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Carter, Craig. "Karl Barth's Revision of Protestant Ecclesiology." *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 35-44.

# KARL BARTH'S REVISION OF PROTESTANT ECCLESIOLOGY

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The ecclesiology of mainstream Protestantism today was worked out during the sixteenth-century Reformation. This ecclesiology was challenged by the Anabaptists during the sixteenth century and by the Baptists and Congregationalists in the seventeenth century, but it has not been abandoned by mainstream Protestantism. Even though some of the most radical aspects of the believers' church ecclesiology,<sup>1</sup> such as the separation of church and state and the centrality of the world-wide missionary task of the church, have been accepted widely in mainstream Protestant circles, Protestant ecclesiology as a whole has largely maintained its sixteenth-century form.

However, in this century, traditional Protestant ecclesiology has come under more critical scrutiny. One of the most powerful critiques of Protestant ecclesiology has come from within the Reformed tradition. Karl Barth, perhaps the most important theologian of the twentieth century, has thoroughly critiqued the ecclesiology of the Reformers, from whom he learned so much. Beginning where the Reformers began, with the Scriptures, and drawing on the entire Christian theological tradition, Barth has produced in his *Church Dogmatics*,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The term "believers' church" appears to have been coined by the German sociologist, Max Weber, in his work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Scribners, 1958) 144f. For a good discussion of the meaning of this term, see J. K. Zeman, "Preface" in *The Believers' Church in Canada: Addresses and Papers From the Study Conference in Winnipeg May 1978* (The Canadian Baptist Federation and the Mennonite Central Committee [Canada], 1979) xi.) The term "believers' church," as I am using it in this paper, is very similar in meaning to "free church" and to both "baptist" and "anabaptist." In his three volume systematic theology, which is written consciously out of this tradition, James Wm. McClendon, Jr., says that "There is indeed this 'free church' or 'believers' church' or baptist style of Christian thought that is widely displayed but only haltingly voiced." *Systematic Theology Vol. I: Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1986) 8. I agree with McClendon that there is such a "style of Christian thought," and I will argue in this paper that Barth embraces it insofar as ecclesiology is concerned.

<sup>2</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. and trans. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1956-75). All future references to this work will

an original and powerful treatment of ecclesiology. I want to suggest that Barth's ecclesiology embodies a believers' church critique of traditional Protestant ecclesiology and is a "completion" of the Reformation in the sense of completing the reform of ecclesiology.

In this essay we will examine Barth's doctrine of the Church in order to show the validity of the claim that it is a "completion of the Reformation." Since an exposition of all Barth's extensive writings on ecclesiology is beyond the scope of this brief essay, we will focus on the teaching of the mature Barth in *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV.<sup>3</sup> We will examine his ecclesiology under six key headings: the nature, orientation, task and ministry of the Church, baptism and the relationship between church and state. The differences and continuities between Barth and the Reformers will be noted and it will be argued that, although there are significant differences between Barth and the Reformers, Barth's ecclesiology is a legitimate development of their teaching in the light of the believers' church critique of Protestant ecclesiology.

### THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

First we must consider Barth's view of the nature of the Church as local and universal, and his consequent advocacy of congregational church government rather than the episcopal and presbyterial structures advocated by the Reformers. In accordance with his theology in general, Barth defines the Church in dynamic rather than static terms. He prefers more dynamic terms such as "community" or "congregation," rather than the more static ones like "corpus" or "society" to describe the Church. The Church is defined as both a divine and a human activity (CD.VI/1,650). "The Church is," he says, "when it takes place" (CD.IV/1,652).

Barth rejects the idea that the Church is invisible, labelling this view "ecclesiological docetism" (CD.IV/1,653). But he denies that the visibility of the Church implies a single unified institutional structure. Rejecting the pretensions of all intermediate structures, he views the local congregation as the visible form of the Church. There are many "churches" in the sense of geographically

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consist of abbreviations inserted into the text in brackets. The abbreviations will refer to the title, volume, part-volume, and page number (eg. CD.IV/1,399).

<sup>3</sup>Each part of Volume IV has a section on ecclesiology. In Part 1 it is entitled "The Holy Spirit and the Gathering of the Christian Community." In Part 2 it is entitled "The Holy Spirit and the Upbuilding of the Christian Community." In Part 3 it is entitled "The Holy Spirit and the Sending of the Christian Community." The only section of Part 4 which was published in Barth's lifetime was the fragment on baptism. This essay will focus mainly on these four sections.

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separated congregations, but only one "Church." Barth thus rejects the claims of episcopal and presbyterian structures to be "Churches."

The question naturally arises as to who are the true Christians and how one recognizes the true Church. Barth rejects two answers which were put forward in the sixteenth century: sacramentalism and moralism (*CD.IV/1,694*). He rejects the idea that the human institutional action of baptism can be a means of controlling the action of the Holy Spirit, as is implied in the Roman Catholic doctrine of baptism. He also rejects the attempt by the Anabaptists to "recognize the holiness of Christians (and therefore of the community) by certain attitudes and actions which distinguish Christian from other men" (*CD.IV/1,696*). The problem with this attempt, says Barth, is that those persons who decide which people measure up and which ones do not have assumed the same degree of infallibility as the Roman Church does in baptism. In both cases the Holy Spirit is enclosed within "the sphere of certain human works thought out by men" (*CD.IV/1,696*). Barth's alternative is to begin with the doctrine of election and to define true Christians and members of the true Church as "the men assembled in it who are thereto elected by the Lord, called by His Word and constituted by His Spirit: just so many, no more and no less, these men and no other" (*CD.IV/1, 696*). Barth would have us accept as a Christian anyone who is willing to profess faith in Christ and to leave judgement in the hands of God.

Barth accepts the four marks of the Church as set forth in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of A.D. 381: unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity (*CD.IV/1,669-724*). Apostolicity, which is a summary of the other three marks, is defined, not in terms of apostolic succession, but in terms of being in harmony with the teaching of the apostles, who were unique witnesses to Jesus Christ (*CD.IV/1,721-2*).

Barth's dynamic view of the nature of the Church has important implications for our understanding of ecumenicity. For him, unity is not primarily a matter of outward institutional forms, but of spiritual vitality and communion with the living Lord Jesus Christ. The Reformers courageously decided to put the spiritual vitality of the Church ahead of institutional unity in the sixteenth century and Barth's congregationalism provides a doctrinal justification for that decision. What matters is that local churches be in vital communion with Jesus Christ because then their spiritual unity will be impossible to conceal, regardless of the actions of hierarchial structures.

#### THE ORIENTATION OF THE CHURCH

Second, we must consider Barth's view of the outward orientation or missionary character of the Church versus the implicitly self-sufficient Church of the Reformers. Barth argues that the orientation or focus of the Church ought not to be toward itself, but toward the world (*CD.IV/3:2,762-95*). He wants to emphasize, as the Reformers failed to do, the fact that:

The community of Jesus Christ is for the world . . . it is the human creature which is ordained by nature to exist for the other human creatures distinct from it. In this way also it exists for God, for the Creator and Lord of the world, for the fulfilment of His purposes and will (*CD.IV/3:2,761*).

Barth stresses that, because the Church is what it is, namely a community of people which lives under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, it is "summoned and impelled" to exist for the world. Its orientation grows out of its nature.

Barth agrees with the Reformation teaching that the Church is "the fellowship of those who have been made participants in the salvation of Jesus Christ by Himself and His Word and His Spirit" (*CD.IV/3:2,765*). He also accepts the Reformers' definition of the Church as existing wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments duly administered (a good dynamic definition) (*CD.IV/3:2,766*). He objects to three aspects of Reformed teaching on the Church, however.

First, Barth faults the Reformers for not saying more in their definition because the impression could be left that the Church exists only for itself:

The classical doctrine seems not to envisage any relationship, or at least any basic and essential relationship of . . . the community of salvation to this world outside (*CD.IV/3:2,767*).

Barth wonders if the "pronounced lack of joy in mission, and even unreadiness for it" of the post-Reformation Church does not stem from an inadequate ecclesiology.

A second criticism is directed, not against the Reformers themselves, but against later orthodoxy which tended to identify the Church with its government (*CD.IV/3:2,765*). This error tends to divide the Church into two parts: one smaller, active and superior to the other larger, passive and inferior part. The Medieval clergy-laity distinction is reintroduced and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers is denied in practice, if not in theory. The result is that many Christians do not think of themselves as the Church. Instead, they think of the minister, the bishop or some particular body of leaders as the Church.

A third criticism is directed against the Reformers' distinction between the true, but invisible, Church and the visible Church (*CD.IV/3:2,783*). The problem which arises here is that a concept of the Church as a mixture of true believers and unbelievers leads us away from an adequate understanding of the Church's mission. Rather than concerning ourselves with the distinction between the wheat and the tares, we should leave judgment in God's hands and get on with the properly human work of witnessing. For Barth, the confession of Jesus Christ by the Church is "the distinctive action for which it is empowered by the Holy Spirit" (*CD.IV/3:2,790*).

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Barth's objections to Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant ecclesiology revolve around the failure to understand that the mission of the Church towards the world is integral to its nature. Defining the Church without mentioning its mission, defining the larger part of the Church as the mission field of the smaller part, and defining the Church as consisting of both believers and unbelievers all tend to focus the Church inwardly rather than outwardly. The prophetic character of the Church is lost when the Church loses its consciousness of itself as poised between God and humanity and charged with the responsibility to witness to Jesus Christ the Reconciler.

### THE TASK OF THE CHURCH

Third, we must consider Barth's understanding of the task of the Church as that of being a witnessing community as opposed to the Reformers' understanding of the task of the Church as being a means of grace. Barth rejects both sectarianism and ecclesiastical imperialism and calls the Church to the service of God and humanity as it performs its proper work of witnessing to Jesus Christ. In this section Barth considers first the content of the gospel, that is, what it means to witness to Jesus Christ, and second, the identity of those to whom the gospel is preached. Then he notes some of the errors which have arisen with regard to these doctrines.

Barth begins by emphasizing the definiteness of the task for the sake of which the Church exists. "The Christian community is not sent into the world haphazardly or at random, but with a very definite task" (*CD.IV/3:2,795*). This task is so definite because it is an expression of the very essence of the Church. In fact, Barth claims that the Church does not even exist apart from its task. The task is not only given by Jesus Christ—he himself is the content of the task. The Church exists to be his witnesses, that is, to confess him. The simplest biblical formulation of the content of the task is in Acts 1:8 "Ye shall be witnesses to me." Barth elaborates:

Jesus Christ Himself is this great affirmation or Christian position. Declaring Himself, He pronounces a single and unambiguous Yes. He is this Yes, and therefore not merely its proponent, sign, symbol or cypher (*CD.IV/3:2,797*).

The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, has been committed to the Church. As Barth says: "This great Yes is its cause. It has no other task besides this" (*CD.IV/3:2,800*). Barth then turns to a consideration of who the Church addresses when it preaches Christ. He makes three points about them.

First, Barth urges us to see the human being as a subject who can neither be dissolved into, nor exhausted by, his determination by the situation. Each human being stands "immediate to God and therefore to his neighbour"

(*CD.IV/3:2,804*). In other words, people are made by God in God's image and are agents capable of purposeful action.

Second, Barth says that we must consider humanity outside of Jesus Christ to be in a state of unbelief and alienation from God. However, we must be careful not to take the human creature's unbelief more seriously than God does for human beings are not by their original nature God's enemies, but rather God's creatures.

Third, Barth urges us to see humanity outside Christ as lacking the knowledge of the gospel and as, therefore, supremely needy. The person outside of Christ is in an impossible situation, at war with his or her own nature.

When the Church loses sight of the fact that the gospel is the living Word of the living Lord and thus has a particular call to those who hear it in every age, the Church is tempted to reduce the gospel to a set of timeless truths which do not demand a concrete decision of faith and obedience. This is dead orthodoxy. On the other hand, the Church may go to the opposite extreme—perhaps in reaction to the first temptation—and allow its presentation of the gospel to lose “the identity and constancy which is proper to it as the living but one Word of the living but one Lord” (*CD.3:2,817*). The gospel becomes an object securely known and held by the Church which must be “translated” into the language and thought forms of the contemporary age. This “method of correlation” makes it impossible for the Church's gospel to be the Word of God, which is superior both to the community and to the world (*CD.IV/3:2,819*). The gospel is then used for ideological purposes and no possible deformation of it is ruled out.

Barth also considers two possible errors with respect to the identity of those to whom the gospel is preached. The first is to neglect the world in an attempt at sectarian withdrawal for the purpose of maintaining purity. But this is a fundamentally wrong strategy, for it is precisely in the encounter with worldly people that the faith of the Church is strengthened. The other error is to patronize the addressees of the gospel and seek to gain power over them. The point is not to advance the interests of the Church but to let the good news about Jesus Christ be heard. The task of the Church is to be a witness; nothing more and nothing less.

#### THE MINISTRY OF THE CHURCH

Fourth, we must consider Barth's view of the ministry of the Church as based on the spiritual gifts of all the members versus the Reformers' focus on the ordained clergy. Of course it is true that the Reformers' preached the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers and attacked the Medieval exaltation of the role of the priest. But, in practice, the Reformers did not open the ministry to the laity. The problem was that they continued to see the ministry of the Church as functioning through the officers of the Church.

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Barth enumerates twelve forms of ministry based on three key New Testament passages dealing with the gifts of the Spirit: Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12 and Ephesians 4 (*CD.IV/3:2,843-901*). Six forms consist mainly of speech: the praise of God, preaching, teaching, evangelization, mission, and theology. Six other forms consist mainly of action: prayer, the cure of souls, the production of exemplary lives, the diaconate, prophetic action, and fellowship. The ministry of the Church belongs to all the members of the Church and is to be exercised on the basis of spiritual gifts.

Insofar as Barth bases the ministry of the Church on the spiritual gifts of the members, rather than on the offices of the Church, he takes a definite position regarding the issue of church order. He comes down on one side of a very old debate which stretches back to the New Testament period itself and which has at times been portrayed as a conflict between order and spiritual vitality.

What enables Barth to safeguard order within the diversified, Spirit-directed ministry of the whole body of the Church is not a hierarchical structure, but rather, his insistence on the definiteness of the ministry. In all these forms of ministry the essence of ministry remains the same: to declare, explain, and apply the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Church exists to witness to Jesus Christ and its ministry is the means by which it fulfills this task. This specific task of the Church cannot be done by anyone or anything else, and the Church should do nothing else.

#### BAPTISM AS THE MEANS OF ENTERING THE CHURCH

Fifth, we must consider Barth's doctrine of believers' baptism as opposed to the Reformers' doctrine of infant baptism. The Reformers, especially the early Luther and Zwingli, struggled with this issue before finally coming down on the traditional side. It seems clear that one factor in their reluctance to reform baptism was the fear of introducing social chaos into Europe and destroying the social order. Barth, of course, was not concerned about preserving a Constantinian social order which no longer exists anyway.

Although space does not permit a full exposition of Barth's doctrine of baptism, we need to examine briefly three crucial moves which he makes in developing his doctrine. First, Barth makes a crucial distinction between water and Spirit baptism. Spirit baptism is the divine act by which the Christian life begins, the baptism of the Holy Spirit (*CD.IV/4,6*). Water baptism is the human act which corresponds to the divine act. Spirit baptism "calls for" water baptism but is "not identical" with it.

Second, Barth rejects the sacramental understanding of water baptism (*CD.IV/4,x,cf.100-33*). Barth wants to do justice to both the work of God in salvation and also to the reality and necessity of a human response to the divine initiative. The human action, however, must be seen as subordinate and reactive



rather than as equal and proactive. Synergism must be avoided when speaking of the response of the individual person and ecclesiastical imperialism must be avoided when speaking of the action the Church. Barth says bluntly: "The Church is neither author, dispenser, nor mediator of grace and its revelation" (CD.IV/4,32).

Water baptism is the response of the human creature to God's act of grace. It is the "first exemplary act of faith" (CD.IV/4,44). It has three meanings: conversion, obedience, and hope. Conversion means a break, a re-orientation of the life toward God. Obedience means firstly obedience to the command of Jesus Christ in the Great Commission (Matt 28:19). Baptism implies hope because it takes place "in orientation to the reality of the covenant between Him and man which is established, fulfilled and faithfully kept by God" (CD.IV/4,195).

The third crucial move Barth makes in developing his doctrine of baptism is to reject infant baptism (CD.IV/4,164-95). Once the sacramental understanding of baptism was denied, the ground was cut from underneath the practice of infant baptism and, once the meaning of baptism as a human response of obedience to the divine act of grace was set forth, the legitimacy of baptizing babies could not help but be questioned. Only the confusion of the divine and the human actions could have led to the adoption of infant baptism in the first place.

Barth's doctrine of baptism is of great importance for his ecclesiology as a whole. His doctrine of believers' baptism leads naturally to the doctrine of the believers' church. The believers' church is not one in which a certain standard of good works is required for membership; but rather, one in which only those who have freely chosen to confess Jesus Christ publicly through baptism are members. This understanding of the Church is far more compatible with the concept of the task of the Church as witness than is the national or mass church concept.

#### THE RELATIONSHIP OF CHURCH AND STATE

Sixth, we must consider Barth's advocacy of the separation of church and state versus the Reformers' concept of the state church or national church. At the time of the Reformation there was great concern about rending the unity of Christendom. The Reformers feared that once the break was made with Rome that chaos might be let loose in both the Church and society in general. Their fears in this regard were not without foundation. However, the solution they sought turned out to be worse than the problem they sought to avoid. They sought to reform the Church through the authority of the civil magistrates and the result was national "Churches." Christianity became identified with the forces of reaction and social conservatism, and was widely blamed during the Enlightenment for the evils of the Wars of Religion.

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The Anabaptists of the sixteenth century, the Baptists and Congregationalists of the seventeenth century and their spiritual descendants have called for religious liberty and the separation of church and state. In most of the Western world, the separation of church and state has now become a reality and, even where "state churches" persist, their powers have been weakened greatly. Barth understands this situation to be good and proper, rather than simply a regrettable fact of church history.

Barth stresses that the state will never fully understand the Church's confession and faith because the state is part of the world (CD.IV/2,688). Although the state is a divinely appointed institution and is representative of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over the whole world, it is not to be confused with the Church. As the guardian of law and order in a fallen world, the state has a different purpose and function from the Church. There can be no such thing as a "Christian state," even where Christians constitute the majority of the population, for to speak this way is to confuse two different things (CD.IV/2,687).

He goes on to argue that what the state really needs is a free church, "which as such, can remind it of its own limits and calling, thus warning it against falling into either anarchy on the one hand or tyranny on the other" (CD.IV/2,689). A "free church" is one which has full control over its preaching, doctrine and life. The most the Church can legitimately hope for from the state is legal recognition and toleration.

Barth's doctrine of the separation of church and state is consistent with his teaching on the nature of the Church as a divine and human activity marked by unity, holiness, catholicity, apostolicity, and separation from the world. It allows the Church to be oriented toward the world and to fulfill its task of witnessing to Jesus Christ. Barth's main concern in this area is to free the Church for its proper work of witness. He wants the Church to be in a position where it can preach the gospel without having to carry the baggage of identification with the state. The Reformers recovered the biblical gospel which had been somewhat obscured during the Medieval period and Barth wants an ecclesiology which will allow the gospel to be heard as easily and as clearly as possible.

## CONCLUSION

Barth has developed the ecclesiology of the Reformers and applied their central insights into the nature of the biblical gospel to ecclesiology. He has applied the Reformation principles of *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide* to ecclesiology. He has rethought the doctrine of the Church in the light of the believers' church critique of traditional Protestant ecclesiology. In so doing he has "completed" the work of the Reformation with regard to ecclesiology.

The key to Barth's ecclesiology is his contention that the sole purpose of the Church is to bear witness to Jesus Christ in the world. The rest of his ecclesiology is an attempt to bring all aspects of the doctrine into harmony with this central insight. Both Barth and the Reformers shared a commitment to the gospel of salvation by grace through faith. Barth's ecclesiology allows this gospel to be heard clearly in the modern world and may, therefore, be considered to be a legitimate development of Reformation thought.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>I want to thank David Demson and Syd Hielema for reading earlier drafts of this article and for making several helpful suggestions as to how it could be improved. I also acknowledge the helpful comments of two anonymous readers of this article who evaluated it for publication. Finally, I want to thank Bonnie Carter for her help in editing and proofreading.

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