

KARL BARTH'S CHURCH DOGMATICS ON THE ATONEMENT: SOME TRANSLATIONAL PROBLEMS

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An accurate translation of Barthian terminology has troubled many English-speaking students of Karl Barth over the years. The way Barth presents his thoughts can be seen as a central methodological problem.¹ Colin Brown points out that Barth's crowning work, his *Church Dogmatics*, is not always easy reading and that "Barth's liberal use of his own technical jargon and his way of putting things often sounds foreign in more ways than one."² Furthermore, Erasmus van Niekerk indicates that because of Barth's idiosyncratic usage of concepts and terminology "any attempt at a formal analogy between Barth's use of words and their more traditional uses should be tackled with the utmost care."³

Barth has been called "the most available example of a theology which revolves around the doctrine of reconciliation,"⁴

¹Erasmus van Niekerk, "Methodological Aspects in Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics," *Theologica Evangelica* 20 (1987): 22.

²Colin Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message* (Chicago: InterVarsity, 1967), 27. On this point, cf. also Walter Kreck, who speaks of an "ungeklärten und unkontrollierbaren Begrifflichkeit" ("Die Lehre von der Versöhnung," TLZ 85 [1960]: 81); and similarly Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt's statement, "So fehlen für eine irgendwie 'exakte' Barth-Philologie bis heute die primitivsten Voraussetzungen" (*Theologie und Sozialismus: Das Beispiel Karl Barths* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1972], 28-29). M. Jacob claims that the fact that "Barth die Aussagen anderer Theologen oftmals nur als so oder so willkommenes Vehikel seines eigenen Denkens gebraucht hat, ist ebenso bekannt wie bedauerlich. Es hat die theologische Kommunikation nicht gefördert, . . ." (" . . . noch einmal mit dem Anfang anfangen . . . : Antibarbarus zur Methodologie der Barth-Interpretation," *EvT* 32 n.s. [1972]: 607). Wilfried Härle refers to Barth's "Sorglosigkeit im Umgang mit Begriffen" (*Sein und Gnade: Die Ontologie in Karl Barths Kirchlicher Dogmatik* [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1975], 186). Johannes Marie de Jong notes that Barth does not give "genügend Rechenschaft über die 'Begrifflichkeit,' die er benützt" ("Ist Barth überholt?" in *Theologie zwischen Gestern und Morgen: Interpretationen und Anfragen zum Werk Karl Barths*, ed. Wilhelm Dantine and Kurt Lüthi [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1968], 43).

³Niekerk, 22.

and recently has even been placed in close affinity with Anselm's satisfaction view.⁵ Several of Barth's statements about Christ's atonement seem indeed to support a substitutionary understanding of the atonement.⁶ Arnold Come, however, has argued that "Barth's whole doctrine of reconciliation is clearly opposed to that of penal satisfaction, and to use the English terminology, accepted in the description of the latter, is to misrepresent Barth in a drastic manner."⁷

In dealing with Barth's treatment of the subject of atonement in his *Church Dogmatics*, one has to solve the difficulty of properly translating the German terms into adequate English. Come has contended that G. W. Bromiley, the translator of most of *Church Dogmatics*, has inserted the substitutionary theory into Barth's theology by translating *Versöhnung* as "atonement" instead of "reconciliation" (reunion of two alienated parties), and thereby has hopelessly confused most English readers.⁸ Come argues further that if Barth had wanted to teach the doctrine of satisfaction he could have used words like *Sühnung* (expiation), *Genugtuung* (satisfaction), or *Bezahlung* (payment).⁹

Bromiley, on the other hand, maintains that the word *Versöhnung* has such a rich content in Barth's usage that it includes

⁴Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), 2:177.

⁵So H. D. McDonald, *The Atonement of the Death of Christ: In Faith, Revelation, and History* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 308.

⁶See, e.g., his statement that "God in Jesus Christ has taken our place" (CD IV/1:216). "The Son of God fulfilled the righteous judgment on us men by himself taking our place as man and in our place undergoing the judgment" (CD IV/1:222). Christ is "our Representative and Substitute" (CD IV/1:230 and cf. KD IV/1:253). Also see the in-depth discussion in Barth's lengthy section, "The Judge Judged in Our Place," in CD IV/1:231-283. Cf. also Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection*, trans. Thomas Collins (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964), 35-40. (The references here and hereinafter to CD and KD are to the standard English and German editions, respectively, of *Church Dogmatics*: i.e., Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G. W. Bromiley et al., 14 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957-69); and Karl Barth, *Die kirchliche Dogmatik*, 14 vols. (Zollikon-Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1952-67). A common style for citation of these publications is followed herein.)

⁷Arnold B. Come, *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 201.

⁸*Ibid.*, 200-201.

⁹*Ibid.* It may be noted that Robert D. Preus in a significant discussion of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation has apparently been misled in his analysis through use of the misleading English translation ("The Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation in the Theology of Karl Barth," *CTM* 31 [1960]: 240).

both "atonement" and "reconciliation."¹⁰ R. D. Crawford points out, however, that the problem of the meaning of Barth's terminology cannot be solved by questions of translation alone; rather, "the deciding factor will be the context in which these words are used, and Barth's teaching in general."¹¹

In this short article I cannot, of course, attempt an exhaustive survey of the entire scope of Karl Barth's doctrine of reconciliation in his *Church Dogmatics*. Rather, my focus is on several pertinent statements which have a direct bearing on the issues presently under investigation: namely, (a) the meaning of the term "satisfaction" to Barth as indicated in the German original, and (b) this meaning as contrasted (in some cases) with inadequate or inaccurate English translations that obscure Barth's true intent in his treatment of satisfaction.

At the outset, we may observe that for Barth the doctrine of reconciliation stresses the point that God is with man in the fulfillment of the covenant of grace. It has been claimed that Barth makes room for the classical as well as the Latin theory of the atonement, although he interprets these theories in a new way.¹² A sampling of Barth's own remarks reveals that his treatment of these concepts of the atonement does indeed depart from tradition.

For Barth, God has become man in Jesus Christ and thus has made man's situation his own.¹³ He declares that "God in Jesus Christ has taken our place,"¹⁴ in that Christ is not only our Brother and Helper but also our Savior and Judge.¹⁵ In suffering the punishment humankind deserves, Jesus Christ frees everyone from the divine judgment,¹⁶ and Christ is thus the substitutionary "reprobate" upon whom the severity of God's judgment

¹⁰G. W. Bromiley in *CD IV/1*:vii.

¹¹See R. D. Crawford, "The Atonement in Karl Barth," *Theology* 74 (1971): 355-358, for a helpful discussion on the problem of translation on this topic.

¹²So Donald G. Bloesch, "Soteriology in Contemporary Christian Thought," *Int* 35 (1981): 133; cf. also Crawford, 357; *CD IV/1*:252-253.

¹³Barth has called this *Deus pro nobis* (*CD IV/1*:214-215).

¹⁴*CD IV/1*:216.

¹⁵This is discussed by Barth at length in the section entitled "The Judge Judged in Our Place," in *CD IV/1*:211-283. Cf. also the discussion in Küng, 35-40.

¹⁶*CD IV/1*:222.

has fallen. Indeed, Barth calls Christ "our Representative and Substitute."¹⁷

But, as is often the case with Barth, after he so strongly emphasizes an aspect as to give the impression of wholehearted acceptance, he then proceeds to make some qualifications.¹⁸ At this juncture I shall present some specific examples. Where the English translation is deficient, I provide first the usual English translation and then the German original.

Although Barth insists (against Albrecht Ritschl and his followers) that God shows anger against sin and that God's wrath is something very real and must be reckoned with, Barth denies that this wrath of God is turned away by the reconciliation of Christ.¹⁹ Even though Jesus Christ is our Substitute who stands in our place and bears the full penalty of our sin, Barth is hesitant to call this a real punishment. In discussing the meaning of the death of Christ, Barth refers to Isa 53, from where, in his view, the concept of punishment has entered Christian theology. According to Barth, this concept does not occur in the NT with this kind of meaning. Nevertheless, he also feels that the concept need not be completely rejected or dismissed on this account. He states:

But we must not make this [the concept of punishment] a main concept as in some of the older presentations of the doctrine of the atonement (especially those which follow Anselm of Canterbury), either in the sense that by His [Christ's] suffering our punishment we are spared from suffering it ourselves, or that in so doing He "satisfied" or offered satisfaction to the wrath of God. The latter thought is quite foreign to the New Testament.²⁰

Es geht aber nicht an, diesen Begriff [der Strafe], wie es in den älteren Fassungen der Versöhnungslehre (insbesondere in der Nachfolge Anselms von Canterbury) geschehen ist, geradezu zum Hauptbegriff zu erheben: weder in dem Sinn, dass Jesus Christus es uns durch das Erleiden unserer Strafe erspart habe, sie selber erleiden zu müssen, noch gar in dem Sinn, dass er dadurch dem Zorne Gottes "genug getan," Satisfaktion geleistet habe. Der letzere Gedanke zumal ist dem Neuen Testament ganz fremd.²¹

Unfortunately, not only has *Versöhnungslehre* been mistranslated as "doctrine of the atonement," but the last sentence has

¹⁷CD IV/1:230. The German reads: "sein stellvertretendes Handeln für uns" KD IV/1:253).

¹⁸See Crawford, 357.

¹⁹For further reference see the discussion in Frank M. Hasel, "The Concept of the Divine Wrath in the *Church Dogmatics* of Karl Barth" (M.A. thesis, Andrews University, 1989).

²⁰CD IV/1:253.

²¹KD IV/1:279.

not been translated into English with its full significance or force. For Barth the concept of satisfaction is "quite foreign," meaning "totally foreign" to the New Testament! In addition, in the English, "satisfaction" is the rendition of *genug getan*, which really means "to have done enough." This latter phrase (or one corresponding to it) expresses Barth's meaning more correctly. In English that meaning has been obscured by the word "satisfied."

In a further statement, Barth declares:

He who gives Himself up to this is the same eternal God who wills and demands it. . . . Both the demanding and the giving are a single related decision in God Himself. For that reason real satisfaction has been done, i.e., that which suffices has been done, . . .²²

Weil der, der sich dazu *hergibt*, derselbe ewige Gott ist, der eben das *will* und *fordert*, . . . weil Beides, diese Fordern und dieses Hergeben, eine einzige zusammenhängende Entscheidung in Gott selber ist, darum wird hier wirklich genug, d.h. das Genügende *getan*, . . .²³

From this it seems as if Barth does not view the death of Christ in terms of the traditional doctrine of satisfaction. Indeed, for him "satisfaction" is but a "doubtful concept."²⁴ Nor does he see the death of Christ as necessary because of any desire for vengeance or retribution on the side of God. For Barth, satisfaction means rather that

. . . that which suffices for the reconciliation of the world with God has been made (*satis fecit*) and can be grasped only as something which has in fact happened, and not as something which had to happen by reason of some upper half of the event; not, then, in any theory of satisfaction, but only as we see and grasp the *satis-facere* which has, in fact, been achieved.²⁵

. . . das zur Versöhnung der Welt mit Gott Genügende schlechterdings *geschehen* ist—*satis fecit*—und nur als *geschehen*, und also gerade aus keinem oberhalb dieses Geschehens als *notwendig* *geschehen*, begriffen werden kann. In keiner Satisfaktionstheorie also, sondern nur in der Anschauung und im Begreifen seines faktisch-praktisch vollbrachten *satis facere!*²⁶

In the same vein, Barth also writes of the "doubtful concept" of "satisfaction" as "that which is sufficient to take away sin, to restore order between Himself as the Creator and His creation, to bring in the new man reconciled and therefore at peace with Him, to redeem man from death."²⁷

²²CD IV/1:281.

²³KD IV/1:309.

²⁴CD IV/1:254.

²⁵CD IV/1:276.

²⁶KD IV/1:304.

²⁷CD IV/1:254-255. Here the English reflects the German quite well

Satisfaction for Barth, then, does not have "some upper half of the event"; it is not something necessary for God. The death of Christ, furthermore, did not alter anything in the relationship of God to human beings, but only in the relationship of the latter to God. According to Barth, God does not need to be reconciled; inasmuch as God is already favorable toward human beings from the beginning and has irrevocably decided to save them, nothing in God needs to be changed. Only human awareness of this fact needs to be awakened.²⁸

Thus, from the perspective of Barth's whole thought on the subject, Christ's substitutionary death cannot be retained in the traditional sense, for in his view God's wrath never precedes man's confrontation with the gospel, and Christ's death has not been made necessary by historical sin. This means that Barth has rejected the orthodox *Grundordnung* between God and man.²⁹ For Barth "substitution" has already taken place in the man Jesus Christ before the creation of humanity. As Paul Jersild aptly points out, the words Barth uses to describe this exchange, and even his reference to the substitution of Christ in our place, "are an attempt to retain the ultimacy of the substitutionary atonement as it is found in traditional theology within a system which will not allow it."³⁰

It is not surprising, therefore, to find Barth denying that the concept of punishment occurs in the context of the atonement in the NT.³¹ Yet at the same time he admits that this concept cannot be completely rejected or evaded and proceeds to mention Jesus Christ as suffering a punishment for humanity. This "punishment," however, is not to be understood as if Jesus Christ suffered the punishment of humanity and thereby somehow "satisfied" the wrath of God. At best, God has bestowed some form of

(Cf. *KD* IV/1:280). Cf. also Barth's words in *CD* II/1: 217-218: "For in the Bible sacrifice does not mean that the Godhead is enlisted and reconciled and placated by an action equivalent to His own goodness and to that extent satisfying." It should be observed that in these statements Barth's reference to cultic language needs to be understood.

²⁸*CD* IV/1:282. On this point cf. also Regin Prenter, "Karl Barths Umbildung der traditionellen Zweinaturenlehre in lutherischer Beleuchtung," *ST* 11 (1958): 1-88.

²⁹For a fuller discussion on this point, see Hasel, 106-111.

³⁰Paul Jersild, "The Holiness, Righteousness and Wrath of God in the Theologies of Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth" (Th.D. dissertation, Evangelisch-Theologische Fakultät, Fakultät der Westfälischen Wilhelms-Universität, Münster, 1962), 191.

³¹Cf. *CD* IV/1:253.

“punishment” in an idealistic (real) sense upon the God-man Jesus Christ, who took humanity’s place from eternity.³²

In summary, we may state that a careful analysis of the German original of Karl Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* makes questionable the viewpoint that Barth stands in close affinity with the satisfaction theory of atonement. Instead, even though he uses terminology which admits that Christ somehow suffered our punishment, Barth seems to have moved from the so-called penal theory of the atonement to what has sometimes been called the “classic theory.” This latter theory views the atonement as a divine conflict and victory in which Christ triumphed over the powers of darkness.³³ This facet of Barth’s view of the atonement is made more clear in the German original than in the standard English translation of Barth’s monumental *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik*—a fact that should be kept in mind when one reads the English version.

³²Cf. Hasel, 110, n. 3; cf. also 94-98.

³³So Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York, 1958), 4-7; cf. also Donald G. Bloesch, *Jesus Is Victor! Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976); Crawford, 357-358.