

KARL BARTH'S CHRISTOLOGICALLY-GROUNDED UNDERSTANDING OF THE ECUMENICAL TASK

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REZUMAT: Concepția fundamentată cristologică a lui Karl Barth despre angajarea ecumenică. În acest studiu doresc să demonstrez trei idei privitoare la tema Barth și ecumenismul. Mai întâi, că Biserica are mereu nevoie de convertirea la Domnul întrucât nicio biserică nu a ajuns încă la destinație. În al doilea rând, întrucât unitatea se află în viitor, cei care practică teologia nu trebuie să se simtă constrânși de vechile moduri de a o face, mai ales de acelea mai degrabă filosofice decât teologice. În al treilea rând, *aggiornamento* nu înseamnă supunerea Bisericii la modele culturale ale timpului, ci a lăsa suflarea Spiritului să ne convertească la o mai mare fidelitate față de Domnul Bisericii.

Cuvinte-cheie: Barth, ecumenism, eclesiologie, unitatea creștinilor, *aggiornamento*, dialog catolic-protestant.

RESUME: Le fondement christologique de la tâche œcuménique chez Karl Barth. Dans cette étude je veux montrer trois choses concernant le thème Barth et l'œcuménisme. Premièrement, que l'Église a toujours besoin de la conversion au Seigneur car aucune église n'est pas encore arrivée à la destination. Deuxièmement, comme l'unité se trouve à l'avenir, ceux qui pratiquent la théologie ne doivent pas se sentir contraints par les anciens modes de la faire, surtout par ceux plus philosophiques que proprement théologiques. Et troisièmement, *aggiornamento* ne veut pas dire soumission aux modes culturelles de son temps, mais laisser le souffle de l'Esprit nous convertir à une plus grande fidélité envers le Seigneur de l'Église.

Mots-clefs: Barth, œcuménisme, ecclésiologie, unité des chrétiens, *aggiornamento*, dialogue catholique-protestant.

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Introduction

Karl Barth was a “grass-roots” ecumenist. Though he would, in later years, contribute directly to “official” ecumenism (at the founding of the World Council of Churches in 1948 and as a participant in the preparatory sessions leading to the Evanston gathering in 1954), from the earliest days of his dogmatic activity in the 1920s, he worried about solutions to the problem of the divided churches which were created by bureaucracies and imposed from without, i.e. from outside the shared life of Christians in community. His most substantial contributions to the cause of ecumenism came about when speaking as an individual theologian; as a member of a church who acknowledged a responsibility to its confession, to be sure, but not as an officially appointed representative.

Over the years, the viewpoints which guided Barth’s ecumenical engagement changed little, if at all. They were already in place by the mid-1930s. They are still evident in the discussions he would have in Rome with members of the Catholic hierarchy (including Pope Paul VI) and with Catholic theologians in 1966, a year after the Second Vatican Council had completed its work.

This past autumn marked the fiftieth anniversary of Barth’s “pilgrimage” to Rome² - an event celebrated recently in Washington, D.C. with a conference on the ongoing significance of Vatican II and of Barth’s questions to it, jointly sponsored by the Thomistic Institute at the Dominican House of Studies and the Center for Barth Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. It also prompts me to set forth a further reflection - which will take the form of an attempt to discern what we may learn today from the theological viewpoints which informed Barth’s understanding of the task of ecumenism. I would like to begin, by way of introduction, with some brief background on Barth’s trip to Rome.

In 1963, Barth had been invited to be an “observer” at the Second Vatican Council, something he very much wished to do. He was honoured and pleased to have been invited but an already overloaded calendar prevented him from accepting.³ And, as things turned out, he could not have gone anyway. Serious illness leading to hospitalization on more than one occasion made the rigors of an engagement with Catholic theologians unthinkable for the time being.

² This is Barth’s own description of his trip. See K. Barth, *Ad limina apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican II*, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press 1968, 11.

³ Karl Barth to Hans Küng, 19 September 1963, in K. Barth, *Briefe, 1961-1963*, ed. by J. Fangmeier and H. Stoevesandt, Zürich: TVZ 1975, 191.

On 2 June 1966, however, Barth wrote to Cardinal Bea, Director of the Secretariat for Christian Unity and the person responsible for his 1963 invitation, to say that he was feeling much better and wondered whether the original invitation might be renewed *post festum*. He did not wish to speak or give a paper. Rather, he wished only to hear in Rome how those most instrumental in making the Council possible now thought of it - looking back on its results and looking forward to its still future impact.⁴ “My intention,” he wrote, “is *not* to speak in Rome, but rather, as much as possible, to hear, to perceive, to understand, to *learn*, only answering questions appropriately which might perhaps be put to me.”⁵ Although, as things transpired, Barth also brought with him to Rome a series of carefully prepared questions of his own, his intention nonetheless remained to take the role of the “hearing church” in relation to representatives of the Roman Catholic Church as “teaching church.”⁶ And upon his return to Basel, he felt satisfied that he had conducted himself in Rome in precisely that way. Those questions only - and not the answers given by Catholic theologians, which Barth treated with great discretion - were published in 1967.⁷

Now Barth’s intention to hear, listen and learn was not simply an expression of good manners, of the civility and respect owed to Cardinal Bea (and in his official capacity, to the Roman Church). It was instead the product of a theologically-grounded understanding of ecumenical engagement which had been formed over a forty year period stretching back to the early days of Barth’s dialectical theology in the early 1920s - and formed, I hasten to add, with the Catholic conversation-partner most especially in mind.

In what follows, I will begin with what I have been calling the theological “viewpoints” which emerge in the “early” Barth’s writings which are of relevance to the theology and the practice of ecumenism. In a second section, I will make some observations with respect to certain questions raised by Barth in Rome; questions chosen because of the emphasis Barth himself would subsequently lay upon them. In a third and final section, I will say something about lessons which might be learned today from Barth’s Christologically-grounded theology of ecumenical engagement.

⁴ Karl Barth to Augustin Kardinal Bea, 2 June 1966, in Barth, *Briefe* 334.

⁵ Barth, *Briefe* 335.

⁶ E. Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth: Tagebuch 1965-1968*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011, 84 (entry for October 5, 1966 - reporting on a conversation which Busch had with Barth six days after the latter’s return from Rome).

⁷ See above, note 2.

I. On Being Questioned by the Other in Dialogue - and Its Theological Necessity

The place to begin in any consideration of Barth's theology is with his account of revelation as it emerged in the earliest phase of his work in the field of Christian dogmatics. The Self-revelation of God is understood by Barth as taking place in hiddenness. This conception is not first and foremost the expression of an epistemological limitation on the side of the human knower; a boundary of human knowledge which can (perhaps) be established by philosophy. No, the "hiddenness" of God in Barth's theology is a function of *the modality* of God's Self-revelation. It is therefore an irreducibly Christological state of affairs. What happens in revelation? God unveils God's Self in and through a veil of creaturely flesh - which remains flesh in being so used. God assumes a full and complete human "nature" (lacking nothing proper to the human - mind, will, energy of operation) - and in so doing makes Himself to be a composite Christological subject together with that "nature."

The "hiddenness" of God in His Self-revelation is now clear. For the ontological composition of the Christological subject is not something that is directly discernible or perceptible to an observer. It must, in fact, be revealed by the Holy Spirit who testifies to the true nature of this composite subject and makes Him known. Revelation thus has three "moments" (logically): the Father who sends the Son into this world, the Son who is made to be (together with His human "nature") a composite Christological subject, and the Holy Spirit who gives to an observer the spiritual "eyes" to see what lies hidden beneath the veil of human flesh. Thus, the veil remains a veil even as God unveils God's Self in and through it. That is the true hiddenness of God in His Self-revelation.

From this state of affairs, Barth then drew a conclusion for our understanding of the relation of Christ to the church. The "head" of the church is nowhere directly *given* to the church or in the church but remains "other." His "otherness" is guaranteed by the modality of His Self-revelation. If revelation takes place in hiddenness, then Christ is and remains the Lord of the epistemic relation by means of which humans are given a share in the divine Self-knowledge in revelation. Revelation does not mean - and cannot mean - that the One revealed is taken under control, as it were, and mastered by the human knower. And the knowledge of faith which takes its rise in the event of revelation cannot have the status of a secure possession, something *known* (past tense) and now susceptible of being used, managed, brought into play in support of even the best purposes which human being might set for it. Please notice: it is because Barth's Christology is

structured in the way it is that his account of revelation is dis-possessive. And it is because his account of revelation is dis-possessive that his treatment of the relation of Christ to the church lays so much emphasis on the irreducible “otherness” of the “head” of the church in relation to the church as His body. This is not a theology devised under duress to address pragmatic needs arising out of Protestant-Catholic dialogue. It has roots that go much deeper, having to do with Christology in the first instance and its significance for an account of the modality of divine Self-revelation. The decisive point is this: revelation - the revelation in which the church is born - is an event over which human beings can exercise no control. It is never a *given*, a datum to be mastered and handed on. It can only be given moment by moment.

Barth is only being consistent, then, when he argues that there can be no “naturalistic confusion of heaven and earth” and that, therefore, the Church cannot rightly be regarded as a “prolongation” of the incarnation or as the “continuation of revelation.”⁸ If Christ, the head of the church, is not directly given to and in the church, then the church can be neither prolongation nor continuation. The head of the church has ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of God the Father, the Almighty. From *thence* He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. The ascension means the departure of the One who alone *possesses* absolute, material authority. “The exaltation of the head really means for the body a lowering, its demotion to a position of humility and waiting..”⁹

It follows that *the* church, the church purified and without spot or wrinkle, is hidden in its - in itself - always questionable historical manifestations.¹⁰ If the head of the church is only revealed in hiddenness, then the church too is only revealed in hiddenness. *The* church is present to and in all churches insofar as any are truly churches, but it is directly identical with none of them. *The* church is always (and in every moment) *becoming visible* in the church in history¹¹; but its becoming is never fixed and finalized so that we can look back on its becoming visible as a finished fact. *The* church in time too is always an event. Its visibility is not something that can be taken for granted.

Now given all of these commitments and their organic relatedness, it comes as no surprise to hear Barth say that real “unity” in the church, the “unity” which the ecumenical movement seeks, is directly identical only with Christ as

⁸ K. Barth, “Church and Theology” in idem., *Theology and Church*, New York: Harper & Row, 1962, 294.

⁹ Barth, “Theology and Church” 294.

¹⁰ Barth, „Theology and Church“ 293.

¹¹ K. Barth, “*Unterricht in der christlichen Religion*”, *Dritter Band: Die Lehre von der Versöhnung / Die Lehre von der Erlösung, 1925/1926*, ed. by H. Stoevesandt, Zürich: TVZ 2003, 364.

the head of the church. The real “unity” of the church is the “unity” which He Himself constitutes in an “otherness” which is preserved even as that “unity” is made visible as the churches. Real unity can only be given by God; it cannot be achieved by human striving.¹²

Now this does not mean that Barth is at all sanguine about the division of the churches. Far from it! “Jesus Christ as the one Mediator between God and humanity *is* absolutely church unity, that unity in which there are most certainly a multiplicity of congregations, of gifts, of persons in the church; through which, however, a multiplicity of churches is excluded.”¹³ It is because the church lives from the mission Christ has given to it in His death and resurrection (the mission to proclaim that all human sin has been put to death in Christ - both our contradiction of God *and our contradiction of one another and our contradiction in and for itself*) that our mission can only be realized where the church is one, united church. That does not mean that a united church would automatically give adequate testimony to its true oneness in Christ. It only means that a divided church cannot possibly do so. No church in a situation of division can do that. “One should not wish to explain the multiplicity of churches... One should recognize it as a fact. One should understand it as an impossibility which has entered in. One should understand it as guilt which we must bear without being able to deliver ourselves from it. One should in no way comfort one’s self with regard to its reality. One should pray for forgiveness and for its removal.”¹⁴ A situation in which the doctrine or confession of one church contradicts that of another is a sheer impossibility. That human beings should tear apart the unity that Christ is, is sin - a sin which for which all are responsible.

“If Jesus Christ is the unity of the church and if the multiplicity of churches is our need [*Not* in German], then there is no avoiding the fact that unifying the churches into the church is a task and, indeed, a task given by the Lord of the church, a command.”¹⁵ But! This is a command which, in the nature

¹² In a recent address, Pope Francis made the same point. “...unity is not the fruit of our human efforts or the product of ecclesiastical diplomacy, but it is a gift that comes from on high. We men are not able to achieve unity by ourselves, nor can we discern the ways and times. What, then, is our role? What must we do to promote Christian unity? Our task is to receive this gift and make it visible to all.” see “Pope’s Address to Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity”, at

<http://zenit.org/articles/popes-address-to-pontifical-council-for-promoting-christian-unity-2/>, p. 2.

¹³ K. Barth, “Die Kirche und die Kirchen”, in idem, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten*, 2nd ed., Zürich: TVZ 1986, 217.

¹⁴ Barth, “Die Kirche und die Kirchen“ 220.

¹⁵ Barth, “Die Kirche und die Kirchen“ 223.

of the case, only the Lord of the church Himself can finally fulfil - and fulfil by giving to the churches a sincere repentance and converting them to Himself. What is needed, above all, is the conversion of each and every church - *not* to another church but to the Lord of the church.¹⁶ Where a church understands conversation with an ecumenical partner as the occasion for repentance - and for the renovation, renewal and reformation of one's own church in service of its ongoing conversion to the Lord of the church, there the conditions on the human side for the emergence of real unity have been made optimal. But we should be under no illusions. The unity of the Church is not the same as a union of churches we could create and give to ourselves.¹⁷ If the Lord of the church does not bring it about, a union of churches is nothing more than a corporate merger, a business transaction dressed up in spiritual rhetoric.

Finally, the "unity" of the Church which God commands is not a numerical oneness and singularity. It is not a "moral-sociological ideal of uniformity, unanimity, and harmony."¹⁸ Barth means what he says when he says that the real "unity" of the Church is a unity which embraces diverse congregations composed of those who belong to diverse races, who speak different languages, etc. So long as this diversity does not give rise to divided churches, the "unity" of the Church can embrace it. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph.4:4-6). And so: the true church is composed of those drawn from every nation, from every linguistic and cultural group, with a variety of gifts. Unity is not uniformity.¹⁹

Now one might wish to respond to the foregoing series of observations by saying that, however true it may be that revelation in and for itself is not directly given to the church, it is precisely because this is so that the existence of a

¹⁶ On this point too, Pope Francis comes to virtually the same conclusion. "...unity is not absorption. Christian unity does not impose an ecumenism 'in reverse,' by which some might deny their own history of faith... Before seeing what separates us, we should perceive also in an essential way, the richness which unites us, such as Sacred Scripture and the great professions of faith of the Ecumenical Councils. ... Ecumenism is true when it is able to move our attention away from ourselves, from our argumentations and formulations, to the Word of God which exacts being listened to, received and witnessed in the world." "Pope's Address...", *Zenit* 4.

¹⁷ Barth, "Die Kirche und die Kirchen" 217.

¹⁸ Barth, "Die Kirche und die Kirchen" 217.

¹⁹ On this point, see again Pope Francis "...unity is not uniformity. The different theological, liturgical, spiritual and canonical differences which have developed in the Christian world, when they are genuinely rooted in the Apostolic Tradition, are a richness and not a threat to the unity of the Church. To seek to do away with such diversity is to go against the Holy Spirit..." "Pope's Address...", *Zenit* 3.

magisterial teaching office endowed with power and authority to mediate revelation is needed. But Barth's careful distinction between the head of the church and His body does not allow us to think in terms of a mediation of revelation by the church. All mediation of revelation remains God's act of *Self*-mediation to which human beings can only respond as witnesses. And that means, then, that even the most official teachings of the church can never be more than a human witness to a revelation over which no control is exercised; the most significant human witness, perhaps, but still a human witness. Christ does not even partially relinquish his teaching authority in the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁰ Such power and authority as the church has to teach is derivative - and formal. Absolute and material authority belong to Christ alone and remain His. "The Word of God is above dogma as the heavens are above earth."²¹

One final comment: Barth's *style* of ecumenical engagement emerged quite naturally from his convictions concerning the relation of the head of the church to His body and of the relation of the unity of the Church to visible unity. Barth was convinced from very early on that a Protestant theologian serves the cause of visible unity best when she allows herself and her church to be questioned by the conversation-partner rather than assuming a position of superiority which would allow one to make a case against the theology and church order of one's conversation-partner and for one's own already established and tightly grasped and maintained theology and church order.²² This does not mean the suspension of theological responsibility, however. One prepares for the emergence of real church unity in visible form best precisely by doing the work of theology together with the conversation-partner. But listening, hearing and allowing oneself to be questioned are the best prerequisites to deepened understanding leading to repentance and conversion of one's own church to the Lord of the church. Nowhere is this more evident than in Barth's comportment in his trip to Rome in 1966 - and in its aftermath.

II. Barth and Vatican II

Already in 1963, Barth made it clear that he understood the "task" of the Second Vatican Council to consist in inner Catholic "renewal" - which, as we have

²⁰ Barth, "Church and Theology" 293.

²¹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1, 266.

²² In an important early essay, Barth noted that it is natural for human beings to want to play the role of Socrates as the "expert midwife of knowledge" in relation to the dialogue-partner. But he says, "It shall not be *so* among you" (Matt.20:26). See K. Barth, "Roman Catholicism: A Question to the Protestant Church", in idem, *Theology and Church* 307-08.

seen, was the best possible contribution the Roman Church could make to the realization of a visible unity of the churches. To those Protestant ecumenists who entertained hopes that the changes underway would yield some sort of adaptation to and/or assimilation of Protestant theological concerns, Barth offered both “sober realism”²³ and reasons for hope. The realistic note was sounded in a word of caution. “There is no reason for anyone to dream that the Roman Catholics might become ‘evangelical’ in *our* sense...”²⁴ That did not preclude the possibility, however, that the Roman Church might be becoming more ‘evangelical’ in a sense entirely congenial to its own traditions. And therein lay the reason for hope - as well as for some soul-searching on the side of the Protestants.

In the last analysis, Rome and the non-Roman churches are not static power groups, buttressed and delimited within themselves and devoted to the preservation of their possessions or the multiplication of their prestige and influence. Both are directed to the unification of all Christianity as their final end. Both live by the dynamics of the evangelical Word and Spirit which are totally constitutive for both. Both live to the extent that they are living communities of the living Jesus Christ. The question that confronts them, first and last, each in its own way and both in their co-existence, is not the co-operation of their different doctrines and institutions but this dynamic movement. They are summoned to give mutual attention to *this* movement. And the present situation could be determined by the fact that for a change we *non-Roman* Christians are in a special way the ones who are *questioned*. Certainly, we are not asked whether we could, should, or would wish to become “Catholic,” but we are asked whether, in view of the spiritual motion that is taking place there, something has been set in motion - or not set in motion! - on *our* side...²⁵

“Being questioned” has now acquired a new depth and breadth. It is not just that ecumenical dialogue provides an occasion for asking whether our theology might stand in need of reformation when judged in the light of a fresh hearing of the Word of God; it provides an occasion for us to ask even more fundamentally whether we too are being caught up into that movement of the Spirit in which the life of every true church consists. “What help would all the prayers about the unity of the church be to us as long as their central meaning was not the entreaty *Veni, creator Spiritus?*”²⁶

²³ Barth, “Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council”, in idem, *Ad limina apostolorum* 66.

²⁴ Barth, “Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council” 68.

²⁵ Barth, “Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council” 72-73.

²⁶ Barth, “Thoughts on the Second Vatican Council” 78.

All this was written in 1963, when as yet only the first session of the Council had completed its work. Barth's more measured reflection came after the Council had ended.²⁷ Over the summer of 1966, he devoted himself to close study of the Vatican documents and prepared a series of specific questions directed to all four constitutions, three of the nine decrees and two of the three declarations. These specific questions were divided in each instance into two parts: questions for clarification and - assuming the answers given showed that his understanding of the document in question was correct - a series of critical questions based on that understanding. In addition to this collection of questions directed to particular documents, there was also a series of general questions directed to the Council itself which were placed first, so as to frame the entire series; general questions having to do with the meaning and significance in the Council for the Catholics themselves.

Once in Rome, the specific questions directed to individual documents were taken up in seminars which lasted upwards of three and a half hours each. Present on each occasion were anywhere from six to twelve Catholic theologians. Barth would later praise his hosts for skipping polite introductions and other formalities and getting right down to the business at hand, i.e. the doing of theology together.²⁸ The discussions were characterized by an openness and freedom on both sides and, on occasion, accompanied by shared laughter.²⁹

My interest here rests primarily on the general questions - and those alone of the specific questions which were also asked in audiences Barth had with Pope Paul VI, Alfredo Cardinal Ottaviani (who was Secretary of the Holy Office in the Curia until 1966 and then Pro-prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith after the re-organization of the Holy Office) and Cardinal Bea. Close attention to each of the specific questions would require a monograph-length treatment. My ultimate goal here is to discern what Barth can teach us with regard to an ecumenical engagement which best serves the cause of an emerging visible unity.

The general questions were seven in number. They may be usefully treated in two steps, beginning with questions 1 and 2 and turning then to questions 3-7. "1. Do the decisions of the Council have a definite center and focus?" And "2. Was Vatican II a *reform* Council? (which is sometimes contested!)" These questions reflect a certain uncertainty on Barth's part which was muted, even veiled, in his more straightforward defence of the reforming character of the Council when

²⁷ In addition to the questions contained in *Ad limina apostolorum*, see also the "Account of the Trip to Rome" by which they are prefaced.

²⁸ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 84.

²⁹ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 84.

addressing his fellow Protestants. Was he right to think of this Council as a reform Council? And, more importantly, was it the expression of the kind of reform which would bind the Roman church more closely to the Scriptures and to the gospel witnessed to in them? What Barth hoped for most, I think, was confirmation that he was witnessing the birth of a Catholic version of “evangelicalism.” In any event, he posed slightly varying forms of questions 1 and 2 in the audiences he was given as well as in conversations with individual theologians while in Rome. It was a recurring theme.

Most encouraging, as things turned out, were conversations with the Jesuits at the Gregorianum. Edouard Dhanis (Jesuit Rector of the Gregorianum) and Juan Alfaro (professor of theology in the same university) saw the “chief result” of the Council and the dominant trend in post-Conciliar Catholicism to lie in more widespread study of the Scriptures and greater attention to them in day to day churchly activities.³⁰ To be sure, that encouraging sign was counter-balanced by the less promising note sounded by the Vicar General of the Dominican Order who assured Barth that “they” were all “Teilhardians” - who knew nothing of the new Jerusalem coming straight down from heaven (Rev.21:2) but expected the eschaton to be the result of a this-worldly development.³¹

Questions 1 and 2 as put to the Pope and to Cardinal Ottaviani did not receive answers Barth hoped for either. To the question “was he satisfied with the results of the Council?”, Paul VI responded (with tears in his eyes, Barth observed) that it was a great burden to have to carry the Petrine keys (Mt.16:19). Barth was bewildered by this response but it was explained to him, in the days immediately following his return to Basel, that the Pope had been caught between the progressive majority in the Council and ten (unnamed) traditionally-minded advisors in the Curia.³² Two very likely candidates were Cardinal Ottaviani and Archbishop Pietro Parente (who was present for Barth’s audience with the Cardinal). The atmosphere in the room during this exchange was “cool.”³³ To the question “what, in your opinion, was the decisive significance of the Council?” he received from the Cardinal a curt two words response: “The Church!” Things were not much better with Cardinal Bea, with respect to whom Barth undoubtedly had high hopes. Barth made a strategic error, I would say, in choosing to discuss the shortcomings of the “Declaration on Religious Liberty” - of which Bea was a prime architect. The details of that exchange need not concern us here.

³⁰ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 88.

³¹ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 88.

³² Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 85.

³³ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 86.

But in spite of these less than happy exchanges, Barth would leave Rome with renewed commitment to his high valuation of the significance of the Council (in large measure as a consequence of his seminars with Catholic theologians like Joseph Ratzinger and Karl Rahner). He would later write, "As a result of the trip, I gained a close acquaintance with a church and a theology which have begun a movement, the results of which are incalculable and slow but clearly genuine and irreversible. In looking at it, we can only wish that we had something comparable, if it could avoid a repetition of at least the worst mistakes we have made since the sixteenth century."

Questions 3-7 are also a unit. "3. What does *aggiornamento* mean? "Accommodation" [*Anpassung*] to what?" Questions 4-6 follow directly upon the answer given to 3. "4. Is it a matter of a) the renewal of the (theoretical and practical) *self-understanding* of the Church in light of the *revelation* which grounds it? or b) the renewal of its *thinking, speaking* and *acting today*: in light of the *modern world*?" "5. If both (in the interests of the pastoral task), which *primarily*?" "6. On which forms of renewal will emphasis lie in *post-Conciliar* development?"

And finally, "7. Are those who belong to the 'progressive' majority at the Council who opt for b) aware of the danger that it could all end in an unwanted repetition of mistakes which have their origin in modern Protestantism?" The last question, especially, gives evidence of Barth's own divided soul. How does one encourage reform without unleashing forces which could do harm to the "essence" of the Church? And, on the other hand, how can one encourage awareness of unwanted consequences without strengthening the hand of traditionalists who wanted no part in any of this?

Barth's dilemma was that he wanted the Roman Catholic Church to remain strong, indeed to become even stronger (in an "evangelical" sense), in order to provide stimulus for the Protestant churches to get their own houses in order. But he did not want to strengthen the hand of those within the Catholic communion who would be content to reaffirm the "Syllabus of Errors" and return to hostilities between the churches as had existed in the days of Vatican I either. He also knew that finding this middle path would not be easy for Catholic leadership - any more than it was for him in the Protestant church.

A final recurring question had to do with what was meant in Council documents by the designation "separated brethren" - especially as applied to the Protestants. That Protestants are separated from Rome is clear enough. The real question for him was this: what is lacking to the "separated"? And what is meant by the "fullness" which is said *not* to be "realized" in the churches separated from

Rome (in *Unitatis Redintegratio* 1.4)?³⁴ This was a question Barth put not only to the Pope but also to the Roman theologians. On one occasion, he pointed to his Roman Catholic physician and friend (who had accompanied him to Rome) and asked quite pointedly, given the mutual understanding that existed between the two of them even in theological matters, how he should understand himself as “separated.” The answer given him was that to be “separated” is not to be in “direct communication with the Bishop of Rome.”³⁵ That answer was “immeasurably disappointing” to Barth insofar as it touched directly on nothing material - whether in doctrine of Christian experience - but remained (he thought) “merely external.”³⁶

We might sharpen Barth’s questions further in light of the lines of inquiry we considered in the first section of this paper and put them this way. If “Protestants” are truly brothers and sisters in Christ, do they not experience the saving benefits of Christ’s work? And can this experience be so “divided” or “portioned” out (quantified?) as to allow one to speak of gradients of that experience? And, in any case, the “fullness” of salvation” is surely reserved to the “glorified” in heaven. If that be so, how can one speak of a “fullness” here and now?

Barth surely knew, since he had already studied the documents closely, that the second Vatican Council had claimed that the sought for Christian unity “subsists in the Catholic Church as something she cannot lose” (*U.R.* I, 4).³⁷ And he clearly knew that the Orthodox Churches had been judged to stand closer to the unity that the Catholic Church is by virtue of the fact that the Orthodox “possess true sacraments, above all - by apostolic succession - the priesthood and the Eucharist, whereby they are still joined to us in closest intimacy” (*U.R.* III, 15) - something not said of the Protestant churches.³⁸ But, of course, that answer only served to underscore the “externality” of which Barth complained; it left “fullness” vague where material content was concerned. But it also underscored the degree to which making real “unity” visible could only be accomplished by a return to Rome (since real unity “subsists” in that communion). This Barth questioned for the reason we already outlined: viz. the conviction that the real “unity” of the church is only to be found in Christ. For him, the Roman church too is born in the event of Word and Spirit. And that he why he could not let the Roman church simply go its

³⁴ A. Flannery, O.P. (ed.), *The Basic Documents of Vatican II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, Northport, NY / Dublin, Ireland: Costello Publishing Company and Dominican Publications 1996, 507.

³⁵ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 89.

³⁶ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 89.

³⁷ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 505.

³⁸ Busch, *Meine Zeit mit Karl Barth* 515.

own way even as he disputed the claims made by that church for itself.

Upon his return to Basel, Barth's final word of reconciliation was this. "“Conversions” from us to the Roman Catholic Church or from there to one of our churches have as such no significance (*peccatur intra muros et extra*). They can have significance only if they are in the form of a conscientiously necessary “conversion” - not to another church, but to Jesus Christ, the Lord of the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church. Basically both here and there it can only be a matter of each one heeding in his place in his own church the call to faith in the one Lord, and to his service.”³⁹

III. Lessons We Can Learn From Barth

Barth went to Rome representing only himself, obviously. He was not representing his church in any sort of official capacity. But there are, I think, lessons in his ecumenical engagement from which even those who represent their churches today in Faith and Order dialogue could profit. I will mention three.

1. First, and most importantly, Barth rightly tells us that every church is in need of ongoing (ever to be repeated) conversion to the Lord of the Church. No church has arrived at its destination. “Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Seen in this light, real unity in Christ would consist in a visibility which has yet to emerge and which all sides to current dialogues can only approach asymptotically.⁴⁰ A unity purchased by adaptation to an existing set of theological requirements held tightly by a conversation-partner or through the assimilation of the practices of that partner might at most result in a powerful witness to the unity which has yet to emerge. But a witness is not the thing itself. And the danger is quite real that it will only be a unity which we have given to ourselves, not *the* unity which Christ alone can bring.

³⁹ Barth, “Account of the Trip to Rome” 17-18.

⁴⁰ For Pope Francis, “Christian unity is an essential exigency of our faith, an exigency which flows from the depth of our being believers in Jesus Christ. We invoke unity because we invoke Christ. We want to live unity, because we want to follow Christ, to live His love, to enjoy the mystery of His being one with the Father... It is not enough to be in agreement in the understanding of the Gospel, but all of us believers must be united to Christ and in Christ. It is our personal and communal conversion, a gradual conformation to Him (cf. Rom.8:28), our living ever more in Him (Cf. Gal.2:20) which enables us to grow in communion among ourselves.” “Pope’s Address...”, *Zenit* 2.

2. A second point follows quite directly from the first. If unity lies ahead of us and if parables of that unity are to be reached through movement on both sides towards as yet unimagined points of convergence, then those who would pursue it need to be free to do theology which is not absolutely confined or restricted by older commitments, especially those commitments which are more nearly philosophical in nature than theological. To say this much is not to denigrate philosophy. It is a mistake that is often made to assume that Barth tried to do "pure theology" - without admixture of philosophy. That is not the case. What he did try to do was to overcome the negative effects of theology's captivity to forms of philosophy which he regarded as outdated. I think one of the reasons Barth has attracted so much attention on the side of Catholic theologians is that Catholics - committed as they are to the authority of already existing magisterial teaching - have enjoyed being able to think about issues in relation to which the Catholic Church has not yet spoken. And though Barth tended to be innovative in ways which were bound to make some uncomfortable, the fact that he also sought - at the same time - to honour the theological values that came to expression in the ancient dogmas, made him enormously interesting to others. This dialectic between cautious fidelity to the past and an openness to experimentation makes Barth a good guide for the kind of dialogue we need. We need to be discussing not only currently maintained doctrinal positions but doing a bit of experimentation ourselves in the process - and doing it together.

3. Earlier, I quoted Barth as saying "Rome and the non-Roman churches are not static power groups, buttressed and delimited within themselves and devoted to the preservation of their possessions or the multiplication of their prestige and influence. ... Both live by the dynamics of the evangelical Word and Spirit which are totally constitutive for both".⁴¹ This is a claim whose truth cannot be taken for granted. Both sides to any conflict are constantly tempted to conduct themselves precisely as those "devoted to the preservation of their possessions" and "the multiplication of their prestige and influence...". But I would challenge all of us - no matter how institutionalized failure to avoid that temptation may have become over the centuries - to seek ways to allow fresh breezes to blow through our churches. In the final analysis, that was the intent of John XXIII; that was the meaning which he gave to the word *aggiornamento*. "Bringing up to date" does not have to mean bringing the church into subjection to current cultural norms. What it needs to mean is allowing the fresh breeze that is the Holy Spirit to convert us all to greater fidelity to the Lord of the Church.

⁴¹ See above, n. 28.

