

THE WORD OF CHRIST AND THE WORLD OF CULTURE: SACRED AND SECULAR THROUGH THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

by Paul Louis Metzger

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Reviewed by Rodney Thoaka

In this study, Paul L Metzger has proven to the students of Barth that he had succeeded on the subject matter of theological investigation that is evidently able to generate not merely a fair measure of original research but also, synthetic works which present the results of original research in a form which is easily reached to both mature students as well as to those who desire to grasp the theology of Barth.

Metzger who is assistant professor of Christian theology and theology of culture at Multnomah Biblical Seminary, Portland, Oregon, attempts in this study to challenge a rather distorted perception that Barth (who is also known as the theologian of the Word) was in every respect opposed to culture. The strategy that he employs impels all those who claim to be conventional readers of Barth to take note of his commentary on Barth undertaking of the word of God and how this relates to culture. Undoubtedly, this work documents the development of Barth's Christocentric theology against the cultural background from which it originated.

The aim of Metzger is to indicate that his view that Barth's incarnational Christology contain the resources for a theology that inhibits the extremes of both making culture divine as well as making it wholly secular. He does this by initially outlining the foundations on which Barth's theology was build.

He divides this study into three sections viz. Foundations, Connections and Distinctions.

In the first section mentioned, Metzger goes out of his way to draw our attention to what he calls the foundation of the theology of Barth (Cf. Part one). It is in this section that Metzger makes reference to all those great minds that had a profound impact on the theology of Barth. He particularly makes reference to the likes of Wilhelm Herrmann, Immanuel Kant and Schleiermacher, as the ones who had a major impact on him, but he is not oblivious of theologians such as Adolf von Harnack, Ernst Troelsch *et al* (See. p. 5ff).

Those who are interesting in Barth will note with interest why it is important that Metzger does this. Briefly, Metzger makes mention of this primary influences on Barth, for (1). Barth use to believe that one could only enter upon theology through recourse to Kant, (2) Herrmann was a theologian who was not ashamed of the gospel and was adamant advocate for the independence of theology and also a devout disciple of Schleiermacher. The context also influenced Barth's theologies to a large extend. This was also the time when philosophical themes took theology captive. The outbreak of world war one, which acted as a catalyst to Barth break with liberal theology, When Troelsch traded his chair of theology for one in philosophy, the endorsement of this very war by some of his theological mentors, his metamorphosis to the Blumhards (from whom Barth learned that the emphasis ought to on the kingdom of God and not on humanity and much more, are all considered by Metzger to be part of the foundations of Barth's theology.

Metzger is well of the fact that all these disappointments, compelled Barth to look elsewhere for understanding that which was going on around him, for he could not subject himself to both the ethics as well as to the dogmatics of his teachers who have sided with war lords.

During this process of theological augmentation, it was already evident that there was a close identification of Christ and Culture exemplified in the thought of Schleiermacher, but this was also endemic in Protestant Liberalism (e.g. p. 21). For Schleiermacher, one must venture to mediate Christ and culture in such a way that one approach revelation from the standpoint of human self-understanding. Such a move, notes Metzger, stands in contradistinction to Hegel's dialect in which antithesis gives way to a higher form of synthesis.

The difference between Barth and Schleiermacher when it comes to the question of religion is that, whereas the latter conceives religion as the noblest of all human works of art which finds its source in the dispositions of humanity, the pinnacles of the temple to which Schleiermacher the orator wishes to lead the cultural despisers of religion, the former perceives religion as the very crisis of culture. Thus apart from God, culture is the most dangerous enemy a human being has. Barth distanced himself from Schleiermacher based on this very explication of how viewed culture. Clearly, Barth occupation with his Romans commentary also contributed to him dismissing Schleiermacher.

Metzger acknowledges the fact that it is by looking at the doctrines of *anhypostasis* as well as *enhyposstasis* that we come close to understanding the fact that Barth was not really a tenacious opponent of culture. For if Barth was indeed such an opponent, such a stance would nullify numerous aspects in his theology with regard to the humanity of God. Barth discovery of Heinrich Heppe's Reformed dogmatics in 1924 provided him with a recipe to be able to "effectively" speak of revelation's relation to history in integral terms without discarding the all important distinction between the two. It was this encounter which let him to contextualize these Reformed doctrines of *anhypostasis* and *enhyposstasis*.

In his contextualization of these doctrines, he found a conception of Christology where revelation can be viewed as taking place "in history without becoming a predicate to history" (See. p. 37 ff). In explicating the doctrines mentioned, Barth maintains his dialectical model that God reveals himself in hiddenness, though such concealment actually occurs in history. This also provided Barth with the categories whereby he could solve the dilemma of the strict opposition of the two within the dialectic of their relation. And this was to be the basis for Barth's development of a truly incarnational, Christological model of revelation and theology. Metzger agrees that this enabled him to set forth a positive yet dialectical conception of the engagement of God and humanity and Christ and culture.

Barth could now speak of God's transcendence in a manner that would not threaten the doctrine of the divine immanence. Barth had set forth the concept of the radical otherness of God with the mere purpose of safeguarding the doctrine of God, however, this also served indirectly to guarantee the distinct existence of the world and human culture.

Having taken this into consideration, one gets to the conclusion that culture can serve as a sign, but not as the substance of revelation itself. The concealment of God in history, which happens indirectly through the veil of creaturely flesh, spells in Metzger's words the "dedivinization" of the world, human history etc. it is very important to note that in all its indirectness, the concealment of God in this creaturely form involves the identification of God with this human form as human. The word, says Metzger, did not enter the human individual; instead it was the very Word which became human.

In the section on the connections, Metzger concurs with Barth that a *diastasis* (separation), ought to be emphasized between The Word and Culture (p. 87ff). This should be done to guard against an attempt to secularize the one at the expense of the other as well as to make the other divine at the expense of the other. He points to Barth's radical dismissal of the amalgamation of church and culture which proved to be detrimental to both these entities with particular reference to the theologies of "Culture Protestants" and "German Christians". It is only by keeping the two apart that Barth would be willing to glorify secularism, but he does not do this for the sake of secularism, instead he glorifies this for the sake of *diastasis*. In this way, the church was able to confront secular humanity; one example of this is that of the confessing Church. With the positions between culture and the word clearly outlined, as well as with the claim that God with his concealment in history sets God self in relation to humanity and thus culture, Metzger turns to Barth's doctrine of election with the intention of substantiating this claim.

Jesus Christ, says Barth, is the electing God. But Christ fundamentally does not stand alone, but stands in the loving freedom of the eternal and undivided communion with father in the spirit, he chooses to be with and for humanity and to reconcile the creation to God. Election thus involves humanization. The doctrine of election in Barth's thought is the doctrine of the constitutive Word, and this constitutive being of Christ concerns all humanity. It is also here that Barth's doctrine of election is different from many in the tradition.

The catch in Barth's doctrine of election in which God elects all humanity is that although all are elected from eternity to be "in Christ", each must still repent, believe and follow him, it is for this reason that only the Christian is in Christ in the full sense. And as the one who participates in Christ, it is thus this very Christian who is to turn to the world and bear witness. And so the church exists for the world.

In the last section of his work, he utilizes the opportunity to give reasons as to why we cannot opt for a *diastasis* between the Word and Culture. It is also here that he gives us the impression that Barth's flexibility when it comes to certain worldly things is capricious. There are two things that the author concentrates on and that is his interest in politics as well as his love for Mozart. He is aware of the fact that Barth criticized the Reformers for not having connected human justice with divine justification, the result of this failure being twofold viz. "pietistic sterility and the sterility of the enlightenment on the other hand (p. 163).

Barth's understanding of politics convinced him that the state is not to be demonized and at the same time, one should be careful not to divinize the state as was the case with National Socialism. Albeit Metzger is very thorough in explicating the politics views that Barth had, he nonetheless hold the view that Barth is to be blamed for advocating a doctrine of the two kingdoms, a view that is in my opinion silly. Metzger does this for he is convinced that the attempt to separate church and state jeopardizes the distinct existence of each since it is ultimately impossible to separate the sacred and the secular domains, thus one should not speak of separation (*diastasis*), but instead one should speak of *distinction* (p. 189). Metzger like the others becomes ignorant of what Barth once called the flexibility and freedom necessary to being a Christian, and unfortunately also falls into the category of those who dismiss Barth as being arbitrary.

He maintains that Barth cannot really be understood as a theologian who is against culture and refers to Barth's commentary on Mozart's music as one such an example. From this he deduces that the word does not enslave human creativity, but grants it freedom within limits, Christological limits. What is more, these Christological limits are not confined to the realm of the church, but extend beyond the church to include human culture

generally (p. 213). It is his comprehension of human creativity that impels Metzger to conclude that Barth's doctrine of creation gives room to science to engage in scientific enquiry apart from theological constraints. In other words, for Metzger, Barth's doctrine of creation sets the parameters within which the natural sciences have space for free enquiry (p. 212). A point for concern is scientific enquiry apart from theological constraints. The reason I think why he is comfortable to make Barth's doctrine of creation compatible with scientific enquiry is because he has done very little with the "*unveiledness*" of God in his mystery. He has done even less with Barth's whole understanding of the concept theology in Barth. Metzger could have even done more to strengthen his thesis that Barth was not against culture in the general sense of the word had he focused not only for Barth's love of Mozart but also on the Barmen declaration. Had he done that, he would have realized that Barth and the Barmen's rejection of natural theology is broadly epistemic in force. Barth and therefore the Barmen declaration do not imply that nothing good, beautiful, true or worthwhile can be found outside of Scripture and the Church. God may speak to us", wrote Barth, "through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog. We shall do well to listen to him if he really does so (CD. I/1, 60, 1936).

In conclusion, to reiterate that which I said as a prelude, this book makes an indelible contribution to theology, and challenges traditional views that served to claim Barth as a theologian who focuses so much on the wholly otherness (Sacred) of God that humanity (Secular) becomes alienated from this very Word. Although I would not agree with Timothy Gorringer that Karl Barth was the twentieth century's greatest theologian of culture, I certainly think that this book puts us on the right path to understand culture as part of humanity and if we believe like Barth did that God is not against humanity but for it, then we must concede that this work helps us to understand that God is for our cultures as well, however when culture replaces the Word (Christ) with some cultural figure, then that particular culture becomes diabolical and prompts the church to oppose it in any way possible.