

Karl Barth and the Historical Jesus

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IF ONE asks Barth what significance the historical Jesus has for Christian faith, the answer will be: the so-called historical Jesus is a construction of historicism which misses the fullness and reality of his life and death by limiting it to that realm of history that can be reconstructed by the historical-critical method (*Historie*). Jesus, however, belongs to that realm of history in which is executed the eternal will and decree of God (*Geschichte*).

This answer is further supported by Barth's exposition of the *anhypostasis* of Jesus Christ's human nature. Jesus did not exist as a man separate from the incarnate Son of God, but only as *the* man Jesus Christ. The humanity of Jesus cannot be considered apart from the divinity, because the divinity is constitutive of this particular, specific man. With this dogmatic¹ affirmation every neutral, historical-critical approach to the reality of Jesus Christ is rejected as misleading and illegitimate.²

Barth reinforces this position by refusing to use the traditional concepts of *exinanitio* and *exaltatio* as descriptions of the temporal succession of Incarnation and subsequent Elevation of Jesus. Even in the humility and obedience of the man Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus is and remains the elevated Lord, the Son of God. Even as in the triumph of Resurrection and Ascension, Christ is and remains the humiliated and obedient man Jesus.³

When viewed from the standpoint of the problem of the historical Jesus much of Barth's theological method appears seriously questionable. Barth holds that Jesus Christ is God's history with man in space and time, known to us through the witnesses of the New Testament, a book written by human men in human words. As a written document the New Testament can be an object of the historical-critical method. But the historical method must be limited to the secondary function only of instrumentally helping to understand the essential nature of the Scriptures as witnesses to God's history with men. Barth refuses to concede to the historical-critical method any possibility or legitimacy of going behind the given canon to understand its historical development.

Therefore, Barth obviously cannot and does not speak about the historical Jesus. Any attempt to go behind the given canon to a historical Jesus in Barth's eyes misses the real nature and intention of the New Testament to confess Jesus as the risen Lord. The Scriptures are historical only in their givenness, but not in their participation in the course of history itself. Operating from the base of a dogmatic hermeneutics, Barth posits the actual and essential unity of the New Testament canon. This means that the question of his-

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¹ "Dogmatic" is used here in its positive meaning to refer to the "content" of revelation.

² *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, pp. 47-50, 91; *Kirchliche Dogmatik* IV/2, pp. 50-54, 100-01.

³ C.D. IV/2, pp. 109-10; K.D., pp. 121-22. Cf. C.D. IV/1, pp. 79-154; K.D. IV/1, pp. 83-170.

torical truth is subjected to the question of dogmatic truth. The problems of historical exegesis which reveal the actual development of the canon in the ambiguous course of history are resolved in dogmatics. This is possible for Barth because on the basis of his theological presuppositions he can affirm the unity and identity of the questions of historical and dogmatic truth.⁴

In this identification there is a confusing mixture of historical method and dogmatic confession. It is true that recent New Testament scholarship has shown that the historical intention of the Gospels is not to give a neutral, biographical account of Jesus. Rather, they are a peculiar product of the church motivated by its kerygmatic confession of Jesus as risen Lord. But this New Testament research has also uncovered various strata in the historical development of the Gospel tradition, e. g., the historical Jesus, the Aramaic-speaking church, and the Hellenistic church. Thereby historical research, by going behind the canon, has inevitably raised the problem of the historical Jesus. This going-behind the canon cannot be dismissed as historically wrong on the basis of a dogmatic methodology. Dogmatic confession cannot legitimately prescribe the historical limitations of the historical-critical method.

Barth's methodology appears highly arbitrary in this respect in view of contemporary New Testament scholarship. When the historical-critical method is applied to the New Testament it must investigate the origin and the development of the New Testament as a historical phenomenon. In carrying out this task it can and does isolate Jesus as a historical phenomenon. The tension between the historically reconstructed picture of Jesus and the confessed Christ of the New Testament canon cannot be eliminated simply by the dogmatic affirmation that the biblical Christ is the real Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore, a historical exegesis must unavoidably ask questions regarding historical correspondence, interrelationship, and authenticity, and regarding material correspondence, agreement, and relationship. Such a historical exegesis factually does turn up tension, disparity, and contradiction in the various strata of the Gospel tradition and in the various literary units of the New Testament. Thus the question of the historical Jesus must be seen in the context of the problem of the relationship between historical exegesis and dogmatic confession.⁵

The questionable solution that Barth has given to this problem of the relationship between historical and dogmatic truth leads not to clarity, but to a muddle of objective history and dogmatic confession. The prime example of this methodological confusion is seen in Barth's portrayal of Jesus as The Royal Man.⁶ When one reads these passages it is never clear whether the description of Jesus is based on a reality proclaimed in the confession of the church, or on a historical reality which would have been obvious to any of Jesus' contemporaries. Actually Barth refuses to distinguish between these two possibilities. Yet, because no distinction is methodologically justified, the dogmatic reality appears on the same plane as historical reality. Hans Conzelmann rightly protests against this confusion:

The lack of clarity in respect to the sources takes its revenge in the form of a latent historization of "kerygmatic" theology: the dogmatic picture of Jesus is changed behind one's back again into a historical

⁴ Cf. Hermann Diem, *Dogmatics*, trans. Harold Knight, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959, pp. 59-63.

⁵ Cf. Ernst Käsemann, "Begründet der neutestamentliche Kanon die Einheit der Kirche?" and "Zum Thema der Nichtobjektivierbarkeit," in *Exegetische Versuche und Besinnungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1960), pp. 214-36.

⁶ C.D. IV/2, pp. 154-264; K.D. IV/2, pp. 175-293.

(*historisch*), or rather a pseudohistorical picture. It is then received in the thinking of the Church as a historical picture. The price that one pays for this is that piety regards genuine history (*Historie*) as a threat.⁷

Barth's answer is that the only legitimate way to see Jesus is to see him as the New Testament confesses him. One may not isolate a historical Jesus from the Jesus confessed and remembered in the New Testament. This New Testament picture of Jesus is based on the post-Easter manifestation of the risen Lord. Therefore, Barth rejects any kind of isolated historical approach to Jesus.⁸ Yet in doing this Barth ignores the fact that there can be and is a neutral, historical approach to Jesus as a human person. The problem raised by this historical reconstruction of Jesus cannot be overcome by declaring it theologically illegitimate. History cannot be overcome by dogma.

There is no doubt that the New Testament sees and confesses Jesus in the light of the Resurrection and wishes to proclaim him even in his earthly life as Christ and Lord. However, Conzelmann is correct again when he writes:

What the Gospels want to be does not finally determine how I employ them today. The question is not whether they were intended to be source material, but whether — in some methodologically determined way — they are; whether they can be evaluated by the historian as source material.⁹

In his depiction of Jesus, Barth presupposes the believing acceptance of the New Testament picture of Jesus as the epistemological basis for describing Jesus as the royal man. This is in accord with Barth's understanding of *anhypostasis* and *exinanitio*. However, such dogmatic insights simply cannot serve as guide lines for the historical method. Surely few historians could accept this epistemological basis for the knowledge of history, nor can the theologian when he operates as a historian.

Barth's exegesis is based on the dogmatic affirmation of Jesus' identity with the kingdom of God. However, even though this identity was consummated in the Christian tradition, it is not part of the earliest Synoptic tradition. By use of a dogmatic hermeneutical principle Barth reads a meaning into certain pericopes that they did not originally have in their primary place of origin. Such a dogmatic exegesis results in an interpretation of texts which their original historical meaning and context cannot bear.

For example, Barth writes:

He Himself in His own person was that which He proclaimed in word and deed: the imminent kingdom of God impinging on all other kingdoms and therefore on every man . . . It is among them as Jesus Himself is among them (Luke 17:21). For "if I with the finger of God cast out devils . . . the kingdom of God is come upon you" (Luke 11:20). The King and His kingdom, the Lord and His lordship, are one.¹⁰

As historical exegesis of these texts and other Synoptic texts this exposition is indefensible. In all the authentic words of Jesus there is no indication that he expressed any identity between himself and the kingdom which he proclaimed. Even if he identified himself with the Son of Man (Mark 8:38), this kingdom is a coming one which is not already present in his person. Such an identity can be made on the basis of the Resurrection-confession of the church, but must be distinguished from a statement of purely historical

⁷ Hans Conzelmann, "Zur Methode der Leben-Jesu-Forschung," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche*, LVI (1959), 4. My translation.

⁸ C.D. IV/2, pp. 247-48; K.D. IV/2, pp. 274-75.

⁹ Conzelmann, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁰ C.D. IV/2, p. 162; K.D. IV/2, p. 181.

exegesis. Only an exegesis that bears with full consciousness the tension between historical exegesis and theological confession can stand with convincing integrity.

At moments Barth seems to be describing the historical Jesus as a historically obvious manifestation of revelation. Then he says that this manifestation was only registered, not really perceived by the disciples.¹¹ But is Barth not thereby admitting that there was some aspect of Jesus which is historically accessible apart from and in distinction from the reality of Jesus known on the basis of the post-Easter confession?

The confusion is intensified by statements which seem fully incongruous. For example, Barth writes:

Without His resurrection and ascension, and therefore without the witness of the Holy Spirit, Jesus would certainly have gone through history, or rather gone under in world history, only as an obscure and unsuccessful Jewish eccentric and revolutionary like so many others.¹²

It is then difficult to know just how one is to understand such statements as the following two:

He Himself was a source of amazement and even alarm to the people. He was an absolutely alien and exciting *novum*.¹³

What was the reason for this joy? And what was its object? When we ask these questions, the answer is to be found quite simply in the fact that what met them in this man was the clear, redemptive mercy of God speaking quite unequivocally and authoritatively.¹⁴

Because Barth rejects any methodological attempt to distinguish here between the historically descriptive and the dogmatically explicative, this section is full of ambiguity and is exegetically misleading.

This methodological difficulty is evident again when Barth discusses Jesus' death. He sees a wonderful readiness and willingness on the part of Jesus to fulfill his mission on the cross. There is no trace, Barth argues, of Jesus' having expected any other outcome to his mission other than his death. Jesus' whole existence was directed to this outcome, and he was not surprised or offended by it.¹⁵

Here Barth seems to be interested in the question of whether the intention of the historical Jesus corresponded to the proclamation of the kerygma. However, his methodology forbids this question, or rather prescribes a dogmatic answer. According to Barth's dogmatic hermeneutics, there could not be any trace of Jesus' having expected anything different from his death, because his obedience is the full obedience of the Son to the Father.¹⁶ It would almost appear that he wishes to demonstrate that his dogmatic exegesis has the support of a purely historical exegesis, but if this is the case it would mean that Barth is assigning a more material role to historical exegesis than just that of helping to understand the text in its givenness. Although Barth has tried to overcome the problem of the historical Jesus by a dogmatic methodology, it appears that he has not succeeded in really defining the theological import of historical-critical exegesis. Barth has not resolved the

¹¹ C.D. IV/2, p. 136; K.D. IV/2, p. 153.

¹² C.D. IV/2, p. 168; K.D. IV/2, p. 188.

¹³ C.D. IV/2, p. 157; K.D. IV/2, p. 175.

¹⁴ C.D. IV/2, p. 182; K.D. IV/2, p. 203.

¹⁵ C.D. IV/2, p. 258; K.D. IV/2, p. 286. Bultmann maintains the very opposite: "The greatest embarrassment for the attempt to reconstruct a picture of Jesus' character is the fact that we do not know how he understood his end, his death." *Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus*, Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1961, p. 11. My translation.

¹⁶ C.D. IV/1, pp. 200-01, 564-65; K.D. IV/1, pp. 219, 630-31.

historical problem of Christian faith that has been handed to us as the critical legacy of the nineteenth-century. Although his theology has served to focus this question in its proper theological context, the crucial historical question itself is not resolved, but swallowed up in a dogmatic methodology.

Because God's act in Jesus Christ took place in contingent, concrete history, some aspect of this act can be the object of the historical-critical method. Although the primitive church remembered Jesus of Nazareth in the light of its confession of him as the risen Lord, it could remember him only because his life participated in that realm of history that is open to public scrutiny. Therefore, historical-critical exegesis actually has a theological function, because God's revealing of Himself has taken place in that realm of history that is open to hypothetical doubt. Barth's refusal to interpret *exinanitio* as an expression of God's having given Himself over to our ambiguous and contingent history has prevented him from seeing the theological importance of the problem of the historical Jesus.

The constructive way beyond Barth will be the clarification of the relationship of historical-critical exegesis to the dogmatic confession of the Church. A quest of the historical Jesus is illegitimate if it would seek to verify faith or if it would seek to demonstrate that the historical Jesus directly is the revelation of God. But it is theologically legitimate if in seeking to clarify the relation of faith to history it reminds us that an event in concrete, contingent history is God's act for us.