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One Hundred Years Later

Karl Barth's Lectures on the Theology of the Reformed Confessions

Bruce McCormack

Introduction

The Karl Barth who arrived in Göttingen in October 1921 to occupy a newly-created honorary professorship in Reformed theology was a man who had no earned doctoral degree. What he did have was his first commentary on *Romans* – for which he would receive an honorary doctorate from Münster in January 1922. But he was very much unprepared for this new challenge. «I did not even possess the Reformed confessional writings, and had certainly never read them.»¹ There was no reason that he should have; the Protestant cantons in Switzerland had done away with a statutory relation to a Reformed confession, as Barth would put it, about the same time Swiss cities were tearing down medieval city gates and walls.² Requirements that the ordained take a vow to be guided by a particular Reformed confession disappeared from the churches in these cantons at roughly the same time.

But he quickly made up for lost time. He purchased a copy of E.F.K. Müller's *Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche* almost immediately upon arrival. There then began a four semester crash course in classical Reformed doctrinal theology – teaching first the Heidelberg Catechism, followed by courses on Calvin, Zwingli, and then (in the summer semester of 1923), the theology of the Reformed confessions. In teaching his students, he was also teaching himself.

It is astonishing to me, really, to see Barth at work on these texts. His attentiveness to details, to nuances of difference amongst the dozens of confessions he treats, even to differences in the style of the writing and the tone of the writers – all of these qualities are those found in a highly-trained historical theologian

1 «Autobiographische Skizzen Karl Barths aus den Fakultätsalben der Ev.-Theo. Fakultät in Münster» (Barth 1971: 309). All translations of German quotations into English in this article are mine.

2 Busch 1998: viii (here citing Barth 1953: 20).

of the old school, but we would not expect to find them in a self-taught honorary professor with only three semesters under his belt. We also need to remind ourselves that he is still a year away from launching his first ever cycle of lectures on dogmatics. There is much that he understands only from afar. He makes mistakes – even at points he recognizes rightly to be decisive. But no one who knows the history of theology well can come away from a close reading of the lectures we are considering without being deeply impressed by Barth's intelligence, his passion, his gifts for teaching and lively communication.

Not surprisingly, Barth had his favorite confessions and catechisms – those which he understood as sufficient, when taken together, for identifying the «essence» of Reformed thinking, for appreciating what he called Reformed «dialectics» (Gospel and only then law, justification and repentance, faith and obedience, dogmatics and ethics), and for comprehending the originating Reformed disinterest in questions surrounding the *assurance* of salvation. The five he named were: Zwingli's *Christliche Einleitung* of 1523, Calvin's second *Genevan Catechism* of 1545, the *Gallican Confession* of 1559 (also written largely by Calvin), the *Scots Confession* of 1560, and the *Heidelberg Catechism* of 1563.³ Notice, if you will, that all of them were written before the death of Calvin. But even as these last three witnesses to the originating intentions of the Reformed movement were being written, Reformed scholasticism was already dawning⁴ – and Barth could sense that too.

What emerges from Barth's intensive engagement with the confessions is a story unfolded in two acts, so to speak; the upward movement in the understanding of God's revelation in Christ which begins with Zwingli and reaches its apex in Calvin and the downward falling away which results from a gradual shift in attention from God in revelation to a focus on the believing Christian, as evidenced above all by later preoccupation with an *ordo salutis*. He prefers his historical periodization for surveying the whole rather than a division into groups and/or types.⁵

Barth divides his treatment of Reformed doctrines into four sections: critical engagement with the old church; Reformed doctrine positively presented; critical engagement with Lutheranism; and the struggle against modern Christianity. I

3 Barth 1998: 209.

4 Bizer 1963.

5 Barth 1998: 230–237.

cannot treat everything here, obviously. I will confine my attention to Barth's understanding of the overarching theme and center of Reformed theology and a very small selection of doctrinal issues which not only illustrate well the distinctive nature of the older Reformed theology but also Barth's relationship to it in this summer of 1923.

I. The Theme and Center of Reformed Theology

The theme of the older theology is the God who is known only through God; the God who makes himself known in knowing us *in revelation*.⁶ The basic intentions shared by all are to declare the glory of this God and to provide direction for a preaching that attends closely to this theme. The significance of this basic orientation is seen most clearly when compared with Luther and his followers. The concern which animates the Reformed is not the religious question «how do I get a gracious God?» and the starting-point is not, therefore, a Law whose purpose was understood to engender a «terrified conscience» in the sinner, thereby driving him/her/them to Christ. «The decisive thing to be said about faith does not consist in the fact that faith makes just, but rather in the fact that faith too is given, awakened, made by God,»⁷ And so: the Lutheran *Augustana* asks how shall I be made blessed, Martin Bucer's *Tetrapolitana*, written in the same year of 1530, asks *Who* makes me blessed? The doctrine of justification did not even appear in Zwingli's *Sixty-Seven Articles* of 1523. It appears, interestingly, without the name in the *Ten Theses of Bern* in 1528 where it is said «Christ is our only wisdom, righteousness, redemption, and payment for the sins of the whole world» (in Thesis III) – but the Christocentrism of this account is evident.⁸ The *Tetrapolitana* takes a similar approach. «...our preachers have taught that this whole justification is to be ascribed to the good pleasure of God and the merit of Christ, and to be received by faith alone.»⁹ If the Lutheran interest lay in the faith which lays hold of justification, the Reformed interest lay in the God who sets forth Christ as our justification and who creates in us the faith which receives him. And so, justification can disappear once again in the *Confession of Basel* 1534 without detriment to its Reformed character. The *First Helvetic Confession* of 1536 devotes a lengthy

6 Barth 1998: 102, 104.

7 Barth 1998: 112.

8 «The Ten Theses of Bern, 1528» (Cochrane 1966: 49).

9 «The Tetrapolitan Confession of 1530» (Cochrane 1966: 57).

article to what we have *in Christ*, who is «...our reconciliation, our redemption, sanctification, payment, wisdom, defense and deliverance»¹⁰ – all of this to be received through that faith which is a «pure gift of God»¹¹ and, therefore, not something the unredeemed could generate in and for themselves. The same orientation can be found in Calvin's and Farel's *Geneva Confession* of 1536. Thus far, Barth has demonstrated an unerring sense for that which is truly essential in early Reformed teaching. He was less sure-footed when it came to metaphysical questions – as we will now see.

What Barth meant by the *center* of Reformed theology was the incarnation – and a Christology (or «doctrine» of Christ) which bore witness to it in its structure and effects with the greatest possible adequacy. But at this point in time, the God-concept which the old Reformed presupposed is causing him problems.

If it is the real God with whom we have to do, Barth says, then this reality «must itself be *finite, temporal, contingent*; not to be confused with the infinity of the world but also not to be confused with the infinite negation of the world, but rather, standing over against both infinities as they mutually abrogate each other, the absolutely unique, unrepeatable, individual, the *revelation* at their center, conquering and reconciling [both.]»¹² The Christocentrism of this statement is clear, though it remains highly formal. But there is also present here a series of contrasts which Christ is said to overcome, chief among them being the immutable and the contingent, the infinite God and the finite human.

Barth was still nine months away from making the doctrine of the Trinity to be the cornerstone of the foundation for dogmatics he would lay in the Prolegomena to his Göttingen Dogmatics. At this point, he has at his disposal only an economic Trinity, having no interest in an immanent Trinity. He relished the fact that Calvin found the Athanasian and even the Nicene Creed to be «unappealing and suspect.» The Nicene Creed, Calvin thought, was guilty of «*otiosa speculatio*» and «superfluous wordiness.»¹³ What that adds up to is this. Barth was quite content, at this point in time, to affirm a doctrine of the «one God» (i.e. «God's being and attributes») as the only necessary presupposition of Christology. He registered his satisfaction with article 1 of the *Gallican Confession*, which proclaimed: «We

10 «The First Helvetic Confession of 1536» (Cochrane 1966: 104).

11 «The First Helvetic Confession of 1536» (Cochrane 1966: 104).

12 Barth 1998: 256.

13 Barth 1998: 29.

believe and confess that there is but one God, who is one sole and simple essence, spiritual, eternal, invisible, immutable, infinite, incomprehensible, ineffable, omnipotent...»¹⁴ He celebrated the addition made here to the «customary series of divine predicates» of the terms «incomprehensible and ineffable,» concluding «It cannot be otherwise.» What is at issue here, he said, «is the knowing of the *unknown* God.»¹⁵ Clearly, Barth is still moving largely within the constellation of ideas which found such vivid expression in his second *Romans*. For now, he thought himself able to join the unknown God with the God made known in Christ without causing himself any problems. Barth could even lend his approval to *the Westminster Confession's* chapter II, article 1 on the one God. «...all of that is very well said.»¹⁶ He made no mention of Westminster I's third article on the Trinity.

But when the Trinity finally put in an appearance, as it would necessarily have to do if one wished to speak at all of an incarnation, the concept of the «Son» with which he would be working was the classical one; the eternal Son who shares in all of the predicates we saw to be affirmed in the *Gallican Confession*. Sharing in them as he did, the straightforward identification of the Chalcedonian «person» with this Son had to mean that the human «nature» could only just *belong* to him and could only serve as his instrument. Talk of a communication of human attributes to the Christological «person» could only be improper, a figure of speech. No unity of the «natures» could be purchased in this way; they could only fall apart – even to the point of assigning some works of the Christological «person» to him in his divine nature alone and some to him in his human nature alone (as had occurred a millenium before in Pope Leo's famous *Tome*).

To be sure, this is the classical Reformed Christology! – and Barth has understood it well. He knows that it was devised in a studied effort to eliminate the possibility of a communication of the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience and – above all – omnipresence to Christ's human nature. He knows that this opposition was rooted in a desire to eliminate the Christological grounding given by the Lutherans to their understanding of the «real presence» of the physical body and blood of Christ in the elements of bread and wine in the Lord's Supper. To this challenge Barth responded as follows. «No one», neither the

14 «The French Confession of Faith» (Cochrane 1966: 144).

15 Barth 1998: 150.

16 Barth 1998: 214.

Lutherans nor the Reformed, «is contesting that in his deity he is omnipresent, but that is what he shares with God the Father and the Spirit; as contingent revelation, however, he is not omnipresent but *concealed* to us.»¹⁷ That is a significant statement, in my view – precisely because of its inadequacy. Barth has eyes at this point only for the concealment of God in God's self-revelation. And because that is the case, he does not see the problems that surround the old Reformed acceptance of the identification of the Christological «person» with the eternal Son as such. For the same reason, he would go on to embrace the *an-* and *enhypostasia* of the post-Chalcedonian church the following year. This would create an insuperable problem for his own Christology – so long as he held on to it, which he would do throughout his life.

The problem is this: the identification of the Christological «person» with the eternal Son was designed in the ancient church to protect the (alleged) simplicity and impassibility of the Son but also, at the same time, to serve the interests of a «divinisation» theory of Christ's work through the «divinizing» of his human «nature.» In the sixteenth century context, the retrieval of precisely this Christology, even in the truncated form given to it by the Reformed, could only really serve the interests of the Lutherans in the long run. To avoid this conclusion, Barth did what his Reformed forebears did: he kept the «natures» separate, thereby accepting Chalcedon in its truncated form.

The day would come when Barth would want to ascribe the obedience which led to suffering and death *not* to Jesus alone but to the God-human *as a united whole*. To achieve that end would have had to mean bidding a firm farewell to the separation that must arise wherever the Christological «person» is identified with the Son while refusing the divinisation of the human which must naturally follow. And this is something Barth would never be able to do. Ultimately, the problem which still exists in *Church Dogmatics* IV/I is that he is trying to pour new wine into old wineskins; he is trying to get divine suffering into a Christological model originally designed to render such a thing impossible. But as I say, in making the mistakes I have identified, Barth was following the lead of the older Reformed who made them long before he did.

But that does raise a question for us even today: what would it mean to say that we are «Reformed» if we can demonstrate no connection to any of this? If being «Reformed» were reduced simply to a question of national or provincial

17 Barth 1998: 214.

groupings? That problem now becomes even more conspicuous as I turn (briefly) to some distinctively Reformed positions on some still divisive doctrinal questions. All of them follow quite naturally from the central theme of Reformed theology and its center in Christology.

II. Derivative Reformed Doctrines

A. The Lord's Supper

To speak of the Lord's Supper is to enter onto ground that is every bit as contentious in our day as it was in the sixteenth century. Most Christians feel very strongly about it even if they possess little understanding of the classical debates. Many of my students were, in fact, inclined to want something like the Lutheran or Catholic position on the «real presence» to be true, even if they otherwise had zero interest in doctrinal questions. What is left in a student who can muster no interest in doctrine is usually a desire to participate in divine mysteries and, as a result, a fascination with liturgy. Whether the mysteries in question are actually divine or not is an open question.

The Reformed position, in all of its varieties, is symbolic. Bread and wine are signs that point to the body of Christ, now risen and ascended and seated «locally» at the right hand of God – from whence it cannot be «dragged down.»¹⁸ Different models are possible on the basis of this shared commitment. The Zwinglian emphasized the importance of a «remembering» that makes spiritually present. The Bullingerian understands spiritual feeding on «body and blood» as a divine gift which takes place simultaneously with the human act of physically feeding on bread and wine. This view has been called «symbolic parallelism» by Brian Gerrish, to emphasize the fact that «body and blood» are *not* joined to «bread and wine» but are instead «presented» to the communicant directly, which is to say: without the mediation of the elements.¹⁹ Karl Barth understood this to be the Reformed position, shared by all confessions worthy of the name.²⁰ «Of bread and wine, nothing is ever to be said other than that they are meaningful signs. Here too, the gift of Christ is a parallel to that which is taken into the hand and into the mouth.»²¹

18 Calvin 1975: IV. xvii. 31, 1403.

19 Gerrish 1992: 253.

20 Cf. Barth 1998: 283.

21 Barth 1998: 268f; cf. 283.

Now a third possibility has been argued for by Gerrish and made to be the position of Calvin. This, he called «symbolic instrumentalism.» He based this claim largely on the *Genevan Catechism* of 1545 where we find the following exchange. The minister asks: «Have we in the Supper a mere symbol of those benefits you mention, or is their reality exhibited to us there?» And the child responds: «Since the Lord Jesus Christ is the truth itself, there can be no doubt but that the promises which he there gives us, he at the same time also implements, adding the reality to the symbol.»²² But the question and the statement are both ambiguous. The addition of the *res* pointed to by the *signa* may well have been understood by Calvin as a divine act taking place at the same time as oral communication but remaining distinct from the latter. What we do know is that Calvin thinks that it is given to us to participate in the «substance” of that body and blood of Christ which remains in heaven by the power of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, Calvin calls the Holy Spirit our «bond of participation.»²³ In any event, Calvin was also able to compose the *Consensus Tigurinus* four years later – which clearly sets forth the view Gerrish calls «symbolic parallelism.»²⁴ So Barth was on very solid ground in his reading of the Reformed view of the Lord’s Supper. He summarizes the central elements in the Reformed view as follows: «...the remaining *contingency* of revelation in Christ (creatureliness of the human nature also in heaven) and the *parallelism* of sign and matter in the Lord’s Supper.»²⁵

In putting it this way, Barth also justifies his claim that Reformed theology is «dialectical theology.»²⁶ For the Reformed insistence upon the finite, creaturely nature of Christ’s humanity not only on earth but also in heaven – and the use they made of this truth in their Christology and sacramentology – allowed Barth to find his own concept of *revelation in concealment* at the very heart of their teachings. This is, I would say, an interpretive overlay but certainly an admissible one.

22 Reid 1954: 137.

23 Reid 1954: 168.

24 Gerrish, 253 (s. note 19 above).

25 Barth 1998: 283.

26 Barth 1998: 279.

B. Justification and Sanctification / Dogmatics and Ethics

Karl Barth is well known for having given Gospel priority over Law. Law is incapable of driving the sinner to Christ unless grace is already effective in its ministration – which suggests that driving the sinner to Christ is not its central purpose. The Law is a means of grace, of helping the Christian to know how to live in a way that honors God. Barth found ample reason in the Reformed tradition to think in this way.

In the Genevan Catechism of 1545, Calvin made God's gracious revelation to be the source and the unity of faith and the evangelical repentance which gives rise to obedience. Their unity is given in the fact that it is a single divine act which awakens both faith and obedience in the human to whom it is addressed. In this way, justification and the initiation of sanctification occur in the same event. In both cases, the focus of attention is the God who justifies and who sanctifies, not religious experience. Faith is «trust» in this God (a word missing from the Augsburg discussion of faith).²⁷ And «obedience» is the grateful living out of God's commands so that God might be glorified in us. For, as Calvin put it, God «created us...and placed us in the world, that he might be glorified in us.»²⁸

This is also the explanation for Barth's well-known inclusion of ethics in dogmatics. Revelation is not only an event in which we know God through God but we also receive from God direction for living. The Ten Commandments are but the chief instantiation of this wider truth. That is why Calvin treats the Apostle's Creed prior to the Ten Commandments (thereby reversing Luther's order).²⁹ It is because he understood ethics to be a task given in and with the gift of knowledge which awakens faith.

27 Barth 1998: 155.

28 Reid 1954: 91.

29 Cf. Barth 1998: 151.

Conclusion

Reformed Confessions are not «symbols» says Barth.³⁰ They do not have the same level of dignity as the early creeds. But, then, even the creeds are not irreformable. And so, the Reformed confessions do not ask for universal acceptance, however true it may be that that they seek to bear witness to that which is universally true. They are best written by particular churches, promulgated by elected representatives – so that the voice heard is the voice of *this* church. That is also why there are so many of them. It is a fundamental principle for the Reformed: «... no church shall claim authority or dominion over any other.»³¹ Their relevance and authority is provisional since the occasion for their composition is concrete and particular questions and debates. When they have fulfilled the purpose for which they are written, they become historical documents.

Still, it is never a good thing when Reformed theologians, pastors and lay people are ignorant of their history. It is never a good thing when we become «confession-less» – whether as a matter of principle or through benign neglect. The confessional tradition which gives to us our name and distinguishes us from other communions invites close study together in an effort to understand who we are, where we have come from and where we are going. Shared beliefs do not create unity; only the Holy Spirit can do that. But shared beliefs do aid us in bearing a common witness to ourselves and to the world. In its absence, there is great confusion.

That is why I have devoted my life to close study of the writings of Karl Barth and to promoting study of them in our churches. Barth's Dogmatics is serious, rigorous – and historically informed. It hits just the right note – being «confessional» without turning the confessions into Law. May we again acquire this kind of balance in our church life even today.

30 Barth 1998: 28.

31 «The French Confession of Faith, 1559» (Cochrane 1966: 155).

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Abstracts

Karl Barth's lectures on the *Reformed Confessions* were concluded nine months before launching his first version of *dogmatics*. In them, his relation to the Reformed tradition was both deepened and clarified. The thesis of this paper is that Barth understood the confessions written prior to Calvin's death in 1564 to be exercises in a form of dialectical theology which anticipated his own. Their theme was his: the God-ness of God in God's self-revelation in Christ. A possible line of criticism is announced which asks how consistent they and he could be in supporting this theme when giving room (as both did) to the metaphysics of the ancients in their shared doctrine of the one God.

Karl Barths Vorlesungen über die *Reformierten Bekenntnisschriften* wurden neun Monate vor der Abfassung seiner ersten Fassung der *Dogmatik* abgeschlossen. In ihnen wurde sein Verhältnis zur reformierten Tradition sowohl vertieft als auch geklärt. Die These dieses Artikels ist, dass Barth die vor Calvins Tod 1564 verfassten Bekenntnisschriften als Übungen in einer Form der dialektischen Theologie verstand, die seine eigene vorwegnahm. Ihr Thema war das seine: die Gott-heit Gottes in Gottes Selbstoffenbarung in Christus. Ein möglicher Kritikpunkt wird benannt. Dieser fragt, wie konsequent sie und er dieses Anliegen realisieren konnten unter der gegebenen Bedingung, dass sowohl jene Bekenntnisschriften als auch Barth selbst dieses im Medium einer – auf dem Boden der Metaphysik der Antike entworfenen – Lehre vom einen Gott zu unternehmen versuchten.

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