
Bruce McCormack has written yet another outstanding book on the theology of Karl Barth. I say outstanding because McCormack is a penetrating reader of the doctrinal commitments that hold the Church Dogmatics (CD) together. Foremost in McCormack’s mind is the work the doctrine of election undertakes in Barth’s mature doctrine of God, as enunciated in CD II/2. Therein Barth argues that it is God’s decision or decree to never be himself apart from humankind, from the covenant of grace that is determinative of God’s being. It is that which supplies material unity, according to McCormack, to Barth’s theology. It is the radicalism of such a move, as it comes to the fore after 1936 that McCormack draws out throughout the four parts of the book: (1) Barth’s relationship to nineteenth century theology, (2) postliberalism and postmodernism, (3) Barth’s theological ontology, and (4) a series of occasional writings.

It is the third part of the book, Barth’s theological ontology, that finds McCormack at his most incisive and probing. Accordingly, Barth is modern inasmuch as he is concerned with the problem of the knowledge of God. Barth takes Kantian epistemology seriously when it comes to the problem of knowing God: the problem of revelation. Barth is orthodox “in the realm of Christology under the conditions of modernity” (232). That is to say, Barth as a modern thinker is concerned with history, with integrating “the concept of ‘history’ into his concept of ‘person’ ” (229). Barth secures the classical orthodox concern—the ontic unity of Father, Son, and Spirit—in a distinctly modern fashion by way of a realist concept of history.

What is perhaps most important and controversial in McCormack’s reading with respect to contemporary Barth scholarship is his invocation of the language of “anticipation” to describe Barth’s understanding of the relationship of God’s eternal being to God’s action in time. For example, “God freely determined that his eternal being would be, already in eternity-past, constituted, by way of anticipation, by the incarnation of the ‘Son’ in time (and the outpouring of the Spirit in time)” (154). This important theme weaves its way throughout all of the essays: McCormack identifies, in an even stronger sense than does Barth, the material content of the immanent trinity and the economic trinity. Not that the later Barth—the Barth of CD II/2 onward—would disagree, but Barth is not always as consistent as McCormack would want him to be as concerns the ontic implications of Barth’s own claims regarding the self-revelation of God: God determines himself to be God only in relation to humankind. This is not to say that Barth does not for a moment disavow or, as McCormack reminds us, ever suggest that God’s activity, activity in accordance with God’s decision, lacks determination as far as God’s being is concerned. The language of anticipation seems to be a moving beyond Barth on McCormack’s part for
the sake of being faithful to Barth; for the sake of rendering Barth more deeply consistent with his own deepest insights.

It is at this point that one becomes aware of both the enormous strengths and sophistication of McCormack’s reading but also perhaps of its minor weakness. That is, McCormack reads the “mature” Barth in a robustly systematic fashion, whereas another leading English-speaking reader of Barth, John Webster, seems to read Barth more as a dogmatician. The difference between the two readings is subtle, but I would argue significant. The latter’s reading strikes me as being somewhat freer: There is less of a desire to read Barth through systematic lenses and more of a desire to attend to what Barth actually does with Scripture, his practice of reading, if you will, which funds his basic doctrinal convictions. Hence, I wonder whether it is not at times better to have a less heavy-handed account of what unites Barth’s corpus. Instead of positing a theological ontology as the center, that is the problem of knowing God, the problem of revelation, and hence the overcoming of “the Kantian subject-object split … by a transcendent divine act,” might it not be better to let Barth be, rough edges in all, even if there are inconsistencies in his presentation (163, 111). Indeed, “God is what God does—and humanity is what Jesus does”; but are questions of theological ontology really as absolutely determinative for Barth as McCormack suggests (239)? Again, this is not to suggest for a moment that they are not; but it is to raise the question of whether a developmental and systematic reading functions at perhaps a level of abstraction in relation to the very real theological work that other crucial doctrines, e.g., that of reconciliation, undertake in the CD. In short, the worry is this: There is a great deal of material in Barth, especially volume 4, that, while not overturning what McCormack’s reading suggests—although the incorporation of anticipation language is at points debatable—would, nonetheless, provide a reading that is not so heavily invested in ontological and epistemological questions.

The most illuminating essay in the volume is “Karl Barth’s Historicized Christology: Just How ‘Chalcedonian’ Is It?” In this essay, one sees McCormack at his best. I say best because of his uncanny ability to articulate the character of Barth’s orthodoxy. Although I find the term still somewhat heavy-handed, to describe Barth as orthodox is possible and salutary inasmuch as Barth takes up the Fathers’ concern to not think of God apart from the man Jesus; he does so in a uniquely modern way that results in a highly orthodox answer. In short, the being and existence of the second person of the Trinity “cannot be rightly thought of in absence of this human history.” (223) It is not that the fathers eclipsed this human being—the ontological significance of his life, death, and resurrection, but it is to say that by talking about person in historical terms and not so much in terms of natures one learns from Barth, as McCormack deftly demonstrates, that it is the decision of God to be God for humanity that teaches us what it means for God to be the person that he is. God’s eternal self-positing of himself as
triune—a self-positing that is in accordance with an eternal decision—is a self-positing that is indeed identical with a particular history. There is not an independent being of the second person of the trinity. Avoidance of nature language, then, in favor of the language of history is Barth’s way of safeguarding and securing the identity of the Logos asarkos with the Logos incarnandus (262).

Readers of Barth once again owe McCormack an enormous debt of gratitude. McCormack inhabits the nineteenth-century literature in an unparalleled manner so as to help one appreciate more and more the extent to which Barth undoes from within the Kantian paradigm by describing the ontological implications of God’s determination to be God for us in Jesus Christ. For that I am grateful. For far too long it has been easy and all too fashionable for theology to embrace a false apophatasis. McCormack reminds us, by way of a rich and probing reading of Barth—especially CD II/2—that God is as God does, that what God is in pretemporal eternity God becomes in time. Only such an emphasis wherein the center of gravity lies in “‘God’s being is in coming’” has the theological resources to resist and rebuff the pitfalls of an exemplarist Christology and the doctrine of God that funds it; a doctrine that divorces God’s act from God’s being. (259)

—Christopher R. J. Holmes


A recent article in the Boston Globe (“Theological Schools Pursue Economies of Consolidation,” May 29, 2009) chronicles the effects of the current fiscal crisis as played out in several of New England’s more historically significant seminaries and graduate schools of theological education. Not for the first time in its long history Andover Newton Theological School, originally established in 1809 as America’s first theological seminary, is looking to consolidate with a likeminded institution. Negotiations are currently ongoing with Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School of Rochester New York, with the goal in mind being a full merger of faculty and administration as a single, centrally located institution. This is perhaps merely the most prominent example of a scenario that is being repeated all across the country among institutions of all denominational affiliations. Clearly, theological education in America finds itself in a state of flux, the direct result of a constellation of factors of which the above-mentioned fiscal crisis is but one.

In his exhaustive study on the subject, Glenn Miller’s *Piety and Profession: American Protestant Theological Education, 1870–1970* shows that flux and transition is perhaps the most apt description of theological education in America. Indeed, Miller suggests that beginning in the decades following America’s Civil War such factors as the increasingly specialized nature of