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Karl Barth and the Analogy of Grace

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Introduction

When one thinks about the analogy of grace today one immediately thinks of the theology of Karl Barth who famously argued for the analogy of faith and opposed the analogy of being. Of course this did not mean that for Barth there was no analogy between God and creatures on the level of being; rather it meant that for him one could not read off any analogy between God and creatures by examining human history, psychology, philosophy or religion. Because all of Barth's theology is an attempt to understand who God

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² See www.stjohns.edu.

is and who we are and what we are called and empowered by God to be on the basis of God's own free and gracious movement toward us in his Word and Spirit, he consistently argued that all knowledge of God which takes place in the church continually must find its certainty in Jesus Christ himself who is the finger of God who enlightens us as to the meaning of the word God itself. Hence,

Wherever there is knowledge of Jesus Christ, it takes place in the power of His witness, in the mystery and miracle, the outpouring and receiving, of the gift of the Holy Spirit . . . He is the *doctor veritatis* . . . the finger of God which opens blind eyes and deaf ears for the truth . . . which causes the reason of man, so concerned about its limitations and so proud within those limitations, to receive the truth notwithstanding its limitations . . . He is the basis of the humility and resoluteness of those who know by His gift.³

It would not be too far-fetched to say of Barth's theology that all he has to say about God and us is shaped by his understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, by grace alone and therefore by Christ alone.⁴

But Barth is not the only contemporary theologian whose thought was shaped by the analogy of grace. Thomas F. Torrance wrote his doctoral dissertation on the doctrine of grace in the apostolic fathers and Torrance's entire theology is marked by his opposition to what he called conditional salvation. This thinking applied also to his own theological epistemology so that he, like Barth, consistently argued that our knowledge of God is secure only because God himself has empowered us and now empowers us to know him from a center in himself in the incarnation of his Son and in the outpouring of his Spirit.⁵

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. in 13 pts. (hereafter *CD* referred to in text), Vol. IV, Pt. 2, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1967), 126.

⁴ See T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (London: SCM Press, 1965), 163.

⁵ While Torrance maintained that everyone has some natural knowledge of God, he insisted that we cannot rely on this natural knowledge of God without coming into conflict with who God has revealed himself to be in Jesus Christ. For Torrance grace can neither be understood nor had cheaply because it is costly both to God and to us since God's love of us cost the sacrifice of his Son on the cross and it costs us every form of self-reliance that is part and parcel of our humanity marked by sin and death. It is bad news if anyone preaches or teaches that we are saved only *if* we repent and believe, because any such teaching ultimately places the weight of salvation subtly back on our own shoulders, when the teaching of the Gospel is clear that Christ has taken that burden upon himself in order to enable us to be truly free. [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In this article I would like to explore the thinking of Barth in order to show how grace functions for him by allowing him to speak with certainty about our knowledge of God, but without basing that certainty in any way on our own experiences or thinking. Any such self-grounded theology would be a form of self-justification which has been set aside by the grace of God's revelation in his Word and Spirit. My hope is that those who follow Barth's thinking on this subject will see how vital it is that all analogies for knowing God are shaped by grace through faith. Let us begin with Barth's understanding of grace as a mode of being of God himself and then proceed to see how this thinking manifests itself in his understanding of our knowledge of God by grace, through faith and by means of revelation.

God's Being as One who is Gracious

It is important to realize that for Barth "grace is an inner mode of being in God Himself" (*CD II/1*, 353). It is that mode of being in which God is freely and favorably inclined toward fellowship "unconditioned by any unworthiness or opposition in the latter [us]" (*CD II/1*, 353). But Barth distances himself from the Roman Catholic view which he believed made "an *a priori* and decisive definition of grace as a supernatural gift, and then [proceeded] to characterise it as a third element mediatorial between God and His creatures". While Barth maintains that grace is definitely a gift and indeed a supernatural gift since it epitomizes creation, revelation, reconciliation and redemption, it is nonetheless no mediatorial element between God and us because it is God himself directly present, creating fellowship between himself and us. In this regard Barth says the "archetypal form" of God's grace is the incarnation of the Word of God in Jesus Christ (*CD II/1*, 354).⁶ In him there is "no third mediating element between God and man". Any such view would be for Barth a "gnosticising conception of grace". In sum

See esp. Thomas F. Torrance, *God and Rationality*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), "Cheap and Costly Grace," 56-88.

⁶ In *CD IV/2*, Barth shows how the Word incarnate in Jesus Christ turns toward us in the Holy Spirit so that the message concerning the incarnation reaches people in the form of the apostolic witness "and declares to them the free grace of God . . . sets them in the freedom of obedience . . . The Holy Spirit is the coming of the man Jesus, who is the Son of God, to other men who are not this but with whom He still associates" (128).

then, for Barth, grace denotes “the manner in which God, in His essential being, turns toward us” (*CD II/1*, 354). This is why Barth could emphatically say that

If we wish to state who Jesus Christ is, in every separate statement we must also state or at least make clear—and inexorably so—that we are speaking of the Lord of heaven and earth, who neither has nor did have any need of heaven or earth or man, who created them out of free love and according to His very own good pleasure, who adopts man, not according to the latter’s merit, but according to His own mercy, not in virtue of the latter’s capacity, but in virtue of his own miraculous power . . . He is the King of all kings just when He enters into the profoundest hiddenness in ‘meekness of heart.’ This has to be said in every statement we make about Jesus Christ (*CD I/2*, 133).

It is, then, Barth insists further, a “turning, not in equality, but in condescension”. Because God alone is truly transcendent, God alone exists in such a way that he does not stand in equality with anything outside of himself. This is important because in grace God turns in a saving way to creatures who need his mercy—creatures who have absolutely no claim on this love and mercy of God in creating fellowship with us. Barth insists that grace is not then a turning of God as an answer to something meritoriously performed by the creature. Any such idea implies a relationship of equality, however partial, between Creator and creatures. Since grace is here understood as condescension, no idea whatsoever that God might owe his grace to us may intrude here. God’s condescension toward us

is free, i.e., unconditioned, i.e., conditioned only by His own will. His inclination, good will and favour which he turns towards His partner in this act of condescension is a sheer gift which something necessarily called forth by it can neither precede nor follow, for, whatever follows it has its ground in this prevent cause. It is thus a gift in this strictest sense of the term (*CD II/1*, 355).

In his doctrine of Reconciliation, Barth contends that God “did not need to continue to love the sinful world of men” but that he has actually done so that “the atonement made in Jesus Christ will be seen to be wholly an act of the grace of God . . .” (*CD IV/1*, 80). There is therefore no other vantage point from which we can know God because it is here in the atonement that we are dealing with God

himself making known who he is and who we are as those who are his creatures. God's grace therefore is his triumph on our behalf over our own opposition to him (*CD IV/1*, 82). That is why for Barth "What God does in this assumption of human being into unity with His own is of course, as an *opus ad extra*, as an act of grace of God to His creature, as His divine action in temporal history, an application and exercise and revelation of the divine humility" (*CD IV/2*, 42).

Grace: an inner mode of God's being

But if grace is an inner mode of God's being in himself, how can Barth present grace as a turning toward creatures in this way without implying that it is part of God's very nature to seek and create fellowship between himself and us? In answering this difficult question, the first point to keep in mind is that Barth thinks of God's grace as an act of love in which God is free in himself *and* for us. In other words while Barth begins speaking of the divine perfections with the perfections of God's love, he is not isolating or separating God's love from his holiness and from his freedom. God's loving us is an expression of his free love within his own eternal triune being. God does not in fact need us in order to be the one who loves because God alone is truly transcendent. Thus Barth can describe the atoning act of God for us as a "sovereign act which God did not owe to Himself or to the world or any man, on which no one could bank, yet which has in fact taken place and been made manifest" (*CD IV/1*, 83). Hence, the "grace of God" is "exclusively His grace, His sovereign act, His free turning to man as new and strange every morning" (*CD IV/1*, 84). This is a frequently repeated insight of Barth's which safeguards God's freedom in his love. And it is based within the Trinity itself: "In the inner life of God, as the eternal essence of Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the divine essence does not, of course need any actualisation . . . Even as the divine essence of the Son it did not need His incarnation . . . to become actual" (*CD IV/2*, 113). In the context of his doctrine of God, Barth cites a number of important biblical texts to stress that grace means election and that if we were saved by works, grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11:5f.). But Barth goes even further to say that those who receive God's grace are not just unworthy but "utterly unworthy" because we know from revelation that God is gracious to sinners and that his good will for us is "unimpeded" by our sin and resistance. This means that

nothing we can do will weaken or render inoperative God's grace. Grace not only presupposes this human opposition, but it actually triumphs over it.

Once again it is clear that the determining factor in Barth's thought here is the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ in such a way that his resurrection from the dead demonstrated God's triumph over human sin as displayed in Jesus' crucifixion, death and burial. God in fact forgives sinners. This is his grace. For Barth it is not the case that God might or might not forgive our sins, and so grace cannot be understood as a gift that God might or might not give or as an attribute which might or might not be applied to his very essence. No. In his essence Barth says God is gracious. Forgiveness, Barth states, can never be the object of uncertainty between God and us because God meets us as the one who forgives us in all his holiness, righteousness and wisdom; grace thus claims us and cleanses us and at the same time it judges and redeems us. "It is our true and final consolation. For God Himself is in it" (*CD II/1*, 356). There is then "no higher divine being than that of the gracious God, there is no higher divine holiness than that which he shows in being merciful and forgiving sins" (*CD II/1*, 356). Even as the God who is hidden from us, and even as the God who judges us and punishes us, God is gracious to us (Cf. *CD II/1*, 358-68). Sin is thus to be understood as being at enmity against God's grace. Turning from sin means turning to God's grace.

Any other idea of God, in which He is not yet gracious, or not yet essentially decisively and comprehensively known as gracious, is really, whether it is affirmed or denied, a theology of the gods and idols of this world, and not of the living and true God . . . Fundamentally and decisively God distinguishes Himself from the creature by His grace . . . This is how God loves. This is how He seeks and creates fellowship between Himself and us. By this distinctive mark we recognise the divinity of His love. For it is in this way, graciously, that God not only acts outwardly towards His creature, but is in Himself from eternity to eternity (*CD II/1*, 357).

But again, one might ask, how can Barth claim that God is in himself gracious in this way from eternity to eternity without implying that God needs to seek and create fellowship with us since by his very nature God is gracious towards sinners? Here Barth

directly answers this burning question noting that “One might object that in His own being there cannot be a creature standing over against Him, still less any opposition from this other, and therefore that there cannot take place any special turning or condescension, or overcoming of the resistance of the other, and consequently that there cannot be any scope for grace” (CD II/1, 357). Barth’s answer is instructive. He replies to this question explaining that

there is not in fact any scope for the form which grace takes in its manifestations to us. *The form in which grace exists in God Himself and is actual as God is in point of fact hidden from us and incomprehensible to us.* For this very reason even in its manifestation and effectiveness for our sakes and toward us it is for us always the mystery which can thus be appropriated only as such and in faith by grace. For this very reason grace can be revealed and imparted to us only by grace (CD II/1, 357, emphasis mine).⁷

Immanent and Economic Trinity

Here one might say is the central nerve of all contemporary attempts to understand properly the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity. Those who claim that Barth should have revised his understanding of the Trinity to indicate that God could only be God for us because election should be seen as logically preceding the doctrine of the Trinity, miss this all important point. The mystery of grace that meets us in judgment and forgiveness primarily exists in God himself.

How then can it be denied that primarily it is real in God Himself in a form which is concealed from us and incomprehensible to us—in Him who as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is One, who is utterly at one in Himself, in whom therefore there is neither the need nor the capacity for any turning and condescension, in whom there is no strife and therefore no reconciliation? Must we not say, then, that just because this is so, just because He who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit is from eternity to eternity the centre and source of all unity and all peace, therefore He must be the origin and essence of that which we know as grace in such a very different form? How can it have divine reality in the form known to

⁷ The form that grace takes in the incarnation of course is the form of God’s self-humbling (*kenosis*) on our behalf. This is a crucial element in Barth’s understanding of the incarnation in CD I/2 and IV/1 and IV/2.

us if it does not have reality in the unfathomable life of God Himself? From the sphere and source alone where it is not yet a special turning, not yet condescension, not yet an overcoming of opposition, where it is manifest in the pure love and grace which binds the Father with the Son and the Son with the Father by the Holy Spirit—from this sphere and source alone can it become what in our experience we know it to be: a turning towards the creature, a condescension, an overcoming of resistance. And from this divine source it will be this in so far as it has divine reality in the form known to us (*CD II/1*, 358).

The parallels between this statement by Barth and a statement that he makes in connection with the doctrine of reconciliation are striking:

In this context we must not refer to the second ‘person’ of the Trinity as such, to the eternal Son or the eternal Word of God *in abstracto*, and therefore to the so-called *lógos ásarkos* . . . The second ‘person’ of the Godhead in Himself and as such is not God the Reconciler. In Himself and as such He is not revealed to us. In Himself and as such He is not *Deus pro nobis*, either ontologically or epistemologically. He is the content of a necessary and important concept in trinitarian doctrine when we have to understand the revelation and dealings of God in the light of their free basis in the inner being and essence of God. But since we are now concerned with the revelation and dealings of God, and particularly with the atonement, with the person and work of the Mediator, it is pointless, as it is impermissible, to return to the inner being and essence of God and especially to the second person of the Trinity as such, in such a way that we ascribe to this person another form than that which God Himself has given in willing to reveal Himself and to act outwards (*CD IV/1*, 52).

In both cases Barth neither advocates an abstract conception of God as indeterminate in his eternal triune being nor does he advance an idea of God who does not have his life in himself—a life that is hidden from us—even in the form of a *logos asarkos*. What he does claim is that the form of God’s love as it meets us in history, a history marked by sin, is the form of reconciliation. And he does insist that we cannot and must not go behind that form of God’s grace to attempt to know God. We are bound to the grace of God’s reconciling action in his Word and Spirit to know him even in his hiddenness. But in both cases, within the doctrine of God and within the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth insists that God in himself exists in a form that is

inaccessible to us and incomprehensible to us as the eternal Father, Son and Holy Spirit. His being therefore is neither constituted by his decision to relate with us as the Revealer and Reconciler, nor is it the case that for Barth the election of us in Jesus Christ is the ground of God's triunity either logically or ontologically. For Barth, the eternal being of the Trinity cannot be collapsed into what God does for us in seeking and creating fellowship between himself and us. It is rather the basis for that fellowship. "*The triune life of God* which is free life in the fact that it is Spirit, *is the basis of His whole will and action even ad extra*, as the living act which He directs to us" (CD IV/2, 345, emphasis mine). To miss this point in Barth's doctrine of God which shaped even his later thought and therefore to claim that Barth is here inconsistent is to misconstrue the nature of grace for Barth himself. Grace is a free turning in condescension toward us in love—a condescension that is in no way constitutive of God's being but rather expresses God's being as one who is gracious as he is holy.⁸

Knowledge of God and Grace

In his discussion of our knowledge of God, Barth was adamant that we are shown by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ that we have no inherent capacity for God but that God himself enables us to know him and that this knowledge takes place in faith and thus through grace. Barth was no agnostic even though he clearly maintained that God is and remains incomprehensible to us in his revelation. Thus, Barth could say that "God is actually apprehensible in His revelation" (CD II/1, 196). But God is apprehensible "to those who cannot apprehend Him of themselves" (CD II/1, 196-97). Barth insists that a person is not left alone in himself or herself as mystical theology suggests but that "In the miracle of revelation and faith he stands before God, God stands before him, and he knows God and conceives Him therefore in His inconceivability" (CD II/1, 197).

⁸ For a discussion of these issues see Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology*, (T & T Clark/Continuum, 2005), 61-4, 81 and "Can the Electing God be God Without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49 (2007), 199-222; Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 183-277, and George Hunsinger, "Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," in *Modern Theology*, vol. 24, no. 2, April, 2008, 179-98. In notes 1 and 2 Hunsinger provides a full bibliography related to this discussion.

Whereas many contemporary theologians actually embrace a kind of agnosticism which they then equate with God's incomprehensibility, Barth claims that both God's incomprehensibility and our knowledge of God are unveiled to us in the mystery of revelation as grace.

Following an Augustinian line of thought Barth claims that it is impossible for us to speak of God the Holy Trinity who surpasses all that we can think and know, but that does not mean that we should keep silent about God. Rather it means because God has made us and given us light we may know ourselves and God. We may know God in himself but not as God knows himself;⁹ we know him only as God has made himself known to us. Here Barth allows Augustine himself, who in this context is addressing God, to speak: "And this [knowledge] is not outside of yourself, but in yourself, since you are the light which has given me light. As you are to yourself, you are known to yourself alone. As you are to me, you are known also to me by your grace" (*CD II/1*, 197). "By grace" Barth insists means that we know God because God has made himself known in Jesus Christ.

The hiddenness of God is the inconceivability of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; of the one true God, our Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, who as such is known only to Himself, and is therefore viewable and conceivable only to Himself, and alone capable of speaking of Himself aright, i.e., in truth. But He has not omitted to do this—to speak of Himself aright, i.e., in truth (*CD II/1*, 197).

God has indeed made himself known to us by becoming incarnate in his Son and pouring out his Spirit on all. Hence Barth insists that the nature of the revelation of this particular God "is grace. That is, it is a bestowal which utterly transcends all our capacity, being and existence as such, but does not destroy us, does not consume us and break our being and our existence" (*CD II/1*, 197-98). What takes place in our knowledge of God by grace, faith and revelation then for Barth is a miracle from our human point of view. That means it is "an

⁹ See Barth, *CD II/1*, 58-9. "He remains hidden from us as I and therefore in the being and essence of His Godhead. This limitation of our knowledge of God has to be seen and noted. The One whom we know as He and Thou is the I who, as such, is known only to Himself. Certainly we know God Himself on the basis and in the form of the reciprocity created by Himself. But in His I-ness God remains withdrawn from this reciprocity and therefore from our knowledge, even though in revealing Himself to us, in His even becoming man in His Son, He certainly does not cease to be God; even though it is He, the Lord over all, who gives Himself to us to be known in the manhood of Jesus Christ. We do not know Him as He knows us. And we do not know Him as we men know one another."

inexhaustible reality that cannot be established, deduced or explained—it is present to us to our salvation, and it can be affirmed and grasped by us in faith, to become a determination of our being and existence” (*CD II/1*, 198). We can have peace with God, Barth says, but only “by the Word of God, in Jesus Christ, by faith in Him, by the Holy Spirit who awakens faith” (*CD IV/1*, 83).¹⁰

Because knowledge of God is thus grounded in God alone, it can only be met by our own thanksgiving and praise for something that we have neither won for ourselves nor deserved. It is not something which could have been foreseen and it is something for which we have no claim. Only because of the goodness of the “Giver” do we know God in truth and thus for this we can only give thanks. Because God has made himself knowable to us in Jesus Christ we know that he has made himself knowable indirectly in faith and not directly to sight. God’s hiddenness in revelation remains and we must acknowledge this hiddenness in knowing God because we are continually dependent on God disclosing himself to us through the signs of his revelation. Indeed “The Word was made flesh: this is the first, original and controlling sign of all signs. In relation to this sign, as the sign of this sign, there is also creaturely testimony to His eternal Word, not everywhere, but where His eternal Word has chosen, called and created for Himself witnesses” (*CD II/1*, 199). “In Jesus Christ God has condescended to this man who exalts himself . . . and falls so low . . . God knew what he was doing . . . To that attempt of man to become as God, an attempt which is so alien and dangerous in its futility, God has made answer with the gracious and triumphant act that He Himself became as man: ‘The Word became flesh’” (*CD IV/1*, 423).

Miracle and grace are central to Barth’s understanding of our knowledge of God because the knowledge of God that comes from and through God alone never comes under our control. It is always grace and miracle because at all times God is fully hidden from all historical, psychological and philosophical analysis and can be disclosed to us only on his own initiative. That is why Barth insists that knowledge of God is an event enclosed in the mystery of the

¹⁰ It is from this same Word who forgives our sin that we come to know the true meaning of sin as well. See *CD IV/1*, 414-15.

divine Trinity. “Knowledge of God is objectively and subjectively both instituted by God Himself and led to its end by Him; because God the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit is its primary and proper subject and object” (*CD II/1*, 204). All of this means that we can know the truth which is God himself only as God enables this. Barth is very careful in his analysis here distinguishing between God’s truth as such and our apprehension of this, insisting that “The undertaking and the attempt [to know God in truth] are on the way to success—with the success appropriate to us men. And our knowledge of God is then true—as true as it can be as our knowledge, which cannot coincide with the self-knowledge of God” (*CD II/1*, 209). But all of this happens, according to Barth, because of the grace of the incarnation: “When we appeal to God’s grace, we appeal to the grace of the incarnation and to this man as the One in whom because He is the eternal Son of God, knowledge of God was, is and will be present originally and properly; but again through whom, because he is the eternal Son of God, there is promised to us our own divine sonship, and therefore our fellowship in His knowledge of God” (*CD II/1*, 252). In Christ therefore and not apart from him we really can and do know God. But because it is by this grace that we really know God, Barth claims, when we do know God in Jesus Christ, such knowledge takes the form of temptation and comfort because “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Him in this form” (*CD II/1*, 253). This leads Barth to a most interesting conclusion. In his own death on the cross Christ suffers judgment and becomes our Judge, Barth says so that “He places our faith in question, taking it away, and killing it as our own work”. In Jesus’ own cry of dereliction on the cross, he confirmed faith “only by letting it be taken from Him” and this is what reveals to us the fact that “faith as our own work is a lost work”. But because Jesus Christ has borne this temptation by God, our first concern cannot be with our faith but with Christ himself who truly bore the temptation of faith on the cross for us.¹¹ Because he did this “the necessary temptation of our faith has already taken place in Jesus Christ” and was removed from us in him. For this reason we no longer have reason to doubt the truth of our knowledge of God. And

¹¹ See *CD IV/1*, 740ff. for a clear statement by Barth of how exactly he understands the relation between faith and its object.

as for the comfort of which Barth spoke, Jesus himself received the comfort that came to him in his resurrection from the dead. This act of God confirms the “good-pleasure that God has found in Him, and again, in Him in our place” (*CD II/1*, 253).

As the One to whom salvation and eternal glory were allotted, this man is our Saviour. It is in this way that he gives us faith again, awakening it from the dead, and making it living faith . . . We must not only believe *in* the risen Christ. We must believe *with* the risen Christ, i.e., on the basis of the divine comfort which has come upon Him. The power of faith is that God has accepted His Son in the flesh, that he has comforted this man Jesus in eternity. And in Him He has already comforted us all in advance (*CD II/1*, 253).

Our theology Barth says is always theology on the way toward knowledge of God. We are pilgrims, so to speak, because we must distinguish between our present temporal form of knowing God and our future eternal knowledge of God. It is, in other words, the distinction between faith and sight. Barth says that when we do finally know God face to face “God will then be no more hidden from us in faith. But God as God, in Himself, will still be hidden from us even then. Even this knowing of God face to face will still be a miraculous bestowal of His grace, an incomprehensible descent of God into the sphere of objectivity of our cognition, and an incomprehensible admission of ourselves into this knowledge—for this is how the older theologians understood this *theologia comprehensorum*” (*CD II/1*, 209). Barth here insists that

Even as eternal grace, freed from the whole enshrouding veil of our temporality and corruption, grace will still be the grace of God and not our nature. To that extent, even in the eternal redemption, we shall not be at the goal, and the blessedness of our perfect knowing of God will consist in a being on the way, so that it too will have to be described as *theologia viatorum* (*CD II/1*, 209).

What we will have in eternity is a perfect knowledge of God no longer subject to error but it is still the church’s knowledge of God and “not the knowledge of the triune God Himself” (*CD II/1*, 209). Our knowledge of God will always remain our creaturely knowledge of God and thus will always remain distinct from God’s knowledge of himself.

Knowledge of God and Justification

Earlier I mentioned that Barth's view of our knowledge of God is marked by his understanding of the doctrine of justification. And it is. That is why Barth insists that while our views and concepts have no capacity for God, and so he would reject any idea of an *obediential potency* or *supernatural existential*, nonetheless, he insists that we are "taken up by the grace of God and determined to participation in the veracity of the revelation of God. In all his impotence he becomes a place where his honor dwells—not his own, but God's. As a sinner he is justified" (*CD II/1*, 213). This is no illusion or game Barth insists. But it really happens because God forgives our sin according to his own good-pleasure and in this act of forgiveness we are truly enabled to know God. Hence "The veracity of the revelation of God, which justifies the sinner in His Word by His Spirit, makes his knowledge of God true without him, against him—and yet as his own knowledge, and to that extent through him. By the grace of God we may view and conceive God and speak of God in our incapacity. And we ought to do so" (*CD II/1*, 213). It is therefore, Barth says, only in the obedient acknowledgment of God's Word that we cling to the grace of God in which we acknowledge that we are "entirely wrong" and that God is therefore entirely right. This obedience has God's promise because this kind of obedience will always acknowledge that while we ourselves had indeed spoken of God with our very human views and concepts with all their limitations, "it will always be God and God alone who will have credit for the veracity of our thinking and speaking" (*CD II/1*, 213). If we were to react with resignation to the fact that our knowledge of God has to become true again and again through God himself, any such resignation would once more be a sign of our pride which refuses to accept the grace of God in humility. Humility Barth says is not to be equated with resignation. Rather "Humility accepts grace in judgment. Humility, therefore, does not let itself be driven by judgment into a despair which as despair of God can only be the rebellion of a supreme human self-consciousness" (*CD II/1*, 213-14). Later, in his *Doctrine of Reconciliation*, Barth identifies the sin known in light of the incarnation as pride and sloth—pride in the form of active displacement of God in his revelation and sloth in the form of evil inaction. God's response was to justify and sanctify us in the

humiliation and exaltation of his Son. That is God's reconciling grace:

the free grace of God addressed to man always has the form of the justification which positively encounters this pride. But as reconciling grace is not merely justifying, but also wholly and utterly sanctifying and awakening and establishing grace, so sin has not merely the heroic form of pride but also, in complete antithesis yet profound correspondence, the quite unheroic and trivial form of sloth (*CD IV/2*, 403).

The Analogy of Grace

This sheds light on Barth's understanding of the analogy of grace. We know that we cannot know God as God knows himself. But by the grace of God in his movement toward us in knowledge and love, we do really know God indirectly and in faith and through the humanity of Jesus Christ as the Son reveals God to us (*CD II/1*, 56f.). But it must be remembered that when we know God, we do not know him as we human beings know each other. There can never be any reversal here with the idea that by examining how we know one another we will be led to a proper understanding of God. Why? Because "an application of this analogy to the knowledge of God obviously leads back to the reversal of this relationship between creating and created I, and it cannot therefore be considered" (*CD II/1*, 59). This reversal, one could say, is the bane of contemporary theology. How often do we see theologians today discuss the importance of special revelation only to then turn to an examination of interpersonal communication as an analogy for understanding such revelation? In this way they commit the very error identified here by Barth. And following upon that error such theologians frequently then claim that some idea of general revelation should form the foundation for dialogue between Christians and those of other religious beliefs. But the moment this happens, grace is subverted by our human attempts to make God and his revelation conform to generally understood analogies that not only fail to begin and end with the mystery of Christ himself, but they fail to see that it is God's grace alone that can be the solution to problems posed when we attempt to understand the truth of revelation and the proper foundation for interreligious dialogue. Barth insists that we cannot name God as we name other creatures because "we must keep to the

name which God gives Himself” (CD II/1, 59). This is why Barth contends that the words “father” and “son” do not derive their truth by reference to our human experience of and knowledge of fathers and sons within creation. As our words used in this context they are powerless to point to God in truth. But on the basis “of the grace of the revelation of God, they may refer, and on the basis of the lawful claim of God the Creator they even must refer, and therefore, on the basis of this permission and compulsion, they can actually refer—in their application to God, in the doctrine of the Trinity” (CD II/1, 229). Hence,

In a way which is incomprehensible and concealed from us, but in the incontestable priority of the Creator over the creature, God Himself is *the* Father and *the* Son. If we apply these words to God, we do not withdraw from them their original meaning, nor do we speak ‘as if’. On the contrary, we speak in the original truth of these words. And in the same way, ‘lordship’ is not first and properly what we know as the exercise of power by man over man, but the κυριότης of God exercised and revealed in Jesus Christ (CD II/1, 229-30).

This thinking applies strictly across the board for Barth. “The fact that God is revealed to us is then grace” Barth writes.

Grace is the majesty, the freedom, the undeservedness, the unexpectedness, the newness . . . in which the relationship to God and therefore the possibility of knowing Him is opened up to man by God Himself . . . Grace is God’s good-pleasure. And it is precisely in God’s good-pleasure that the reality of our being with God and of His being with us consists. For it is Jesus Christ who is God’s revelation, and the reality of this relationship in Jesus Christ is the work of the divine good-pleasure (CD II/1, 74).

For this reason “God’s being and nature are not exhausted in the encroachment in which he is God among us and for us, nor His truth in the truth of His grace and mercy” (CD II/1, 75). Here is where there is a parting of the ways among contemporary theologians. How many contemporary theologians either overtly or subtly collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity with ideas that suggest that God can *only* be God for us and could never have remained God in himself? Those who argue that God can only be God for us do the very thing that Barth avoided because he insisted that knowledge of God is based on God’s grace and mercy. That is why they miss the

only possible guarantee of genuine knowledge of God. Because God's revelation is not under our control in any sense at all, it has to be accepted Barth says "that it happens as a movement 'from God'" because "It is by the truth itself that in revelation we have to do with the truth itself" (*CD II/1*, 69). For Barth, God is the solution to the problem of how we can have fellowship or partnership with God and knowledge of God as another: "It is He Himself who does this [solves this problem], and He does it out of His own most proper being. He is always active in Himself in His action among us. In what He does on earth He reveals Himself as the One He is in heaven, so that not only on earth but in heaven we have no reason to expect anything higher or better or more sure" (*CD IV/2*, 345). Because God's history as the eternal Triune God is a history in partnership "before and above all creaturely life" we have assurance that our partnership and knowledge of God in revelation is really and truly knowledge of God.

What this means is that one cannot acquire a knowledge of the truth by claiming it on the basis of one's correct thinking about the Trinity, however accurate that may be in detail.¹² However perfect our theological statements may be, none of them has the power to disclose to us the truth of God. Hence, for Barth, "only as we stand in the truth, only as we are summoned, authorised and directed by it, can we refer and appeal powerfully and effectively to the truth and therefore in a way that will genuinely enlighten both ourselves and others" (*CD II/1*, 69). It is not within our power to place ourselves within the truth—only the truth can do that—and if we are not in the truth, then it can happen only "by the truth itself" (*CD II/1*, 70). That is why true knowledge of God does not come easily. It can occur only because "God is in fact knowable . . . because He is Himself the truth" (*CD II/1*, 70). But, says Barth, we resist the truth; we think past revelation "instead of adapting our thinking to it" and thus there is always the great danger that in being open to ourselves we might be led to think we are open to God. But Barth insists that we certainly do not know God in this movement of thought. We cannot escape this situation. When we do actually know God in the midst of this situation, it is not by extending our thought into infinity but only when something exceptional occurs, namely, God makes himself

¹² See, e.g., *CD I/2*, 878-9.

known to us; and this can be recognized in truth only by allowing God's encroachment (his approach to us in his Word and Spirit) to be the place and manner of our knowledge of his truth.

Barth helpfully spells out what he means when he insists that knowledge of God is based on God's grace, namely, on the good-pleasure of his making himself known to us. He maintains that we actually possess no analogy that will enable us to know God in himself. He gives a number of examples. Barth says that we may well be acquainted with "lords and lordships". But no such concept will lead us to know "the nature and being of God as the Lord". This is an extremely important point. We cannot, Barth says, extend our ideas of lordship "into the infinite and absolute" and think that thereby we will know God himself. "No idea that we can have of 'lord' or 'lordship' will ever lead us to this idea, even though we extend it infinitely" (*CD II/1*, 75-6). It is only as we know God's actual lordship over us that we know God as the Lord. Nonetheless "if God Himself has to be added to give content and substance to what is supposed to be analogous to Him, it is obviously useless as an analogy of God". But cannot some prior idea of lordship at least help us in finally refining our concept of God as Lord? Barth insists that "Of themselves they can only hinder. For in the last resort they do not point us to God, but to ourselves, to our God-alienated souls, to our threatened life on this side of death, to a merely possible lordship set in the sphere of our choosing" (*CD II/1*, 76).

How then can we really know God without leaving the sphere of human knowledge and understanding (and Barth insists that God does not want us to try to escape this sphere in order to know him)? Barth says that when we do know God as the Lord, we do so because a fundamental conversion and renewal has taken place in our thinking such that it is not in virtue of anything that we had known previously that we know God as the Lord. "It is not even partly because of this previous knowledge" Barth says "and partly because of God's revelation". Rather it is because of revelation alone. And that means because of God's grace and mercy, he takes us up into the truth of his own knowing and thus enables us to know him. In light of this fact nothing is left to us but "gratitude" that God is not hidden from us but that he is open to us. Barth gives the same examples with regard to the knowledge of God as Creator. We have no analogy on the basis

of which such knowledge is really possible. We can only know God the Creator when all our prior knowledge of things that might resemble creation are “contested and converted and transformed” on the basis of God’s gracious movement toward us as Creator. This is why Barth insists that “God is unknown as our Father, as the Creator, to the degree that He is not made known by Jesus” (*CD I/1*, 390). And Barth says the same with regard to our knowledge of God the Reconciler and Redeemer. Perhaps now we can see more clearly why Barth would insist that if there is true knowledge of God it is because Jesus Christ is, through his Spirit, the finger of God who enables it.

It is perhaps here that one can see the analogy of grace most clearly in Barth’s theological epistemology. To believe, Barth insists, means to believe solely in Jesus Christ.

To believe means to believe in Jesus Christ. But this means to keep wholly and utterly to the fact that our temporal existence receives and has and again receives its truth, not from itself, but exclusively from its relationship to what Jesus Christ is and does as our Advocate and Mediator in God Himself . . . in faith we abandon . . . our standing upon ourselves . . . for the real standing in which we no longer stand on ourselves . . . but . . . on the ground of the truth of God . . . We have to believe; not to believe in ourselves, but in Jesus Christ (*CD II/1*, 159).

Interestingly, it is just this point that causes so much stress in much contemporary discussion of God. Even the best contemporary theologians seem perfectly willing to insist that it is only because of our prior knowledge of God that we can know God at all. It is only because of our “pre-understanding” that needs correction in light of special revelation, that we can truly know the Christian God. Eberhard Jüngel says this.¹³ Karl Rahner certainly believes this.¹⁴ Walter Kasper directly espouses this view.¹⁵ Yet Barth methodically rejects all such thinking because in his view any such conception, however partial, demonstrates that those who take that position

¹³ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism*, trans. by Darrell L. Guder, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 326.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction To The Idea of Christianity*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 33-5.

¹⁵ Walter Kasper appeals to our preunderstanding as the context for understanding the role of natural theology in relation to our understanding of faith. See Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell, (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 67ff., 92-106.

actually are not thinking about God on the basis of God's grace. They are in fact attempting to justify their thinking in some apologetic way by appealing both to their prior thinking and to grace. In Barth's mind this merely represents an attempt to control grace. Indeed the clearest evidence, in Barth's view, here that such approaches to knowing God necessarily fail, is that in every case they do not approach God the Father through his Son and in his Spirit but rather on the ground of something knowable beforehand apart from faith in Christ himself. For Barth, there is literally no way to the Father except through the Son. That is what is respected when the analogy of grace is lived and appreciated by those who believe and then seek to understand God's truth.



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