

NOTES

THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: KARL BARTH ON THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

No one will deny that the root ecumenical question is the nature of the Church. It is possible to deal with and even to liquidate certain surface differences between the churches; yet, since the separation is essentially ecclesiological, Christians of various persuasions find themselves worlds apart in their attempts to answer the question, what is the Church?

The fact, therefore, that Karl Barth makes a systematic attempt to answer this question is not without importance; for this present-day Swiss Neo-Calvinist theologian certainly represents something serious in contemporary Protestant thought. Although it might be somewhat of an exaggeration to say that all Protestant theology today is defined either in accord with or in opposition to the theology of Karl Barth, nevertheless, as a contemporary spokesman for that "magisterium of the university professors" which is characteristic of Protestantism from its very beginnings, the theologian of Basel holds a position which is scarcely rivaled by any other Protestant thinker at the present time.

When the mystery of the Church is the topic of discussion, whether or not from the point of view of Karl Barth, certain difficulties will be encountered. Ecclesiology is a "derived" system, in the sense that it is dependent upon other theological principles. Immediately primary among these, of course, is the doctrine concerning Christ, because it is with the Church of Christ that we are concerned. The presupposition, therefore, is that the question, what, or rather who, is Christ? is answered, before an attempt is made to ask, what is the Church?

Another difficulty consists in this, that any systematic treatment of the mystery of the Church is bound to be synthetic, that is, it must embrace many facets of the theological discipline. It is impossible to say, for example, that ecclesiology is either solely dogmatic or moral. It all depends on whether the consideration is directed toward the structure or the life of the Church. Again, in either case, a complete ecclesiology must draw upon several of the tracts which go to make up either of these two parts of theology. This is just as true in the thought of Karl Barth as it is in the thought of a disciple of St. Thomas.

Finally, those who have been born and/or nurtured in the Catholic tradition may find it strange to be moving in the thought system of a theologian who is not only Protestant but Neo-Protestant. It was probably true in the

sixteenth century to a certain extent, and it is certainly true now to a great extent, that, although Protestant and Catholic theologians do use identical terms, the ideas which these terms express are not the same. Therefore, it is always necessary to know the supposition of such words as "faith," "predestination," etc. Otherwise, there is the risk that we not only disagree with the theology of such a man as Barth, but even misunderstand his thought completely. Moreover, since he is Neo-Protestant, terms such as those mentioned above (and others) cannot, without examination, be taken as standing for the same realities for which they stood in the minds of the first Reformers. Such seems to be the history of modern thought, as well as of Protestantism.

The following is the order to be followed in this brief consideration of the thought of Karl Barth on the nature of the Church. The first part will be an exposition of Barth's doctrine. Its sources will be enumerated and discussed briefly; then his own thought concerning the Church will be delineated as to its place in the whole system, the definition he elaborates, and the properties which he designates. The second, critical part will include a line-up of principles to be used, and a discussion of the points which seem to be at issue. In this latter part, i.e., the critique, we will be able to show that Karl Barth's theory concerning the nature of the Church is really destructive of the communion (communication) which belongs to the Church by its very definition. From this we can therefore conclude that the theory does justice neither to the full revelation of God nor to the nature of man himself.

BARTH'S DOCTRINE ON THE CHURCH

*Sources of Barth's Ecclesiology*¹

There seem to have been several crucial moments in the history of Protestantism. The first, of course, was the break that Luther and Calvin (*et al.*) made with traditional Catholicism. The Protestant world was able to subsist on the fare provided by the first Reformers as long as the world at large was dominated by the same thought patterns. When, however, the rationalist movement began to hold such great attraction for the mind of Western man, it appears that at least some segments of Protestantism made certain adaptations. These modifications, which are best exemplified in the thought of the German Lutheran, Friedrich Schleiermacher, would seem to constitute the second crucial moment in the history of Protestantism. Finally, today,

¹ From the outset it ought to be said that Fr. Jerome Hamer's treatment of this whole question offers the student an ample opportunity to penetrate Barth's thought: *Karl Barth*, tr. D. M. Maruca (Westminster, Md., 1962). On the present question, see pp. 139-57.

it would appear, we are witness of another modification; but the proportions of these changes are difficult to assess at such close range.

To go back to the beginnings of the movement, it is well known that the ecclesiological theories of Luther and Calvin, while manifesting certain differences, do proceed along the same general lines. For Luther, the Church is composed of those men who are "justified by faith alone." It is the "society of saints," where the supposition of the word "saints" is those who put their trust altogether in the merits of Jesus Christ. Likewise, it is common knowledge that John Calvin conceived the Church as being the "society of the predestined." Whereas for Luther faith, or rather trust, is the fundamental requisite for membership in the Church, Calvin's idea is that Church membership is founded altogether in predestination, that mysterious election of God by which he segregates some men and makes them share in the blessings earned by Christ, while some others, the reprobate, he positively rejects and destines that they be damned.

For both Luther and Calvin, however, the Church is visible in virtue of the Word that is preached and the (two) sacraments that are rightly administered. The difference in their theories concerning the Church is that the true and invisible Church of Martin Luther is contained within the visible Church of the Word and the sacraments; it is a secret church within the Church (*ecclesiuncula*). The true and invisible Church of John Calvin extends beyond the boundaries of the visible Church, because God's predestination cannot be limited by either the preached Word or the sacraments. Notwithstanding this, however, Calvin's true Church is also secret.

It is this secrecy or privacy of the Church as conceived by the first Reformers which seems to be of paramount importance, because it is altogether formative of a Protestant tradition. Even though Luther was the one who emphasized the subjective certitude of trusting faith, and Calvin affirmed that the eternal predestination of God was quite immutable, so that a man could feel himself to have been chosen, nevertheless, in the Church, as conceived by both these Reformers, there is little mention of the communion of faith and community of our election in Jesus Christ. Salvation is an affair of the individual, whether it be faith or predestination which is the key to the understanding of the mystery; and the fact that there is a "society of saints" or of the "predestined" does not itself seem to be essential to the mystery.

This isolation of man—even though he belong to that "association" which is called the Church—is not overcome in the thought of a man who is Barth's ancestor more immediately, Friedrich Schleiermacher. In the early nineteenth century this man attempted to cement together Protestantism and

rationalist trends. His doctrine concerning the Church may be summed up as follows: (1) Luther was correct in affirming that faith is the principle of salvation; but it is necessary to understand this faith as a religious experience, a "feeling" of total dependence upon God, who is the Ground of Being. The man who has had this experience is the "religious" man. (2) The Church is made up of the collection of men who have had this experience, i.e., who have imitated Christ in effectively experiencing their entire dependence upon God, as the God-man evidently did. Again, however, this experience is incommunicable; the members of the Church remain alone, even though they are perhaps one according to a unity of likeness.

These seem, then, to be the principal sources of Barth's thought on the Church: Luther's society of those who trust completely in the merits of Christ; Calvin's society of those who have been elected and who, indeed, have known this election to be altogether irrevocable; Schleiermacher's association of men who have had the common religious experience of feeling a total dependence on God, the Ground of Being. These three distinctive sources seem to have in common a certain individualism whereby the communion of the Church, i.e., the real communication among the members, is weakened. At least it is not made evident through the manner in which the Church is defined by these three Protestant theologians.

Barth's Development of Reformation Doctrine on the Church

First, what is the locus of ecclesiology in Barth's system? There are several places from which we might derive Barth's own thought concerning the Church, because he has treated this subject explicitly on several occasions. There is, however, only a single work, his *Church Dogmatics*, in which we can see the context in which his ecclesiology is properly developed.² This, in summary fashion, is what he seems to say. The function of the theologian is, in general, to make a critical appraisal of the preaching of the Church, with Holy Scripture as the ultimate criterion of judgment. In making this criticism the theologian finds that it revolves around the following points: (1) the Word of God, conceived of as (a) the altogether free activity of God, who is wholly other (*totaliter aliter*); (b) Christ, as the God-man, i.e., as the man

² The following are the principal texts which should be consulted for Barth's own treatment of the doctrine on the Church: *Church Dogmatics 4: The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Part 1 (New York, 1956) pp. 643-739; "The Holy Spirit and the Gathering of the Christian Community"; "The Church—the Living Congregation," in *The Universal Church in God's Design* (London, 1949) pp. 67-76; *La nature et la forme de l'église* (Lausanne, 1948); "The Church, Its Unity, Holiness and Universality," in *Dogmatics in Outline* (London, 1949) pp. 141-48; "The Concept of the Church," in *Christianity Divided*, ed. D. J. Callahan et al. (New York, 1961) pp. 153-71.

who stands in our place beneath the simultaneous *judgment* of God's Word upon sinful man and *justification* of God's Word concerning man as a creature of God; (c) the Scriptures themselves. (2) The sin of man, which seems to be, according to Barth, the attempt to be religious, i.e., to experience in any way, on his own account, that God *is* altogether "other." (3) The justification of man, which takes place at the moment that a man is assumed into the judging-justifying Word of God. This moment is called the "event of faith." If, then, the "sin of man" be symbolized by a horizontal line, and the Word of God in Christ (and through the Scriptures) as a vertical one, the point at which they intersect represents the moment of justification. We shall see that, according to Barth, this moment or event is constitutive of the Church, to the extent that the doctrine concerning the Church is nothing more than a consideration of man insofar as he has been justified in Christ. This seems to be the sense of what Barth says in the following passage: "In the Christian Church we have to do with *man*, his history, existence and activity in this peculiar but provisional form."³

When, therefore, it is said that the Church is the "work of the Holy Spirit," the meaning is that (1) the subject being considered in ecclesiology is man, and (2) the formality under which this consideration proceeds is his justification, that "peculiar but provisional form of his existence." This gives us an idea of the place in which ecclesiology fits into the theological synthesis of Karl Barth.

Second, what is Barth's definition of the Church? Any genuine attempt to be theological will respect not only the substance of God's revelation, but also the manner in which God has revealed Himself to mankind. Thus it is that in the theology of the Church, as in many other parts of theology, we must begin with terms that are symbolic or figurative. In this case the revelation concerning the Church involves several figures, but the most important of them all seems to be that one according to which the Church is called the "body of Christ." Our method in considering Barth's definition of the mystery of the Church, therefore, will follow these lines: we shall see what he has to say about this Pauline figure of the Church, and then we shall consider the idea which he derives from this figure.

Here we shall let Barth speak for himself, first of all, concerning the concept of the "body of Christ." A very general statement introduces us into the topic: "The community is the earthly-historical form of existence of Jesus Christ himself, . . . *his body*, created and continually renewed by the awakening power of the Holy Spirit."⁴ Two other statements are explicative of the sense in which Barth takes this doctrine.

³ *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 643.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 661.

... The community ... is only the arrow which points to the unity of the many which is grounded and—although hidden—actual in the fact that He [Christ] is the Mediator and Substitute and Representative of all men.⁵

... The community is not *made* the body of Christ or its members of this body by this event, by the Spirit of Pentecost, by the fullness of his gifts, by the faith awakened by Him, by the visible, audible and tangible results of the preaching and receiving of the Gospel, let alone by baptism and the Lord's Supper (as so-called Sacraments). It *is* the body, and its members *are* members of this body in Jesus Christ, and his election from all eternity. And it became his body, they became his members, in the fulfillment of their eternal election in His death on the cross of Golgotha, proclaimed in his resurrection from the dead.⁶

It seems certain that Barth is speaking here of the *visible* community, that is, the congregation of those who are gathered together to listen to the word of God. He says, on the one hand, that this visible community is only an "arrow," i.e., a sign, which points to the truth that many (may we say "all"?) are the object of God's love in Christ. The universal election of God (which is at least implied in this text) is, as he says, hidden; nevertheless, it is actual, i.e., in Christ, who mediates and substitutes for all men, and represents them.

On the other hand, however, Barth says that the community is not *made* the body of Christ by an event that takes place in history, i.e., which is discernible to us. Again, in Jesus Christ election has taken place; and therefore there is a sense in which it is true that the body of Christ, which is the Christian community, exists from all eternity. This is the mind of Barth! According to him, therefore, the Church as the ("mystical") body of Christ is altogether identical with Christ, exists with Him, from all eternity (as he says), and is not constituted by any concrete historical event. Nevertheless, it *is* "continually renewed by the awakening power of the Holy Spirit."

It is against this background that other statements, in which Karl Barth elaborates what comes close to being a "real" definition of the Church, must be interpreted. The first of these statements is a general introduction into his way of thinking: "The Church is the living community of the living Christ, a *dynamic* community of men whom God makes to live the life of grace, whom He directs through His Word and His Spirit, in view of the kingdom."⁷ Much more specific, however, is the following description:

The Church *is* the congregation [*Gemeinde*, i.e., worshiping community] ... [and this, in turn] is an *event* [*Ereignis*] ... which consists in gathering together ... those

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 665.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 667.

⁷ *La nature et la forme de l'église*, p. 76; cited by C. Journet, *L'Eglise du Verbe incarné* 2 (Paris, 1951) 1144.

men and women whom the living Lord chooses and calls to be witnesses to the victory [of Christ]. [This event is one] by which certain people are differentiated from others, . . . in which the absolute sovereignty of Jesus Christ . . . finds its proper answer and response in the perfect freedom of obedience of those who have been called, . . . in which the witness of the apostles and prophets to Jesus Christ, deposited in Scripture, . . . becomes present, effective and fruitful, . . . in which the communion of the Holy Ghost also establishes . . . a human fellowship, derived from the acceptance of the Word of Jesus Christ in and through the witness of the Bible.⁸

In the light of what has been said previously about Barth's concept of the Church as the body of Christ, it is possible to sum up what appears to be the meaning of these statements. It has been affirmed that the Church exists from all eternity in Christ, and that the visible community is only a sign of this universal election of all men. Now it is said that this visible community itself is an event, i.e., there are no principles according to which it has continuous existence in time. If, therefore, we see the doctrine of Barth as a sort of development of Reformation ideas, it would seem that he is affirming that the faith of which Luther speaks as the foundation of the Church is an event in which a given community "sees" or "is conscious of" the eternal election of all men in Jesus Christ. This event takes place—it must take place—according to the will of God when the word of God which is biblical is preached and heard. Finally, although there is no continuity (structure) to the Church, still the communion of the Holy Ghost does bear fruit in what Barth calls a "human fellowship." The fellowship or communion is a direct result of the acceptance of the "word of God in Jesus Christ and through the witness of the Bible." In our critique we shall return to this idea, because it seems to be paramount in importance.

Third, what are the "properties" of the Church according to Barth? There is, in the *Church Dogmatics*, a text which is, at least in appearance, a succinct summary of Barth's mind concerning these properties of the Church, i.e., that she be one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. These are his words:

All four predicates describe the one being of the Christian community. But we can and should read and understand them as mounting to a climax. *Una* describes its singularity. *Sancta* describes the particularity which underlies this singularity. *Catholica* describes the essence in which it manifests and maintains itself in this particularity and singularity. And finally, *apostolica* does not say anything new, in relation to these three definitions, but describes with remarkable precision the concrete spiritual criterion which enables us to answer the question whether and to what extent in this or that case we have or have not to do with the one holy Catholic Church.⁹

⁸ "The Church—the Living Congregation," p. 68.

⁹ *Church Dogmatics* 4/1, 712.

Even read in the light of what we know to be Barth's doctrine of the Church as the body of Christ (existing eternally in Christ's election) and as the event of faith (in which the Word of God assumes this local congregation, so that in common these people may be conscious of God's blessing upon the human race in Christ), this description of the properties of the Church does not offer much new insight. The only remarkable thing about the entire passage seems to be the reference in one of the last clauses to the "spiritual criterion," which is evidently the biblical word.

This expository section may be concluded with a summary of what appears to be Barth's idea of the Church of Christ. Concretely, it is the local worshipping community (with no distinction between priest and laity indicated) which is "touched" by the Word of God, through the preaching of the biblical word, and is thus, in common, made conscious of the eternal election of all men in Jesus Christ, and which thereby becomes an "arrow," i.e., a sign of this election. Finally, he affirms that this common realization or consciousness founds a communion or fellowship among the members of the community.

CRITICAL REMARKS CONCERNING BARTH'S ECCLESIOLOGY

It has already been suggested that this reconsideration of Barth's doctrine on the Church will be centered upon a single point, namely, the notion of communion and/or communication. Still, it would seem feasible that in the beginning an attempt be made to compare his ecclesiology as a whole with a theory of the Church which might be called Thomistic, and which, therefore, is in accord with Catholic tradition.

One theme that is at least implicit in the biblical revelation, and which is certainly the object of the explicit teaching of some of the Fathers of the Church, is that the Church is a new creation, of which Christ, the Incarnate Word, is author. The meaning which underlies this theme is that the grace of Christ is the immediate principle from which the Church's very being is derived. In His Mystical Body, outside of which there is no salvation, everything depends on Him.

The doctrine concerning the Church will, therefore, have this as a sort of ruling principle. For example, if there be found any subsisting perfection in the Church (any continuous existence in time, any structure), it will be altogether dependent on Christ. If there be any distinction among the members of the community, in virtue of which there is any "vertical" communication and interaction, this distinction must be based upon the wisdom and power of Christ. Finally, if there be any permanent principles of government in the Church, any mediation, this also is quite dependent on Christ, who is the unique Mediator.

The Catholic definition of the Church will be derived from the same symbols as the definition of any theological system of which biblical revelation is the source: the scriptural images which are the foundation of Catholic tradition, such as the body-figure. Each of these figures, and they are several, will be subjected to the analogy of faith, that is, the criterion furnished by the credal statements of the Catholic faith, in order that the realities which are expressed in metaphorical language may be understood.

In other words, through an interpretation of these symbols or figures according to Catholic tradition, we should (in a sound ecclesiology) attempt to perceive how the visible structures of the Church correspond to what is at least implicit in the figurative expression. The conclusion that is reached through such an analysis is that there must exist in the Church an "articulated activity" according to which members who have different status (i.e., who are distinguished one from the other according to the office they have to perform in the Church) do a particular work, for which each is competent, so that "the whole body . . . harmoniously joined and knit together . . . derives its energy in the measure each part needs. . . . In this way the body grows and builds itself up through love" (Eph 4:16).

In thus defining the Church, however, in discerning that this articulation of the various members is an expression of Catholic unity, and finally, in seeing that the principles of government in the Church (being hierarchical) are also principles of holiness and apostolic life, we are obviously speaking a language which does not jibe with that employed by Karl Barth. There is apparent a certain disparity of principles. If it be granted that the starting point of the two analyses is the same, scil., the biblical images concerning the Church, it must be equally admitted that the interpretations of these images are radically contrary one to another.

One method of dealing with such a situation would be to label the interpretation which is at odds with Catholic tradition with a "theological note" and have done with it. This is the way St. Irenaeus handled the Gnostic question. There are reasons, however, which militate against applying this method here. True, the corpus of Barth's thought is outside Catholic tradition, and the factors which have influenced his presentation of the doctrine are, many of them, heterodox. It is also incontestable, however, that some of his insights are not merely defensible, but also express truths which must be integrated into a sound and complete ecclesiology. It may be said, even further, that at one or another date in the history of Catholic theology these truths have not always been enunciated with all the clarity that is demanded by their presence in the apostolic deposit of the faith.

An example of such a point is Barth's contention that the Church consists in an event (*Ereignis*), and that save for the continuous renewing acting

of the Holy Spirit, the Church would fall back into nothingness. This is obviously true; and it is, therefore, a Catholic truth, provided that it be transferred from the sphere of the Church's structure to the sphere of activity or life.

Even though it is certain that Christ gave continuity or subsistence to the communion of love which is the Church, it must be recognized and often affirmed that the life of this communion is in intimate dependence on Him who is its immediate cause. The activity of the Church, and even the hierarchical principles of this activity, are only effective insofar as they are enlivened by the Spirit who is the soul of the Church. This Spirit is the "promise of the Father" and the "Spirit of Christ," which truth, in turn, indicates that these activities and their principles are directly related to Him who is the author of the Church, Christ Himself. In His sacred humanity he never ceases to support every movement which takes place in this communion of love. This was true of the Pentecost event, and it is equally true of the Eucharistic event, which is the activity of the Church par excellence. The dependence is such that to take away this influx—an impossible supposition, because of Christ's promise to be with the Church to the end of time—would be to destroy the Church herself, and this at any moment. She never stands by herself in the autonomy of complete independence; her need of support, as Christ's bride, is constant. In fact, it is this image of the Church that expresses best, perhaps, her indigence. Her Lord and Master delivered Himself for her sake, once and for all; but the outpouring of His saving love is necessary all along in order that she be "cleansed of all blemish or wrinkle or any such thing."

Therefore, when the question is asked: Is Catholic tradition correct in affirming that the Church does have an existence which is somewhat fixed and stable, or is Barth right in stating that the Church is an altogether dynamic community? a distinction must be brought to bear. The Church *is* a created reality; but the Church is a *created* reality. By this is signified that the Body of Christ does have a mystical existence, but this existence, as created, is upheld at every moment by the wisdom and the power of her Lord, Jesus Christ.

This point, moreover, brings us to the topic which has been referred to as of paramount importance in the ecclesiology of Barth (or any other theologian), namely, the idea of, and the very possibility of, communion among or communication between the members of the Church. That this idea is germane to the Catholic doctrine concerning the Church should be quite evident. There are two ways of looking at this truth: in its immediate principle and in the consequences which flow from it. On the one hand, this

notion of the Church as a communion of love seems to be based on the truth that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church. This being true, since the Holy Spirit *is* Love, it must be said that a communion of love is the mysterious reality (the *res*) of this "prime sacrament" (*Ur-Sakrament*), the Church. On the other hand, the consequence of saying that the Church is a communion of love is the conclusion that the members of the Church are perfected insofar as they are brought out of the isolation which is their primordial status, to a sharing which is the communication of self to or with other persons. This communication is made possible and realized by the healing and transforming grace of Christ in the Church. Both the healing and the transformation are altogether necessary, because the sinful state of mankind has so encompassed man in isolation, which is merely the result of man's being possessed of unrealized potentialities for communication, that sin-scarred man comes to experience even a positive revulsion for this communication with others.

The question which must be posed now is as follows: Does the Reformation doctrine of the Church, and does, in particular, the Barthian idea of the Church do justice to this notion of communion? Does the doctrine itself promote communion (regardless of what takes place in a Protestant community in spite of the doctrine; or in a "Barthian" community in spite of Barthianism), so that the Church is *understood* as a Holy Communion, a communion of love?

To be sure, Barth explicitly affirms that the event of faith in the worshipping community provides the climate for human fellowship; but the basis for this statement in his own system is difficult to discern. It would seem that the unity of the community in the event of faith, as described by Barth himself (i.e., the common recognition of a group of people worshipping together, in other words, listening to the word of God being preached), is at best a unity of likeness among the members of the community. They do not have a life in common, the life of grace, because, as Barth himself teaches, man cannot share in the life of God, who is wholly other.

What appears to be involved here is an outlook which is characteristic of Protestantism in general, but which is reflected in the thought of Karl Barth in a peculiar way. The reasons for this outlook are, to be sure, not immediately evident, and merit a more direct investigation than is possible in this paper. Still, the truth is that God and man are conceived of as completely estranged one from the other. The otherness of God is not something that can be overcome, not even by God Himself, it is so radical. At the root, therefore, in relation to God, men have in common only their otherness, i.e., their isolation from God. In a sense, this must be the object of the recognition

which Barth calls the "event of faith." This outlook would seem, reasonably, to postulate that men too remain estranged one from another.

The characteristic difference, therefore, between the Barthian concept of the Church and that of Catholic tradition is a difference which is felt most of all in terms of the opposition between the isolation of the Barthian man and the communion into which the true member of the Church enters. On the one hand, we are dealing with a man whose act of faith is not his own act, for whom it is absurd even to attempt to be in communion with others, since he is estranged from his truest self. It seems quite certain that this is but another way of expressing that Lutheran pessimism about human nature to which Cardinal Cajetan refers in John Osborne's play about Luther: "How will men find God if they are left to themselves, each man abandoned and only known to himself!" On the other hand, in the Catholic tradition, we are dealing with man truly conceived of, open to the grace of God, able to be healed, even though this healing process may be long and painful. We are concerned with man as having already entered into the status of communion with God and with other men. This communion seems to be impossible to conceive according to the ecclesiological principles of Karl Barth.

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