als sakramentales Ereignis: Zum Verhältnis von Wort, Sakrament und Menschheit Christi nach der Theologie Karl Barths, TThZ 72 (1963) 96–99.

¹⁵ CD, IV/2, 105–112. This is also recognized by E. Jüngel, ... keine Menschenlosigkeit Gottes ... Zur Theologie Karl Barths zwischen Theismus und Atheismus, EvTh 31 (1971) 382.

¹⁶ CD, IV/2, 87–88.

¹⁷ CD, IV/2, 94.

¹⁸ Bauer sees a tendency in Barth towards a separation of the divine from the human in Jesus Christ: “... die Nuance zur Trennung ist da. Halten wir fest: Durch die Betonung des Ereignisses entsteht eine Tendenz zur Trennung und zur Betonung des Nebeneinander von Gott und Mensch in Jesus Christus, die seine seinshafte Einheit der beiden NATUREN in einer Person überschattet.” Bauer, 98–99. For Prenter this is an undeniable fact. Cf. Prenter, 25.

the dialogue in which God and man meet and are together.¹⁹ Jesus Christ is in this one person, as true God, man's loyal partner, and as true man, God's.²⁰ In this understanding, however, the true unity of the divine and the human is actually truly dissolved, because God and man are but two partners in a covenant relationship. In this relationship they come together, but not in the traditional understanding of being one person in essence.²¹ According to Regin Prenter, for Barth the humanity of Jesus must remain in principle separated from his divinity.²² The man Jesus Christ who lived in our world is only God's *witness* who points to our irrevocable election from eternity. But he is not God acting in human form.²³ It should be noted that Barth at this point despite the similarity in his language, differs fundamentally from the early church and Lutheran Reformation in the understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ. With this Christology Barth has come, to use Prenter's words, very close indeed to the speculative Hegelian Christology in which the humanity of Christ reflects an eternal divine "Idea".²⁴ This leads us to our next step, where we turn to Barth's view of Scripture.

Barth's Understanding of the Nature of Scripture

For Barth, the Word of God is first and foremost Jesus Christ as the content of God's eternal will. It is only in a secondary sense that the Bible functions as the Word of God. Even here it only points to the primary Word. Barth clearly draws the conclusion that the fact that we have the Bibel as God's Word does not justify us in claiming that the "Bible is God's Word".²⁵ The Bible as God's Word is rather a proposition about God's being and His working mightily in and through the Bible.

That we have the Bible as the Word of God does not justify us in transforming the statement that the Bible is the Word of God from a statement about the being and rule of God in and through the Bible into a statement about the Bible as such.²⁶

¹⁹ CD, II/1, 663.

²⁰ Cf. also K. Barth, *The Humanity of God*, Richmond 1960, 46–47.

²¹ Prenter calls this a consequent Nestorian christological position and points out that Barth is here in harmony with his earlier position in his "Epistle to the Romans." Prenter, 20–21, note 22.

²² Ibid. 19.

²³ Ibid. 85.

²⁴ Ibid. 41, 80.

²⁵ Cf. W. Young, *The Inspiration of Scripture in Reformation and in Barthian Theology*, WThJ 8 (1946) 28–29.

²⁶ CD, I/2, 527.

Another thesis follows. For Barth to speak about “God’s Word” is to speak about “God’s Work”.

To say “the Word of God” is to say the work of God. It is not to contemplate a state or fact but to watch an event, and an event which is relevant to us, an event which is an act of God, an act of God which rests on a free decision.²⁷

This is in harmony with Barth’s understanding of the Incarnation as an event.²⁸ For him “every static identification is to be rejected utterly”²⁹ in the written Word of God.

Barth’s distinction between the divine and the human within Christ and by way of analogy also in Scripture naturally implies that the Bible, at least from one point of view, is a fully human book. This Barth acknowledges time and again.³⁰ The Bible is clearly to be distinguished from revelation.³¹ “The Bible is not a book of oracles; it is not an instrument of direct impartation. It is genuine witness.”³² It is worthwhile to quote in full length a passage where Barth brings out clearly his understanding of the relation of the human and the divine in Scripture. He says:

Again it is quite impossible that there should be direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of God the Creator. It is impossible that there should have been a transmutation of one into the other or an admixture of the one with the other. This is not the case even in the person of Christ where the identity between God and man, in all the originality and indissolubility in which it confronts us, is an assumed identity, one specially willed, created and effected by God, and to that extent indirect, i. e. resting neither in the essence of God nor in that of man, but in a decision and act of God to man. When we necessarily allow for inherent differences, it is exactly the same with the unity of the divine and human word in Holy Scripture.³³

Here and at several other places³⁴ Barth draws a close comparison between the nature of Christ and the nature of Scripture. Nevertheless, Barth

²⁷ Ibid. I/2, 527.

²⁸ Similarly, inspiration according to Barth is not an once for all act of God through which God endows His chosen writers with a new quality but it is rather an *event* that occurred not only with the prophets and apostles but also is active today in the hearers and readers of Scripture. Cf. CD, I/2, 502–503. See also Bauer, 84.

²⁹ Cf. K. Runia, Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture, Grand Rapids 1962, 33.

³⁰ “Even here [i. e. in the presence of God in the word of the prophets and apostles] the human element does not cease to be human, and as such and in itself it is certainly not divine.” CD, I/1, 499.

³¹ CD, I/1, 462–463, 465.

³² CD, I/1, 507.

³³ CD, I/2, 499.

³⁴ CD, I/1, 121 and CD I/2, 487.

remains cautious not to identify both too closely. For him the Word becoming Scripture is not the same thing as the Word becoming flesh, yet “the uniqueness and at the same time general relevance of its becoming flesh necessarily involved its becoming Scripture”.³⁵ Ultimately this means for Barth that the words of the biblical authors remain only human testimonies to the revelation of God in Christ. But by means of inspiration God takes up these human words and makes them his.³⁶

Having said this about Barth’s understanding of the nature of Scripture we will now look at some implications that arise out of this view.

Implications on the Nature of Scripture

Since Barth rejects every mechanical conception of inspiration the words of Scripture are always only human words. As such they are a witness to the one true Word, which is Jesus Christ.³⁷ To acknowledge that the Bible is a fully human document, however is only the first step. Barth at once acknowledges that the Bible as a human document is also a *fallible* document. For Barth to be serious about the true humanity of the Bible is to acknowledge that it is “conditioned and limited because the men whom we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves”.³⁸ Barth clearly states that “in our search for an absolute, unconditional, supreme source of divine revelation we inevitably come up against the fact of human relativity and limitations of the authors of the Bible”.³⁹ This relativity can be seen on different levels throughout the Bible. The limitations of the Biblical writers are apparent in their own thought and work.⁴⁰ They did not have infallible “knowledge of all things in heaven and earth, natural, historical and hu-

³⁵ CD, I/2, 500.

³⁶ CD, I/1, 530. Cf. also T.E. Provence, *The Hermeneutics of Karl Barth*, Ph.D. Diss. Fuller Theological Seminary 1980, 262–264.

³⁷ Cf. J.K.S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture. A Study of the Reformation and Post-Reformation Understanding of the Bible*, London, 1957, 194–212.

³⁸ CD, I/2, 506–507.

³⁹ K. Barth, *The Christian Understanding of Revelation*, in: *Against the Stream: Shorter Post-War Writings*, trans. by E.M. Delacour and S. Godman, ed. by R.G. Smith, London 1954, 221.

⁴⁰ CD, I/1, 529.

man".⁴¹ Consequently, the witnesses were products of a first century world-view and a middle-eastern culture which is far different from that of modern man.⁴² Beyond the limitations of culture and age, however, the prophets and apostles were also limited in their theological understanding.

The vulnerability of the Bible, i.e., its capacity for error, also extends to its religious or theological content... they [the biblical authors] are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology. In view of the actual constitution of the Old and the New Testaments this is something which we cannot possibly deny if we are not to take away their humanity, if we are not to be guilty of Docetism.⁴³

For him, not to take seriously the human nature of the biblical documents means to stand in danger of identifying that which is human with that which is divine, which in turn easily can be the beginning of idolatry. The presence of the Word of God in the Bible is not to be viewed as a property, inherent in the book as such. Scripture is unique in its unique function⁴⁴ whereby there arises, in analogy to the Incarnation, an indirect identity of human existence with God Himself.⁴⁵ The presence of God's Word is such as cannot be grasped, says Barth.⁴⁶ Yet, these human limitations do not hinder Jesus Christ from appropriating those words as his own. In this sense the words of Scripture can *become* the word of God because God, in his sovereignty, reveals himself to man through it.⁴⁷

Having said this we will now turn to the concluding part of our study.

⁴¹ CD, I/2, 508.

⁴² "The Bible is the literary monument of an ancient racial religion and of a Hellenistic cultus religion of the Near East. A human document like any other, it can lay no *a priori* dogmatic claim to special attention and consideration." K. Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, 60.

⁴³ CD, I/2, 509–510.

⁴⁴ D. H. Kelsey, *The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology*, Philadelphia 1975, 47, points out that Scripture has a functional authority for Barth.

⁴⁵ Cf. CD, I/2, 488, 496. See also Young, 33–34.

⁴⁶ "If, therefore, we are serious about the fact that this miracle is an event, we cannot regard the presence of God's Word in the Bible as an attribute inherent once for all in this book as such... It is present in a way we cannot conceive: not as a third time between past and future, between recollection and expectation, but as that point between the two which we cannot think of as time... just as the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the center of time is the basis of time in general." CD, I/2, 530.

⁴⁷ Cf. CD, I/2, 508, 529.

Conclusion

Our study has shown that Barth has indeed drawn an analogy between the incarnate and the inscripturated Word of God. Even though there is a “great looseness in the use of the term ‘analogy’”⁴⁸ Barth uses this term in reference to Scripture and Jesus Christ, the Word of God.⁴⁹ This analogy is an analogy of faith and *not* an *analogia entis*.⁵⁰ It has its starting point in the person of Jesus Christ who in his humanity “reflects”, “illustrates” or “portrays” in an analogous way the eternal inner-trinitarian relationship. Having distanced himself from the traditional understanding that God is really present in the man Jesus, Barth sees the Incarnation as an *event* that is continually progressing rather than a static union of two persons in essence. On this basis, consistent with his understanding of the Incarnation as an *event* Barth sees inspiration not as something “static”, once for all but rather as an ongoing *event* that extends even to the current reader. This leads Barth eventually to the point where he rejects any identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God. For him the human words of the prophets and apostles are truly human and therefore fallible.

Barth does not seem to draw direct implications from his view of the humanity of the Bible for his Christology. It is the other way round. Consistent with his christological approach he starts with Jesus Christ and draws an analogy from Him to Scripture. We have seen that for Barth there is no real unity of the divine and the human in the person of Jesus Christ. Rather, the dynamic event character of Christ’s incarnation is stressed. This dynamic understanding tends to eclipse the ontological, however. It seems to us that in Scripture alongside this “dynamic” aspect there is inseparably linked another dimension, that is, revelation in the sense of revealedness.

Despite Barth’s positive aim, namely pointing to God as the ultimate authority in Scripture, one has to ask the question whether Barth has consistently used all relevant biblical material on this subject. Concerning Barth’s understanding of Christ’s humanity we can join Balthasar who raises the following question:

⁴⁸ So J. McIntyre, “Analogy,” SJTh 12 (1959) 7.

⁴⁹ Cf. R. T. Osborne, *Christ, Bible and Church in Karl Barth*, JBR 23 (1955) 100.

⁵⁰ See McIntyre, 10–17 and Eberhard Jüngel, *Die Möglichkeit theologischer Anthropologie auf dem Grunde der Analogie. Eine Untersuchung zum Analogieverständnis Karl Barths*, EvTh 22 (1962) 523–557.

Is this what the Bible tells us, or are we actually peeking behind the dark glass we are supposed to look through? [Do we not look God in his cards at this point?] Does this not clarify the mystery to such an extent that no mystery remains?⁵¹

Here the danger of theological rationalism becomes real. When the humanity of the Bible is stressed to the extend of fallibility at every possible point then there is no place left for a real unity of the divine with the human, which is indeed the case with Barth.⁵² His insistence on biblical fallibility really undermines the christological analogy and leaves us with a purely human book.

According to Hebr 4:15 Christ was tempted in all things as we are “yet without sin”. Barth is apparently not willing to carry the analogy this far and seems to think that although true humanity need not involve sin in the case of the incarnate Word,⁵³ the humanity of the inscripturated Word involves fallibility.

Paul Ronald Wells has reasoned that in order to be totally logical at this point “Barth would have to argue that fallibility is not sinful”.⁵⁴ For us this is the Achilles heel of the analogy in Barth’s case. As Klaas Runia has said:

To insist upon biblical fallibility along with its humanity is actually to destroy the whole parallel with the Incarnation. The only thing that is left is a purely human book which can be used of God to communicate his divine message, but which as such is not this message.⁵⁵

It seems to us that there is a certain parallel between the incarnation and the inscripturation in the Bible. The nature of Jesus Christ, however, remains a mystery that we can not fully explain but only accept by faith. The same holds true to the role of the human and the divine in relation to Scripture. Neither one explains the other mystery. But both are “analogue” in the sense that they are unique in their perfect union of the divine and the human. In this sense not only Jesus Christ but also the Bible is uniquely the Word of God.

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⁵¹ H. U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. J. Drury, New York, 1971, 200. For some reason the English translation has left out one sentence. This sentence is supplied in Square brackets by the author of this paper.

⁵² Cf. Runia, 77.

⁵³ CD, III/2, 48.

⁵⁴ Wells, 14.

⁵⁵ Runia, 77.