

## VIII

### THE IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIACY

#### I

We may now see how we stand as to the answer which attested revelation permits us to give to the question whether the Word passed on to us as Truth is revelation in itself. When the question is raised whether or not we possess the real Word in the written Word, we cannot agree with Barth's dictum that the issue is between those who regard the Spirit as a *datum* and those who regard It as a *dandum*.<sup>1</sup> The issue can only be so stated if the whole Barthian position is already conceded. For, while we must maintain the unity of the written Word with the Spirit, we need not reduce the Spirit to an inert *datum*, in order to do so, unless it is already agreed to be impossible that any such Word should be unified with the free active Spirit of God. Since the Spirit is God in act, It must always be a *dandum*, both in the outward act of God's Self-presentation in the actual event of revelation, and in Its inward operation, which is necessary both for the original recipient at the time of this event and subsequently also for others, in order to show the revelation in its true light. But though we are agreed that the Spirit is always a *dandum*, the real issue would appear to remain: namely, whether the required unity of the free, active Spirit of God with the content, received through and expressed by the written Word, is or is not possible.

We agree that the present inward operation of the Spirit is necessary for the Unity of God with His Word, but not that a fresh outward operation, or self-presentation of God, is essential. This God may give. But we differ from the Barthians in maintaining that God's Word may be His without it. Once the actual approach of God is achieved by the twofold divine act of outward presentation and inward visitation, can it or can it not leave to the world Truth which is God's own gift? Here Barth says: "No". Others who are just as insistent on the spirituality of the Word say: "Yes". Otherwise stated, the question is whether the truth which issues from the reactive contacts of men with God is properly the effect of the divine approach. If it is, such an effect, the truth is then the final term of God's outward approach to us, in which the distinction between mere sign and real content becomes untenable. The Word of Truth cannot be so much as a sign except by revealing itself as properly the address of the Personal God to us through

<sup>1</sup> See *The Holy Ghost and the Christian Life*, pp. 11 ff.

His original approach. If the deposited truth is properly such an effect, it is always with us, permanently there to do its appointed work to whatever extent the inward working of the Spirit may determine.

Barth evidently regards the Spirit as either specially given or else completely absent. But is it not rather a permanent *dandum*, if always a *dandum*, as God's active power always present to us in some degree? Moral experience tells us that we are less than the conditions of our existence permit us to be if there is not sustained within us a life of aspiration. Such a "life" cannot be given or withheld from time to time. Though it may come to light only at intervals, it is surely the permanent and distinguishing feature of human creaturehood that conscience proclaims can be ours. If the presence of the divine is needed to sustain it, this presence must be inward as well as outward. God presents Himself outwardly in and through the opportunities of endeavour which life offers, thus providing the moral person with a religious aim. But there must also be sufficient spirituality within us to permit our response to this outward presence of God. In so far as our created nature retains its divinely given spirituality, this response is already possible. If we accept the survival of the *Imago*, we are already supposing that the free, active Spirit of God is permanently effective. The Spirit which is a *dandum* in its creative operation is then effectively with us always. Nor can it be disproved by any logical or human consideration that the Spirit is also given as a continuous and present *dandum*, effective in proportion as it discovers minds responsive to God's approach in the special Word.

Thus, the indispensability of the Spirit need not worry us. We need not regard It as either completely given or completely withheld. Nor need we regard the capacity to hear God's Word as one which we possess either entirely or not at all. Indeed, it seems impossible to regard anything about God's Self-giving or what issues from it, either the giving of the Spirit, the hearing of the Word, faith, or the Christian life, as ever completely realized or unrealized. If we do justice to the dynamic aspects of the giving and receiving of revelation, we must allow that it is real though incomplete. We can only speak of the work which the Spirit does, not of Itself as present or absent; and consequently also only of the degree to which it is possible to hear God's Word, whether given otherwise or through the extension to us of the direct address formerly given to another.

When it is questioned whether it is God's real Word that comes to us in this latter way, to begin with, we cannot lightly pass over the scriptural witness of both Testaments, both direct and circumstantial, which affirms that it does so. We cannot ignore the

circumstance that when God speaks in the Old Testament He is by no means exclusively interested in the spiritual welfare of the prophet directly addressed. On the contrary, the prophet is a servant, and the divine interest extends primarily to the welfare and progress of the nation indirectly addressed through him. Prophet and people alike, and indeed all who hear God's Word, find their spiritual well-being in their inclusion in a service to what lies beyond, while it includes, themselves. Were God interested in the prophet alone we might then find it possible to admit that what God said to him could only be known by him in the actual event of its utterance. But since the divine interest is in the Word passed on, whatever we may think of the epistemological problems involved, God Himself at least is satisfied with the direct Unity of Himself with His Word as heard by those to whom it is not directly addressed. What is present to the contemporaries of the prophet and lacking to us is not the direct address of God, which Barth regards as paramount, but the immediacy of their own environment and the prophet's personality. Such mediative factors do not give an unmediated presence of God. Wherefore we and these contemporaries stand on an equal footing in point of indirectness of address; and if we must say that God's Word reaches them as He intends, unified with His Personality as He intends, we may surely say this also with regard to ourselves.

The New Testament likewise furnishes us with a sufficiency of evidence that the Unity of God with His Word in Christ is preserved in its self-extension through the fellowship of the Church. In the seventeenth chapter of his Gospel, St. John gives us an insight into the close filial relation of the Son to the Father. Jesus has sent out His followers to preach the Word, and as He sees that their labour is not in vain He perceives that His own labours are not in vain. Their success is the success of His own work. Accordingly, He gives thanks to the Father that His mission to the world is accomplished through His followers. "I have finished the work which Thou gavest me to do (v. 4). As Thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world (v. 18). For I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest me; and they have received them (v. 8), and they have kept Thy Word" (v. 6). And the Word which they have kept and successfully delivered is the Word of Truth. "Sanctify them through Thy truth: Thy Word is truth" (v. 17).

There could not be a more thoroughgoing declaration that God's Word in Christ is continued through His human followers, and carried to the world as the Word of Truth. The circumstance that St. John is bold enough to declare so much as the private thought of Christ in a prayer of thanksgiving need not indicate that it is

only the opinion of the evangelist. St. John must have been unshakably convinced that this was the mind of Christ. It is not too much to say that St. John's conviction that the revelation in Christ is validly continued in this way must be included in his conception of the Sonship of Jesus. The same conviction is expressed further in the opening verses of the first Epistle. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us, and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ" (I John i. 3).

It is remarked in the *Church Dogmatics* (I, p. 514) that this announcement is "the indication of a reality, the possibility of which in the New Testament is by no means to be taken for granted", and the words of St. Paul in II Cor. iii. 5 are cited in proof, "not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think anything as of ourselves". But if we complete the quotation, which continues: "but our sufficiency is of God", we may perceive that, in harmony with the context, St. Paul does not mean that he or others do not have this sufficiency. On the contrary, he appears emphatically to declare that the followers of Christ do have it, but have it of God and not of themselves; wherefore their sufficiency is real. Every preaching may not be true, of which obvious possibility St. Paul warns us. Nor is the spiritual hearing of the Word more than a possibility. But the preaching of the Word by the evangelists is an actuality which definitely is to be taken for granted. The Word is heard only within the fellowship of the Church, but this fellowship is not to be looked for or awaited as a pre-condition separately generated. Rather is it the counterpart of, and generated by, the declaration of the Word. The New Testament conception of God's Sonship in Christ includes the faith that the fellowship He began on earth can declare the Word, thereby continually recreating itself as the living fellowship of the Church; wherefore the Church itself may be truly described as the "extension of the Incarnation".<sup>1</sup>

2

We have argued that it is the Barthian philosophy, with its pre-supposed view of man and sin, and its view of truth as a product of an inner propensity of the human mind, that is properly responsible for the decision that any such self-extension of the original approach of God is impossible. But only the attested nature of this approach can ultimately determine whether or not it can accomplish what it apparently claims for itself. The approach of God being two-fold, the evidence is also two-fold. There is evidence of how the Spirit works inwardly and the

<sup>1</sup> See *The Person of Christ*, L. W. Grensted, Ch. III, p. 56.

evidence of the nature of the outward presentation. We have sought to show that in both instances the scriptural evidence supports our view. The scriptural description of how the Spirit works is, as it is bound to be, mystical. Hence the hearing of the Word must take place *by* God's mystery. But this does not justify the oft-repeated Barthian statement that it takes place only *in* God's mystery, as an event from time to time achieved by God. The mystery is that of the inner nature of God's act. But the result of His spiritual energizing, the understanding of His Word, need not be entirely mystical.

If the Barthian interpretation were correct, there ought to be no witness which declares that the gift of the Spirit is the understanding in faith of what the outward, worldly form of God's approach reveals Him to be; whereas with the all-important revelation in Jesus Christ this would seem to be precisely what the witness does say. The Spirit enables the natural man to perceive that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. If, however, it is claimed that the witness may also be understood to imply that what the inward Spirit empowers us to receive is the present approach of God, devoid of all worldly form, of which possibility the spiritual understanding of the worldly form only warns us, the attested nature of the outward presentation must then be the deciding evidence. Accordingly, we have sought to show the mediacy of God's Self-presentation, and to find in this mediacy the circumstance which will explain how the truth which ensues is still His Word, unified with Himself. In both Testaments it is the worldly form which God takes to Himself that is declared to be the revelation. The veiling form is itself the unveiling of God. The worldly form which veils and unveils is both form and content, between which no difference is attested.

The mediate approach of God which the Scriptures declare appears to us the only approach possible. So long as God is God and man is human, revelation can be only mediately achieved, and only mediately received. It is by bringing Himself into touch with the hopes and aspirations, the fears, weakness, and sin of human life that God makes Himself known. While the evidence is that this approach reveals God to us as He desires, the Barthian anthropology inevitably dictates that it cannot do so. As God reveals Himself in answer to the spiritual questionings of the human soul, He is known by human thought; which, according to Barth, can result only in the experience which man can give to himself of the fallen cosmos in which he lives. Against this we have argued that the mediate experience afforded is properly experience of God.

How direct, though mediate, experience of anything at all is

possible is a problem in itself. But, as this general problem does not specially concern us, we have done no more than point out that the conviction of the fact precedes the problem, remaining a primary conviction despite all difficulties. What concerns us is the specifically theological problem of how mediate experience of *God* can be direct and real. Here, also, since attested revelation is the final authority about itself, the attested conviction that God is directly, though humanly, known must appear to many sufficient evidence that so much is possible. In any case, revelation must be allowed to explain the human awareness of God which is its own accomplishment. The human awareness of God is the divine act of self-revelation viewed from the side of man. It is God's act, in which He takes upon Himself the task of so presenting Himself that we can understand Him humanly. The very event of revelation is already the adaptation of divine things to our understanding. Sin, the root of all the difficulties Barth has raised, is no fatal obstacle to our hearing the Word, since it is especially to human sin that God savingly relates Himself. We thus feel justified in accepting the mediate experience of God as a divinely grounded possibility and an attested actuality. It remains to determine what we believe it entitled us to say about the Word passed on to ourselves in the form of truth.

3

The Written Word is revelation if it is unified with God as the informative effect of His approach to man. It must be so unified before it can be a divine gift. It must also enable us to understand God as He intends. This last involves two distinguishable conditions which must be fulfilled; in that the Word must give us a true appreciation both of the objective and of the subjective aspect of revelation. First, the understanding which it gives us of God's relation to the world must be that understanding which He intends us to receive thereby, since otherwise it is not the true content which reaches our minds. Second, this content must be recognized and received as Subjective. It must be received as the address of the Personal God, as God's Word precisely, according to all that is implied in the sentence "God speaks". If these two conditions are fulfilled we have the real Word of God, which cannot demand more for itself than that we should hear its true meaning as God's address. The two conditions cannot really be separated, as each implies the other. Only as Subjective is the character of God's relation to us made known. Only in approaching us in some way definable by the understanding can God address us at all.