

The Nature of the Christian Community

Barth's explanation of the relation of the Spirit and the Church, whilst keeping the relation of Christ and the Church very much in view,¹ establishes the divine origin and nature of the Church. Both relations represent a twofold reality in unity, differentiation and asymmetry, in which the true Church only exists in relation to the Spirit who makes Christ present. The same is apparent when Barth speaks predominantly of the relation of Christ and the Church; he keeps the relation of the Spirit and the Church in view, for it is the Spirit who enables Christ to be contemporary in every age. This is why he unusually places his account of the Christian community within this Christological section of his *Dogmatics*. Barth is clear that his theological anthropology demands a central focus on Christ, whilst keeping in view the work of the Holy Spirit, for "the one reality of the atonement has both an objective and subjective side . . . it is both divine act and offer and also an active human participation in it."² Barth explains what he means by this subjective realization and active human participation, when he explains that the Holy Spirit "is God intervening and acting for man, addressing Himself to him, in such a way that He says Yes to Himself and this makes possible and necessary man's human yes to him."³ The initiative is entirely God's, for the Holy Spirit is "God in this particular address and gift, God in this awakening power, God as the Creator of this other man."⁴

1. CD IV.1, 643–739.

2. Ibid., 643.

3. Ibid., 646.

4. Ibid., 645.

This means that ‘in everything that we have to say concerning the Christian community and Christian faith we can move only within the circle that they are founded by the Holy Spirit and therefore that they must be continually refounded by Him, but that the necessary refounding by the Holy Spirit can consist only in a renewal of the founding which He has already accomplished.’⁵ For Barth “the infallible sign of His presence”⁶ is the expectation and desire of the Christian community to receive the Spirit, to cry in obedience and prayer “*Veni creator Spiritus*.”⁷ The Spirit cannot be controlled, directed or possessed by either the Christian community or the individual Christian. “He makes man free, but He Himself remains free in relation to him: the Spirit of the Lord.”⁸ The Spirit “is the power in which Jesus Christ attests Himself, attests Himself effectively, creating in man response and obedience.”⁹ The Spirit is sent by Jesus Christ. “He is the form of His action.”¹⁰ The Spirit therefore “is the power of Jesus Christ in which it takes place that there are men who can and must find and see that He is theirs and they are His, that their history is genuinely enclosed in His and His history is equally genuinely enclosed in theirs.”¹¹ Barth will not speculate further on how this occurs, for “even the New Testament, although time and again it places the Holy Spirit between the event of Christ on the one hand and the Christian community and Christian faith on the other, does not really tell us anything about the How, the mode of His working.”¹²

In Barth’s actualistic understanding, the Church, grounded as it is in Christ through the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, is a dynamic event and history:

To describe its being, we must abandon the usual distinctions between being and act, status and dynamic, essence and existence. Its act is its being, its status its dynamic, its essence its existence. The Church is when it takes place that God lets certain men live as His servants, His friends, His children, the witness of the rec-

5. Ibid., 647.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 646.

9. Ibid., 648.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., 649.

conciliation of the world with Himself as it has taken place in Jesus Christ.¹³

Barth follows Luther in translating *ekklesia* as *Gemeinde*;¹⁴ not “church,” but a dynamic expression of the gathering of God’s people as “community” or “congregation” through the presence and work of the Holy Spirit. It should be noted that Barth maintains a strict order in his presentation, speaking of the community before he speaks of the individual, in a conscious riposte to the individualistic assumptions of Enlightenment thought. It is a critique that equally challenges an early Salvationist assumption of an individualistic gospel. In his account of election he clarifies that “it is not men as private persons in the singular or plural” that God elects, but “these men as a fellowship elected by God in Jesus Christ and determined from all eternity for a peculiar service, to be made capable of this service and to discharge it.”¹⁵ As Barth further expresses it, “It is God’s choice that for the sake of the Head whose name it bears He has created and established this particular body, this people, to be the sign of blessing and judgment, the instrument of His love and the sacrament of His movement towards men and each individual man.”¹⁶ Barth can therefore conclude that:

The biblical witness to God is itself wholly characterised by the fact that this God has determined Himself the Lord of Israel and the Church, and as such Lord of the universe and man in general. It is for this reason and to this end that He wills the calling of Israel and the Church and the creation of the universe and man.¹⁷

Barth argues against what he sees as the “*cul de sac*” of “the individual experience of grace” and its impact upon the doctrine of the Church as demonstrated in Pietism including the “detour via Kierkegaard,” and affirms that “our theme is the reconciliation of the world with God in Jesus Christ, and only in this greater context the reconciliation of the individual man” for “the city set on a hill, is the community of God and

13. Ibid., 650.

14. See Barth’s comments in Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, 141; Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 37.

15. CD II.2, 196.

16. Ibid., 54.

17. Ibid., 91.

not the individual Christian as such, although the latter has within it his assured place.”¹⁸

As an event the community “is a phenomenon of world history which can be grasped in historical and psychological and sociological terms like any other,”¹⁹ for “this involves—in varying degrees of strictness or looseness—an ecclesiastical organisation and constitution and order.”²⁰ In this way the Church is at the same time both event and religious society, invisible and visible as a twofold reality. In that Christ is a real man, Barth’s Chalcedonian pattern will not allow “christological Docetism” and in that the Church has a human history he will equally and correspondingly, not allow “ecclesiastical Docetism,”²¹ for “the Christian community as such cannot exist as an ideal commune or universum, but . . . only in the relationship of its individual members as they are fused together by the common action of the Word which they have heard into a definite human fellowship; in concrete form, therefore, and visible to everyone.”²²

Barth is determined to emphasize that this visibility can only be the true Church when it understands its reality negatively as *anhypostasis*, that it cannot exist without God, upon whom it is totally dependent. Rather than speak of an invisible and visible reality, Barth argues not simply for “a general but a very special visibility,”²³ in which in its total dependence on God, the Christian community can be visibly known in its reality as *enhypostasis*. For Barth, this means “a religious society within human society generally and side by side with other organisations,”²⁴ and equally, to be visibly and insightfully seen by Christian faith in “the third dimension of its existence,”²⁵ in the light of its awakening by the Holy Spirit. There can, therefore, be no heretical view of the Church that focuses on its visible and institutional character, to the detriment of its

18. CD IV.1, 150.

19. Ibid., 652.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 653.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 654.

24. Ibid., 655.

25. Ibid.

origin and essential third dimension in the awakening power of the Holy Spirit.²⁶

Barth is critical of a church whether large or small, that fails to keep open the “special visibility” of this “third dimension,” and “becomes unserviceable to the will and act of God, to the extent that in its visible being it wants to be something more and better than the witness of its invisible being . . . taking itself and its doctrine and sacraments and sacramental observances and ordinances and spiritual authority and power . . . to be the meaning of its existence, its greatness, its true and final word, in place of the underlying and over-ruling power of Jesus Christ and His Spirit.”²⁷ This is not to deny that the Church must take its visibility seriously in the world, and create “forms which are indispensable to it as the human society . . . which are best adapted to its edification and the discharge of its mission.”²⁸ These forms are, however, at best “provisional” in need of “constant reform,” and can never allow the Church to be anything better than “an *église du desert* . . . a ‘moving tent’ like the biblical tabernacle” in which it “lives by the awakening power of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹ Barth affirms that if the Church “lives also and primarily in its third dimension, it can and should act confidently on the level of its phenomenal being.”³⁰

The belief that The Salvation Army was an act of God, a living demonstration of the awakening power of the Holy Spirit, enabled Bramwell Booth to make confident claims about its phenomenal being. Of all the early Salvationist leaders, in the heat of the Army’s ambiguous holiness revivalism, he made the most confident assertion that “of this, the Great Church of the Living God, we claim, and have ever claimed, that we of The Salvation Army are an integral part and element—a living fruit-bearing branch in the True Vine.”³¹ Timothy Bradshaw adopts a similar image in his Anglican evangelical ecclesiology, *The Olive Branch*,³² where

26. See Barth, *Against the Stream*, 62–77, for his account of this “special visibility.”

27. *Ibid.*, 657.

28. *Ibid.*, 660.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*

31. Booth, *Echoes and Memories*, 79.

32. Bradshaw, *The Olive Branch*.

he is clear that “the New Testament stress on the church’s free adoption into the family of God unites the doctrines of salvation and church.”³³

Lesslie Newbigin suggests that in view of God’s free, merciful and gracious gift of the Church, great care should be taken in assessing the respective merits of different versions of the Church, not to become judgmental and partisan. He is insistent that “the Church does not exist by virtue of something which it is in itself . . . It exists wherever God in His sovereign freedom calls it into being by calling His own into the fellowship of His Son.”³⁴ He is clear that “when the Church claims to have the plenitude of grace in itself, it has abandoned the Spirit for the flesh.”³⁵ He even sounds like a Salvationist when he declares, “It will be none other than the mercy-seat where alone Christ meets with us . . . nothing that the Church *is* can provide us with our basis of assurance,”³⁶ sentiments with which Barth would no doubt have wholeheartedly agreed. Newbigin believes we “should completely abandon . . . the idea that we can find some minimum of visible marks which will enable us to say: “This is a Church and God must recognise it as such,” for “the Church exists, and does not depend for its existence upon our definition of it.”³⁷ God is free,

to break off unbelieving branches, to graft in wild slips, and to call “no people” His people. And if, at the end, those who have preserved through all the centuries the visible “marks” of the Church find themselves at the same board with some strange and uncouth late-comers on the ecclesiastical scene, may we not fancy that they will hear Him say—would it not be like Him to say—“It is my will to give unto this last even as unto thee?”³⁸

In Barth’s sense that the Church is an event, a happening, totally dependent upon God’s call and commission, The Salvation Army can be affirmed as an authentic community of God’s action in gathering God’s Church, no matter how much of an “uncouth late-comer,” to use Newbigin’s phrase, it might to some appear to be. So Barth maintains that the true Church is in its essential third dimension, in the divine

33. Ibid., 134.

34. Newbigin, *The Household of God*, 132.

35. Ibid., 83.

36. Ibid., 134.

37. Ibid., 132f.

38. Ibid., 133.

action of electing, reconciling, gathering, upholding and sending the Church. On this inclusive basis it has been an integral participant in ecumenical life and work throughout the world. This is the source of the authentic “church” strand that runs through the tangled cord of mission, army and church. Barth is equally concerned, however, with the appropriate corresponding human form and action that must obediently follow. He therefore establishes the visible form of the Church in a dialectic of indestructible divine action and destructible human action. It is this appropriate corresponding visibility that Salvationists have not sufficiently reflected upon, and must be considered next.

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