

# Is there a Future for "Church Dogmatics"?

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# Is there a Future for ‘Church Dogmatics’?

An Address on the Occasion  
of the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Karl Barth’s Death  
The University of Basel

It is becoming increasingly clear, I think, that when it comes to the field of dogmatic theology, two theologians tower above the rest when measured by the dual standard of rigor and comprehensiveness of thought on the one side and influence on the ecumenical church on the other: Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth. Certainly, in the part of the world in which I live and work, Karl Barth’s star has never shone so brightly. Books on his theology are being published at a dizzying rate. More essays are devoted to his treatment of doctrinal themes in the four leading English-language theological journals (taken together) than to anyone else. I refer to the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, the *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Modern Theology* and *Pro Ecclesia*. Unofficial but extremely high level ecumenical conversations on decisive points of disagreement between Barth and Roman Catholicism have been sponsored in the last two years by American Dominicans - the first on the theme of divine impassibility held at Providence College<sup>1</sup> and the second on issues surrounding the *analogy of being* at the John Paul II Center in Washington, D.C.<sup>2</sup> And «Barthians» are now increasingly to be found on the theological faculties even of evangelical institutions, which suggests that Barth’s influence is now extending even into the traditional strongholds of conservative theology in the United States.

Seen in the light of Barth’s widening influence, it might seem strange to celebrate his life and theological achievement on this occasion by asking «is there a future for ‘Church Dogmatics’ in Karl Barth’s sense of the term?» That such a question is an appropriate one to ask, however, even in the Uni-

<sup>1</sup> The papers of this conference have been published. See J. F. Keating and Th. J. White, O.P., eds., *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering* Grand Rapids 2009.

<sup>2</sup> See T.J. White, O.P., ed., *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Anti-Christ or the Wisdom of God?* Grand Rapids 2010, forthcoming.

ted States, has to do with the fact that Barth's theology has had, to date, no discernible impact on what we might call the «official» theology of any of the churches. All of the initiatives I have just described are those of individual theologians and, to the extent that they reach into church life, they tend to be ad hoc in nature. Indeed, it could be argued that the Roman Catholic Church shows more obvious respect for Barth's status as a «doctor» of the ecumenical church than do the Protestant churches.<sup>3</sup>

One of the reasons for this is to be found in the doctrinal chaos which now characterizes most of the churches of the Reformation in my country. The Lutheran churches manage to maintain greater outward solidity than do the Reformed churches, but even they find it increasingly difficult to measure their unity by a shared commitment even to the Augustana, let alone the other documents found in the Book of Concord. Within the Reformed churches, the confessions which are still «on the books» (i.e. part of the constitutional basis of church life) are treated largely as historical artifacts with little ongoing usefulness. In this situation, it is not at all clear that the work of any recent theologian (even a theologian of Barth's stature) could appreciably influence the way in which a church's «official» teachings find expression in proclamation and education. Where unity in shared beliefs has largely become a thing of the past, it is unthinkable that any theologian could attain to institutional recognition of any sort. And that certainly helps to explain why the Roman church is better positioned to listen to Barth as a «doctor» of the ecumenical church than are the Protestant churches.

And yet the individual efforts I just mentioned - as numerous and diverse as they are - are not entirely lacking in ecclesial value. The reason has to do with the changing shape of church life in the United States. Even if

<sup>3</sup> See the remarkable text published in *Osservatore Romano* (December 9, 2008) on the occasion of the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Karl Barth's death: Barth habe sich vor allem kritisch und geistreich gegen jegliche Relativierungstendenzen im Dialog der Religionen ausgesprochen. Die Theologie Barths habe mit ihrem starken Bibel- und Christusbezug das theologische Verständnis des 20. Jahrhunderts entscheidend geprägt. Auch der katholischen Kirche habe Barth zu einer Neuentdeckung ihrer Spiritualität aus dem Evangelium verholfen. Jenseits von Meinungsunterschieden hinsichtlich des sakramentalen und institutionellen Charakters der Kirche, stehe Barth für einen überkonfessionellen christlichen Denkansatz mit grosser Aktualität. In einer Zeit, in der die christliche Spiritualität ermatte und religiöse Gleichmacherei vorherrsche, besitze das Glaubensbekenntnis Karl Barths Vorbildcharakter.

«denominationalism» as we have known it over the last two centuries were to come to an end, the churches would not simply disappear. Even now, the older denominations are morphing into more congregationally-centered forms of organization - which suggests that congregations, rather than denominations, will have to be the «institutional-bearers» of the theological legacy of the Protestant Reformation in the near future, if there is to be any. And if that should prove to be the case, then individually inspired, grass roots ecumenism of the kind that is currently promoting Karl Barth's theology may well be the way of the future in churches as well.

But what, then, is «church dogmatics» - and why should it even matter that it should have a future? To answer these questions, I turn to Karl Barth.

«Church dogmatics», as Barth defined it, is both a critical and positive discipline. It consists, first of all, in critical reflection upon the church's proclamation, testing its adequacy and truth in the light of the Word of God attested in Holy Scripture. And it consists in the positive attempt to confirm, strengthen, invigorate, and vivify Church proclamation.<sup>4</sup> Such a definition then breaks open into three distinct parts: 1) the object under investigation (church proclamation), 2) the source and norm of the testing that takes place in dogmatics (Holy Scripture), and 3) the reflection itself. I would like to reflect briefly upon each part of Barth's definition in turn.

First, then: church proclamation as the object of critical scrutiny and testing. What Barth has in mind initially when he speaks of «church proclamation» is not the sermon we might have heard last Sunday. «...[I]t might be neither pertinent nor profitable for dogmatics to try to relate itself to Church preaching as delivered yesterday, the day before, or before that. Genuinely to promote the self-examination of the Church in respect to this central function [of proclamation], it will turn rather to that form of yesterday's proclamation in which the latter is already tested, criticized and corrected, i.e. the results of the history of dogmatics.»<sup>5</sup> That which has already been tested, criticized and corrected: Barth is referring here to «official» church teachings, the so-called «dogmas» which either belong to the shared witness of the Christian churches scattered throughout the world (i.e. the ancient Creeds) or which are to be found in those confessions of particular churches which constitute an appropriation of the witness of the ancient church and

<sup>4</sup> Barth, (= *CD* I/2, p.851); cf. *KD* I/2, 948f.

<sup>5</sup> Barth, *CD* I/1, p.78; cf. *KD* I/1, 80.

its expansion in relation to questions not treated by those early creeds.

It should be noticed that Barth is speaking here of subjecting the results of previous testing of the Church's message to a new round of questioning. The «dogmas» provide us with what Barth calls the «raw material»<sup>6</sup> with which dogmatics works. The «dogmas» are doctrines which have attained some level of official recognition at some point in the past. It should be noted, however, that for Protestants, unlike Catholics, there are no «dogmas» which are irreformable in principle. Not even with respect to the Nicene Creed or the Chalcedonian Formula can this be said. All such statements are reformable and their critical appropriation in any day and age will not leave them unchallenged or unchanged. But they must first be known and understood if they are to be critically appropriated and used.

Such a claim brings us once again up against the problem I described at the outset. Where a church no longer has an officially received and promulgated confession, there it would seem, there is no «raw material» in Barth's sense upon which the dogmatic theologian might critically reflect.

This is not a new problem, however. Barth already confronted it himself as early as the 1920s - and acknowledged from the outset that it was a source of some embarrassment to be seen stressing the importance of an ecclesial task which the churches themselves no longer seemed to endorse.

...the dogmatics of present-day Protestantism has been more or less left in the lurch by its churches. For the most part they do not say what church dogma is, or they do so only with enigmatic brevity, or by means of a cheap and very general reference to the confessional writings of the Reformation. They act like Nebuchadnezzar among his wise men when he wanted them to tell him not only what his dream meant but also what it was [Dan.2:1f.]. In face of the embarrassed mumbling or total silence of the modern churches about their basic statements, dogmatic theologians can only surmise that finally the churches do not want any dogmatics...<sup>7</sup>

But Barth also felt quite strongly that the fact that there was little appreciation for the dogmatic task in the churches constituted a very good reason for undertaking it. If a Reformed church, for example, no longer has a confession,

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p.77.

<sup>7</sup> K. Barth: *Unterricht in der christlichen Religion 1: Prolegomena*, 1924, ed. H. Reiffen, Zürich 1985, 50; English Translation: *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion*, vol.1, trans. by G. Bromiley, Grand Rapids MI 1990. p. 40. See also Barth, «Kirche und Theologie» in: idem, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten*, 1922-1925, pp. 655-660.

there is still nothing to prevent a Reformed theologian from doing what the church is willing to leave undone, to make careful study of the conflicts which led to the formation of the Reformed churches as a distinctive movement within the Protestant Reformation and of the confessions by means of which the theological identity of the Reformed churches was first crystallized. To know this history is to create the conditions for what we might think of as «ecclesial hermeneutics» (to which I will return in the second of my points). To do theology in a way that is informed by this knowledge is to stand in and allow oneself to be shaped by a theological tradition. Such a stance does not have to mean ignoring the needs of the present moment, obviously. But it does mean that any attempt to address the needs of the moment will be informed by a thorough acquaintance with one's own church and the history of its theology. In any event, to engage in this labor is to bear witness even to the church itself that the church too needs to take its own theological history seriously. For a church will not be characterized by a serious «theological existence» in the absence of an awareness of standing in a history, of taking responsibility for the further elaboration and/or correction of a theological tradition.

Second, the source and name of «church dogmatics»: the Word of God as attested in Holy Scripture. Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is complex and highly nuanced. At the heart of the matter lies his conviction that the Word of God (revelation as such) is identical with the living *person* of Jesus Christ. The Word of God is directly identical with Him alone; it is only *indirectly* identical with the media through which He has chosen and continues to choose to reveal Himself. These media are: first and foremost, the humanity of Jesus; and then the human words of Scripture which bear witness to Him; and, finally, a preaching which is based upon the exegesis of the Scriptural witness. With these creaturely realities, Barth says, the Word of God is indirectly identical in the event of God's speaking, in the event of God's *address* to us. But that then means that the Word of God is nowhere given to us directly. It is not ready to hand. It cannot be taken under human control; it cannot be brought into play and made to perform tasks which we humans might like to assign to it. The Word of God is not a «given» - in the sense that a finished piece of furniture standing in a room is a «given.» It is rather a «giving» - an act of God which must be undertaken anew in each new moment of our lives. God gives Himself to us in Jesus Christ through the witness of Holy Scripture in an ongoing fashion; a witness which must be ac-

tively received in each moment in response to the activity of the living God.

Here in Basel, it will be well-known that the old Franciscan church in its Barfüsserplatz (which today houses the Historical Museum) has a very unusual architectural feature. When you stand outside of it, you notice immediately that the facade is divided into three parts corresponding inside to the two side aisles on the left and on the right and a great center aisle. You also notice that the great window in the middle is perfectly centered with respect to the outer walls on the left hand and the right hand sides. And that's as it should be, one might think. But then you notice something very odd. Though the great window is in the very center of the building as measured by the outside walls, it is *not* placed in the center of that central portion of the facade. It is off center. The center of that central portion of the facade is marked by a cross near the peak of the roof - and the cross and the great window are off-line with respect to each other. The reason for this is quite simple, of course. The side aisles are not equal in width - so that centering the great window with respect to the outside walls will not allow it to be centered in the central portion of the facade. As a young man, Barth used this architectural feature to illustrate to his students in Göttingen that theology is radically dependent upon God if it is to complete its task of testing the Church's talk of God in the light of the Word of God attested in Holy Scripture. «To speak about God is to set up in human society and order and custom that which is symbolized by the unsymmetrical window at the front of many old Franciscan churches: a response, a corrective, a reminder of eternity, the great divine disruption to which alone we may attach our hopes.»<sup>8</sup> Testing the church's talk of God by the standard of the human words found in Scripture is something we humans can do very well; that is something that falls well within the range of human capabilities. But testing the church's talk of God in the light of a Word of God which comes to us in and through those human words is something that is, humanly speaking, an impossibility. It is something that only happens when and where God acts.

<sup>8</sup> Barth, *Unterricht* (Anm. 7), 59. Barth was, in truth, wrong to think that this architectural feature originated with the Franciscans and was true of all of their churches. It is true only of the Basel church - and came about through a reconstruction of that church between 1890 and 1894! But the truth claim that Barth sought to illustrate with this example retains its importance, with or without the help of the Franciscans.

The problem with a good deal of academic theology today is not that it is too philosophical, perhaps, or too devoted to ethical or social-critical analysis and not enough to the central doctrinal themes of Christian faith. Such things, where they occur, may in some cases be symptoms of a problem, but they are not the problem itself. The real problem is that much of what is done under the banner of «academic theology» would not be done differently even if all parties to the exercise agreed amongst themselves that there is no God. What Barth would have us do is to do our theology in conscious awareness of our responsibility to God, as a self-conscious act of faith and obedience and even as an act of «penitence.»<sup>9</sup>

Such talk was alienating in Barth's own day; it is even more so now. It sounds too pietistic, too naive to be at all meaningful and useful. But it is really not so strange when you think about it. Even the natural sciences are never in control of the «objects» they investigate - which is why knowledge in the sciences must constantly be supplemented, amended, corrected. The «objects» under investigation do not give themselves completely to our efforts to know them. The consequence is that revolutions in natural scientific knowledge take place from time to time.<sup>10</sup> When Barth speaks of the need for God to act if our theologizing is to reach its goal, he is speaking of the great question mark which stands on the boundary of all human attempts to know, a question mark which is not placed there by study of the limits of human knowing (subjectively considered) but by the objects of our knowing themselves and by that which transcends and grounds both the objects and the critical methods we use to investigate them. And so it is with theology.

Theology done under these conditions is a very human enterprise; broken, fragmentary, provisional, open-ended. Completed, comprehensive and perfectly integrated systems of theology are neither to be expected nor sought.

It is in the light of these conditions under which theology is done that we are to understand why Barth refers to his dogmatics as «*church* dogmatics». It is precisely the fact that theology is a risk, a venture undertaken in faith, that leads him to suggest that our attempt to hear the Word of God in and through the witness of Scripture should be carried out under the guidance

<sup>9</sup> Barth, *CDI/1*, p.22; cf. *KD I/1*, 21.

<sup>10</sup> See on this point B.L. McCormack, *Theology and Science: Karl Barth's Contribution to an Ongoing Debate*, in: idem: *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids 2008, pp.285-9.

of the Church, a guidance that takes the form (once again) of its creeds and confessions, the results of earlier testing. I noted earlier that the creeds and confessions provide us with the «raw material» which a critical dogmatics subjects to questioning. Now we learn that the creeds and confessions are *also* relatively binding guides which enable us to carry out the task of biblical exegesis. The phrase I used earlier - «ecclesial hermeneutics» - refers to an exegesis which is informed materially by the voice of the Church in the past, by its hearing of the Word of God in and through Scripture. Exegesis which is carried out under the guidance of a church is exegesis which begins with a recognition of just how difficult exegesis truly is; an exegesis which recognizes that the meaning of a biblical text is finally to be sought in relation to a subject-matter which is witnessed to by the whole of Scripture but which is not directly identical with any part of that whole.<sup>11</sup> For you see, even though there is indeed a unity to the Bible, a «center» which gives meaning to the parts, that center is not to be found in an allegedly central doctrine as so much of the older «biblical theology» has imagined. It is not to be found «on the surface» of the biblical texts at all, but rather in the living *person* Jesus Christ to whom the whole bears witness. Here again, the element of indirection is very important. Jesus Christ is not directly identical with the Bible. He remains other than the text; He stands beyond it and gives Himself to us through it. So exegesis too is a venture. And it precisely is because exegesis is a task which is constantly threatened with failure that exegetes need all the help they can get. That is why the voice of the church in the past is important.

It needs only to be added that what is envisioned here in speaking of a relatively binding authority of the church is *not* the expression of a conservative temperament.

It is the expression rather of radical need, of a poverty which Barth believes is shared by all. And the authority which Barth attaches to the Church in theology is a wholly *spiritual* authority. It is not a matter of law and cannot be

<sup>11</sup> For more on Barth's theological hermeneutics as it came to expression in his own exegetical efforts see especially, R.E. Burnett, *Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis: The Hermeneutical Principles of the Römerbrief Period* (WUNT 2/145), Tübingen 2001; B.L. McCormack, *The Significance of Karl Barth's Theological Exegesis of Philippians*, in: K. Barth, *Epistle to the Philippians* (40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition), Louisville/London 2002, pp.v-xxv.

allowed to become the basis of any sort of legalism. «We cannot», he says, «allow ourselves to be bound by the confession as by a law.»<sup>12</sup>

The authority of confessions and creeds is not an authority of the letter, but of the spirit. The creeds and confessions give us a direction in which to look, they point beyond themselves to Holy Scripture which, in turn, points us to Christ. The ecclesial authority proper to them consists in this spiritual direction, nothing more.<sup>13</sup> At the end of the day, Barth's attachment to the creeds and confessions is an exercise in a humility which seeks to honor the fathers and mothers of the faith; which seeks to hear with respect before criticizing.

Third, and finally, there is the reflection itself - reflection which, as I have said, must be both critical and positive. We have already anticipated what needs to be said here on the critical side. Barth's theology moves from Church proclamation to exegesis and back again, in a dialectical movement which (in the nature of the case) can never be regarded as «finished.» But at this point, the aperture of his lens opens up a bit and we find that it is not only the received results of yesterday's «official» teaching of the church which is being investigated, but preaching that is taking place in the present moment. The more narrow earlier definition is expanded now into a wider one. What comes into view here is a turn from the critical side of dogmatic reflection to the positive side.

Theology is offered as a service to church proclamation - and because church proclamation is accompanied by the promise that the human words in which it occurs will be made to be God's Word by the Spirit's working - theology is offered as a service to the Word of God. The goal of such service is that church proclamation will become *transparent* to the Word of God; that obstacles to a hearing of the Word in the words shall be removed and, so far as possible, the human words will be made ready and available for divine use. The critical function of dogmatic theology lies in the attempt to remove obstacles; the positive function in the re-invigoration of the Church's teaching in the present moment.

Church proclamation, you see, takes place in a concrete historical situation.<sup>14</sup> Dogmatics on its positive side seeks to aid the preacher to attain insight into what must be said and what must be left unsaid when standing between the

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *CDI/1*, p.651; cf. *KD II/1*, 731.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p.650; cf. *KD II/1*, 730f.

<sup>14</sup> Barth, *CDI/2*, pp.839-43; cf. *KD I/2*, 939-944.

Word of God attested in Scripture on the one side and the concrete situation of the congregation on the other. «A Church attitude precludes the possibility of a dogmatics which thinks and speaks, as it were timelessly.» It «excludes the possibility of a romantic dogmatics, a dogmatics which does not start honestly from the Church of the present day, but goes back more or less successfully to the past and critically or uncritically tries to speak from the standpoint of a past century of the Church.»<sup>15</sup>

Barth's view is that dogmatics can best perform this positive role through an ordered reflection on the contents of the Word of God as attested in Scripture which takes the form of *loci communes* - the presentation of dogmatic theology in the form of loosely organized common themes which arise, with equally validity and importance, out of the Word of God attested in Scripture.<sup>16</sup> Barth likens a dogmatics constructed in this way to a wheel whose opening at the center is left open and can only be filled by the activity of the living Word.<sup>17</sup> The *loci* are then likened to the spokes which radiate from the periphery of that open center, each possessing a certain independence in the sense that no one of them can come fully into their own if it is made subservient to another theme.<sup>18</sup> The point of this vivid image is to insist that theology should avoid the urge to system building which finds expression in the elevation of a particular doctrine to the level of an a priori principle and seeks to order all other doctrines to it.

I will leave it as an open question whether even Barth was able to resist this temptation in the long run; whether he did not, in his later years at least, make Christology to be a central doctrine of the kind he rejected in *CD I/2*.

I will also leave aside the even more important question of whether this is such a bad thing; whether there might not be other ways to insist upon the methodological importance of the activity of the living Word than through the use of the image of the wheel (and the doctrinal egalitarianism it seeks to promote). I turn instead to some concluding thoughts.

Barth's understanding of *Church Dogmatics* is now before us in outline

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp.841-2; vgl. *KD I/2*, 940f.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.870: «We must return to the method of the *Loci*, the method of Melancthon and also of Calvin, which was wrongly set aside as unscholarly by the more progressive of the contemporaries of J. Gerhard and A. Polanus.» Cf. *KD I/2*, 973.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.869; cf. *KD I/2*, 972.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.873; cf. *KD I/2*, 977.

form. The question then returns: is there a future for a dogmatics of this kind - and why should it even matter? My answer to the latter question is that it is not clear that any church can long survive in this world if it has no shared, well-articulated faith to confess. A church which lacks such a faith is at best lame and withered and quite possibly not a church at all. So does dogmatics in Barth's sense have a future?

The answer in my own context is clearly «yes.» Indeed, the only kind of theology which can find a sizable audience in the States today is a *churchly* theology - a theology, like Barth's, which seeks to invigorate the teachings and the practices of a church. That is true not only of the books which are written by seminary professors like myself. It is also true of the books written by those teaching at our great Divinity Schools, those institutions which function like seminaries (in making the preparation of ministers to be their central task) but which are attached to universities. Their audience is the same as our own. Departments of religion also exist in our universities, of course, to promote the phenomenological and comparative study of religion as a dimension of human life in this world. But they have no connection to the Divinity schools, let alone the seminaries. They remain an enterprise apart - and constantly threatened with downsizing and/or incorporation into another humanistic discipline in times of economic recession. And the reason for this is that those interested in what they do remains a relatively small number. The situation is different in Europe and the United Kingdom, obviously. Here, theology has long been a university-based discipline. And the differing functions performed by Divinity schools and departments of religion in the States tend today to be blended here, often being carried out within the same university departments.

Whether such a blending of tasks can continue in European universities in the long run is a question for Europeans to answer. My hope would be that ecclesial dogmatics in the style of Barth will continue to find a home in European universities as well. If that should not prove possible, then the chasm which often seems to separate Europe from the United States will likely become wider.

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*Abstract*

'Church Dogmatics' in Karl Barth's sense is both a critical and a positive exercise. It consists in critical reflection upon the proclamation of the Church, i.e. the attempt to test its adequacy in the light of a fresh hearing of the Word of God as attested in Holy Scripture, in order then to reconstruct Christian doctrinal affirmation in ways more responsible to God's Self-revelation and more immediately relevant to the situation of the Church in the present. This essay analyzes the task of theology so defined in three steps: 1) the 'object' of theology, 2) the source and norm of theology, and 3) the reflection itself. It concludes with an expression of hope that theology in our day will continue to serve the needs of the churches and not of the academy alone.