

1 Knowing the Will of God

(By Discerning The Crisis-Causing Word)

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What are you doing, you human, with God's Word upon your lips? . . . Who deserves the wrath of God more than us pastors?

– Karl Barth in *“The Need and Promise of Christian Theology.”*

Intro: Romans 12:1-2/linking lecture to sermon

Part I: **Theology in Crisis versus Crisis Theology**

A. Locating “Crisis”

- 1) Hazardous (wrong) understandings of “crisis”
 - (a) Crisis as unfortunate circumstances
 - (b) Crisis as internal conflict or “inner contradictions” (Miriam Webster) that require “faith and divine revelation” in order to be resolved (online dictionary)
 - (c) Why “hazardous”?
- 2) Barth's understanding
 - (a) Crisis is not circumstantial, but does come from outside
 - (b) Crisis is not generated by the self, but by the other who is God
 1. God is transcendent
 2. God is a Subject

Note: it is because God is a Subject, I think, that Barth says ¹you can't do theology unless you preach as well as teach. This is because God is not only “subject matter” that can be lectured about, but a Subject who speaks. So a theologian is responsible not only for saying “words about God,” but (along with the pastor), also for discerning what it is that God is *saying*, and proclaiming that to the people (gulp. See quote, at top).

3. God speaks an answer, provoking our questions
4. The task of the pastor/theologian is to discern what it is that God is saying and then to articulate it in ways that invite others “in.”

¹ Most blatantly in his *Göttingen Dogmatics*.

“*Doctrina* is the Christian word of the human that has gone through the crisis, through the merciless refining and purification by the Word of God witnessed to in the Scripture . . . [doctrine] becomes “a predicate of the divine Word.”²

5. BUT: how do we know what God is saying?³ How do we know what the Word of God *is*? How do we know what the command of God is?

Note: in Barth’s theology, the “Word of God” that causes crisis seems to be synonymously identified as the “command of God.”

Part II. What does Crisis look like, and how does God’s Word Precipitate it?

- A. Where Crisis doesn’t come from (review)
 - 1) It is not self-generated.
 - 2) It is not provoked by a consciousness of sin and unworthiness.
- B. Where Crisis does come from:
 - 1) It is provoked by God
 - 2) It is delivered by grace
 - 3) It happens when God’s Word is perceived/discerned by us.
- C. How it Might Happen to Us
 - 1) We are exposed to proclamation (the Word – the “majesty of God” [Calvin] proclaimed)
 - 2) We make *the* discovery. The discovery of discoveries.
 - (a) What we discover: that God is *this* God; that God does *these* things.
 - (b) What we discover: That God’s works are wondrous, that God is gracious and merciful, that we are recipients of grace that we do not merit.
 - (c) *This*, Barth says we will say, “I did not know.” *This* “I could never have found out by myself!” It is “the beginning of wisdom” that inspires “the fear of the Lord”⁴

² From “Substance and Task of Reformed Doctrine” (in *Theology and Church* volume).

³ As I keep telling my student, we’ll come back to this! ☺

⁴ From Barth’s “The Beginning of Wisdom,” sermon on Psalm 111 (*Deliverance to the Captives*, 133).

"Catch only what you've thrown yourself, all is mere skill and little gain; but when you're suddenly the catcher of a ball thrown by an eternal partner with accurate and measured swing towards you, to your center, in an arch from the great bridgebuilding of God: why catching then becomes a power – not yours, a world's." – Rainer Maria Rilke

- 3) When we are thrown into crisis, everything now becomes different.
- (a) We fear the Lord. We are not “afraid,” but we do have the right kind of fear – the kind you have when you know everything will be different.
 - (b) We are moved to change and to act.

When the right fear of the Lord takes possession of our hearts, we are both lost in amazement and struck by awe, even terror. For we discover that God, since the beginning of time, has not hated or threatened you and me, but has loved and chosen us, has made a covenant with us, has been our helper long before we knew it and will continue this relationship . . . The fear of the Lord springs from the discovery that it might be high time to awake from sleep, to arise and live as the people we really are, God's elect and chosen people, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, set free by him from our sin and our misery. The fear of the Lord springs from the discovery that God calls us unto himself and that God's calling urges us to wake up, to arise, and to begin to live as God's children. The fear of the Lord is very real, it is awe, even terror, yet is poles apart from . . . dumb anxiety.”⁵

BUT:

Part III. How (more precisely) do we Know (and Perceive) the Crisis-Causing Word of God when we see it?

A. Barth's fundamental answer is: “you'll know it when you see it.”

1) This answer does and has frustrated some.

(a) Reinhold Niebuhr was concerned, for example, that this approach didn't contribute anything toward the development of a public theology.

(b) Criticism was that, if we don't clearly say what God's Word is, those with the most power and influence *will* say. Tyranny will follow; the priesthood of all believers will be disrespected.

(c) Barth thought the danger of idolatry was much higher if we developed some kind of “list” of what we think God is

⁵ “Beginning of Wisdom,” 114.

generally saying (casuistry, he called it). If we do that, he thought, people with the most power will manage the “list” or devised ethical system.

Danger! This could lead to the domestication of God (idolatrous) and the taking away the human process of “discovery” (sad). Question: have we kind of done this, already? Could this have something to do with why, for example, the religiously non-affiliated see (our) religion as “boring”? Have we forgotten that there is something to be “discovered” – something that is outside of ourselves?

B. Barth does give some basic guidelines for where to go to hear the Word that will then inform what we do:

1) Be open to seeing and hearing God’s Word anywhere and in any way God reveals it.

(a) Barth famously says that it might come through a Mozart Sonata, or through Pure Land Buddhism, or through Russian communism, or even through a “dead dog.” Wherever God speaks, God speaks.

1. note that this keeps us from being on a “scavenger hunt” in seeking to discern God’s Word. We are not looking here and looking there, ruling out this place and looking in this other. Rather, we have a posture of seeking listening for what God has to say all the time, in relation to everything.
2. note that this keeps us, again, from thinking we manage the materials God has to work with!
3. note that to say God *can* speak through a dead dog does not mean God always does, or even that when someone says God is doing so God is.

2) Respect the fact that Christians recognize the Bible as a privileged source for discerning the Word of God because for two millennia disciples have consistently indicated that they have “discovered” the Word of God through it. The Bible is the Word of God because it bears witness to the Word of God, helping us to discern it.

“The Bible is not in itself and as such God’s past revelation. As it is God’s Word it bears witness to God’s past revelation, and it is God’s past revelation in the form of attestation. When the Canon,

the staff which commands and sets moving and points the way, is moved by a living stretched-out hand, just as the water was moved in the Pool of Bethesda that it might thereby become a means of healing, then it bears witness . . .”⁶

(a) Barth has us hold the Bible in one hand and the newspaper (and all other sources) in the other. The Bible gets its own hand, as “the norming norm that norms all other norms.”

(b) Barth concedes that other books and sources can be more interesting than the Bible. But, he said, the Bible contains “that which matters most.” So: if you don’t read it, you miss out!⁷

3) Keep what you know to be true about Christ at the center of all your discernment processes, and reject anything inconsistent with who he is as contrary to the “Word of God” (see C, next, for more on this).

4) “Discover” the crisis-causing Word of God/discern the command of God in the context of the community of faith. The community serves to help you see what you cannot, and help you unsee what you have discerned incorrectly. Barth himself insisted on calling his “dogmatics” (his articulation of what he believes he has discerned) the “Church” dogmatics, reminding himself and everyone that they are subject to the evaluation of his brothers and sisters in Christ.

C. Barth does say quite a bit about the *character* of the Crisis-Causing Word of God:

1) The Crisis-Causing Word is always a particular Word to a particular person in a particular moment about something in particular (e.g., think of Exodus 3!).

(a) Remembering Christ at the center: the Word became not just any old flesh, but particular flesh. Theologians have called this “scandalous” because it appears to limit the unlimited God. But it is the particularity that is instrumental in precipitating crises in us that leads to transformation. It is the particular ways of our particular Christ, for example, that lead Chris Wiman to say that Jesus feels like a “shard of glass in [his] gut,” not allowing

⁶ *CDI*/1, 111.

⁷ See “Strange New World Within the Bible,” in *Word of God and Word of Man*.

him to ignore the homeless or to engage them as sub-human.⁸ (You don't get these kind of reality-rattling "graphics" without particularity!).

- (b) Remembering that election occurs one-by-one. Israel is called by name. We are called by name; every day of our lives known to God before one of them came to be (Ps. 139). Barth said Christians should hope "everyone makes it in the end," but he also thought it was absolutely imperative that every particular individual "subjectively appropriate the objective reality" of God's grace.

"Reality which does not become truth for us obviously cannot affect us, however supreme may be its ontological dignity," Barth acknowledges. 'In Jesus Christ Christians have already come into being, but in themselves and their time they are always in the process of becoming.'⁹ It is following the command of God – the crisis-causing Word! – that continues us in this process.

- (c) Recognizing that God's particular claim on us continues as God calls us to particular tasks according to our particular vocations.

2) The Crisis-Causing Word is always a Word of grace (mercy).

- (a) We have as one of our participants, here, the author of a book called *Ambushed by Grace*, the Rev. Dr. Tom Currie. I, like Tom, learned from Barth that judgment is a kitten compared to the lion that is grace. It is grace, not judgment, that undoes us. It throws us into crisis and doesn't just "tweak" us. It kills us the old us and resurrects us into something completely new.

- (b) When we are thinking about Barth's understanding of the Word of God, we are thinking of it not as that which brings comfort to some and judgment to others. We who seek comfort from it are also taken up and into it. Those who are judged by it, too, are healed and brought into grace with the rest of us. God's "yes" always swallows God's "no," according to Barth.

3) The Crisis-Causing Word is always a Word that promotes justice.

- (a) While we can't say exactly what God's Word is apart from the particular moment and situation, we can say this, according to Barth: God always sides with the underdog. God has opinions,

⁸ In *My Bright Abyss*.

⁹ *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, 307.

you see, about what is right and what is wrong, what is just and what is not:

“The command of God is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter-movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form, and therefore a call for the championing of the weak against every kind of encroachment on the part of the strong.”¹⁰

(b) Barth comes to this conclusion, remember, because he believes this is consistent with the God we know in Jesus Christ, born witness to in the Scriptures. It is reflected in his exegesis of the Jesus stories in his sermons, particularly in the sermons he preached in Basel.

4) The Crisis-Causing Word is a Word that reminds us of the *provisional* status of all of our efforts.

(a) For Barth, what prevents us from mistaking our own commands for God’s is constant reference to the event of Christ as it has been made known to us in God’s self-revelation.

(b) Our job, according to Barth, is to ever point away from ourselves to the one who gives the command; the One who – being free- always commands in ways consistent with God’s being.

(c) Barth thought that consistently to ask the question, “What are we to do?,” subjecting ourselves with every asking to the living Word of God, is never to become cavalier even in relation to our best insights. “The continuity of a life which steadily affirms itself from one decision to another,” Barth argues, “can only be the continuity of disobedience.”¹¹ Rather than showcasing our degree of “rightness,” we are instead charged to live as those who are humbly aware of our constant need for correction and growth.

‘We can never look back upon a genuine previous conversion and instruction without its necessarily compelling us to be more serious than ever in our present circumstances, to prepare ourselves for fuller openness to

¹⁰ III/4, 554.

¹¹ CD II/2, 647.

truth, to inquire more searchingly than ever before: *What ought we to do?*¹²

- 5) The Crisis-Causing Word thereby *frees* us to participate in the work of God in the world – *doing* the Word of God without the “burden” of being sovereign.

See “implications” for comments about how this leads to following the command of God “playfully.”

Part IV. Implications

A. For Church Theology

- 1) We can get beyond merely “talking to ourselves.” As we remain open to hearing God’s Word wherever God speaks it, we become increasingly engaged with the world. Because the Word throws us ever-again into transformative crisis, we can journey together.
- 2) Because our efforts are provisional, we can be *playful* in our theologizing and our lives together.

“Our work, when done before the sovereign God, cannot be anything but play.” – Barth.

- 3) Categories of “imagination” and “discovery” should have a more prominent place in our life together.
- 4) Being “almost Christian” (Kenda Dean) is incompatible with “crisis theology” and must be rejected as *not* Christian. Instead, we should speak freely and passionately about the crisis-causing Word that reveals the take-you-out love of God, a love that “demands our lives, our souls, our all.”

B. For Public Theology

“Committing themselves ever-again to the command of God – living in crisis rather than with complacency – Christian believers may speak prophetically as those whose fundamental posture is not to be ‘right,’ but to bear witness to a truth that de-centers and relativizes all other powers and perceptions of truth. Insofar as the prophet points her finger toward Jesus Christ and not at herself, according to Barth, she is herself open to personal revision and change. She needs not promote her position, since

¹² CD II/2, 647. Quoted by Werpehowski, 306.

what she bears witness to needs no protection. She is open to conversation with others as she continues seeking to understand that which is beyond herself. On a corporate scale, according to Barth, the church, as the community of believers, does not possess the 'right' answer in contrast to the world that lacks this answer, and that therefore and better listen to the church. Rather, the church exists for the sake of the world as 'a parable and promise of the Kingdom of God.' Insofar as it is 'Reformed and always reforming, according to the Word of God,' the church can admit that it might be wrong – even when it believes it is right! - listening to the critiques and views of others in the global conversation."¹³

C. For Our Own Spiritual Practices

- 1) Hearing the Word of God, and then doing it, requires readiness on our part. Are we positioned to hear and to do?
- 2) Diogenes Allen: "be enough of a person that God can find." Would Barth agree?
- 3) Creating spaces for watching; creating time for doing what matters most.
 - (a) Barth suggests we need to make time to be thrown into crisis. To be stressed out all the time is to deny the sovereignty of God. To be overextended is to be slothful; inattentive.
 - (b) Without clearing some sacred space, how will we be able to "play" – to engage the generative work God will ask us to do to mend the world?
- 4) What if we thought of our spiritual practices as creating the time and spaces to be met by the crisis-causing Word? Worship, taking us out with grace. Bible study, questioning us (instead of answering our questions). Praying not so we will be calmed, but so we might be unnerved in our complacency?

¹³ Rigby, "Karl Barth," in *Empire and the Christian Tradition* (Fortress, 2009).