A QUESTION FOR INVESTIGATION

by

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In discussing the theology of Karl Barth it is usual to begin with a general consideration of his unique theological method, viz., that Jesus Christ is alone the sole methodological and epistemological principle for knowledge of the being of God and man and their proper relation.

This paper will begin at the other end with a consideration of a specific ethical position taken by Barth, viz., the relation between man and woman. It will ask after the logic by which Barth arrived at that position, paying particular attention

-- to the formal and systematic theological principles he uses to give content and order to the revelation given in Jesus Christ, and

-- to the assumptions involved in the use he makes of scripture to arrive at this position.

This consideration will accomplish two purposes:

-- it will show how vague is the route from the general methodological position to a specific ethical position, and

-- it will point out a number of second level assumptions, which while not logically contradictory to the basic methodological assumption, are also not strictly derived from it, and therefore require further specific examination.

In Church Dogmatics, III, 2, Barth takes the specific ethical position that the relation between man and woman is a relation in which the man takes a position of superordination, and the woman, a position of subordination (p. 311, passim.). In this relation the man has "precedence, initiative, and authority" while the woman is "to be led by him, to accept his authority." Barth laboriously attempts to explain that this ordering is not a matter of domination or of a power struggle, but rather takes place within a relation of love, kindness, and concern for the rights and "proper dignity" of the other.

Stepping back to look at the immediate context of this specific ethical position we can trace three overt steps in the theological logic by which Barth reaches this position:
#1 the Christological statement that Jesus Christ is the man for other men;
#2 the general anthropological statement derived from #1, that the basic form of humanity is co-humanity; and
#3 the specific ethical statement that
a. the basic form of co-humanity is the relation between male and female, and
b. that this relation is one of superordination and sub-ordination, not one of equality.

Without at this point questioning Barth's general methodological principle that Jesus Christ is the sole epistemological and ontological principle of all anthropological and ethical statements, let us look more carefully at the logic by which Barth moves from this general principle to the specific ethical position with regard to man and woman.

First let us look at Barth's treatment of the specific teachings of scripture on this subject. Barth accepts the bulk of the Pauline teachings on this relation, which specifically (wearing the veil, and obedience of wife to husband, etc.) and symbolically (in the metaphors comparing the relation of man and woman to that of Christ and the Church) both prescribe and accept as given the subordination of woman to man. The difficulty comes in Barth's handling of Gal. 3:28 ("In Christ there is no more Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female"). Barth claims that with regard to the third pair, male and female, the relation of super and subordination is not contradicted by the Gal. statement. The Gal. statement simply rules out the exaltation of man and the oppression of woman (III, 2, p. 312). We might call this a "weak" reading of the Gal. statement.

Other Biblical interpreters, including Krister Stendahl (The Bible and the Role of Women) do not think the problem of conflicting testimony within the scripture can be so easily overcome. One of his arguments is that to accept a "weak" reading of Gal. 3:28 on the question of male and female, to be consistent, requires accepting also Paul's ambiguous position with regard to the institution of slavery. (It should be noted that Stendahl's position requires making an appeal outside of scripture in order to determine which of the specific ethical teachings in scripture are culturally relative.) The point here is simply that when faced with an apparent contradiction within scripture as to the relation of male and female, Barth makes a decision about how to relate them, giving one priority over the other.

Our question at this point is to ask about the logic of that decision. One reason Barth interprets Gal. 3:28 by subordinating it to
Paul's other teaching on the relation between man and woman is a second order theological principle derived from his first theological principle, viz., that Jesus Christ is the sole epistemological and ontological principle for the knowledge of God and man. From this Barth deduces the second order principle that what Jesus Christ reveals about God and man is not a novum, but a confirmation of and a manifestation of the original order of creation. Thus Barth ties his ethical position on man and woman to the creation story of Genesis 2 and following, which teaches that woman was made from man, and not man from woman, and that she was made to be his "helpmeet." Two further questions can be raised at this point:

--Some Biblical scholars have claimed that the Genesis 1 creation story does not teach the subordination of woman to man. Thus, Barth's appeal to the order of creation involves a degree of selectivity.

--In Church Dogmatics, III, 2, Barth relativises the cosmological elements of the creation stories, claiming they are eclectically derived from Near Eastern sources. However, Barth chooses to say that the relation of man and woman in the creation story is eternally ordained. The reason for this is, again, a second order deduction from the primary theological principle. Jesus Christ, the God-man, tells us about God and man; he does not give us details about the cosmos.

A further principle which is implicit in Barth's handling of the tensions in scripture itself with relation to the question of man and woman is the principle that the unity of Jesus Christ as the Word of God witnessed to in scripture demands that scripture is a unity. Thus, one part of Paul cannot conflict with another, nor can one Genesis story teach something not assumed implicitly by the other.

Now let us ask how Barth moves from #2 to #3 from the general statement of man's co-humanity to the specific statement that the paradigm for this is the relation of man and woman (leaving aside for the moment the question of the order within that relation). In the general statement of man's co-humanity, #2, Barth is agitated by a major polemical concern which may have caused him to overstate his case when he moved to #3a, the statement that male and female is the basic form of co-humanity. This is his polemic against the monastic ideal and the philosophical doctrine of the self-sufficient individual. Both the monastic ideal and the philosophical individualism have been historically associated with an exaltation of intellect over body (and not merely superordination) and hence with a rejection of sexuality. Thus, in #2, Barth is concerned to assert that man does not gain salvation by fleeing his fellows either to a monastery or to a university study.
The rejection of sexuality involved in either of those routes thus leads Barth in #3a to overstate his case. It is logically possible that co-humanity and the incarnation in the body can be preserved without making the male-female relation the paradigm of these principles. Again, there is a tension in Barth's logic. Everything does not proceed easily and clearly from the basic principle to the specific statement.

Finally, let us consider what is involved in #1, the statement that Jesus is a man for other men. Our observation here is that the content which Barth gives this Christological statement is peculiarly formal. While Barth asserts that Jesus Christ reveals both God's love and his order, his ordered love, his love which cannot be without order, there is a structural tendency in the Church Dogmatics to stress the aspect of order.

We raise here the question whether the formal principle of the polarity and the relation of the active and obedient will, superordination and subordination in love (with a structural emphasis upon the superordination-subordination aspect), is not the guiding systematic principle of Barth's theology. If so, has Barth not limited the concrete reality of Jesus Christ to a formal principle which is a matter of speculation or specific religious experience?

This sort of a principle explains finally why Barth must assert that male-female is the paradigm of co-humanity--because in Barth's understanding male-female is the fundamental polarity in human experience which corresponds to (figures or typifies) the polarity between God and man. The same principle is the fundamental logical reason for the assertion that the male-female relation must be one of super and subordination, again because it corresponds to the super and subordination of Father and Son, Son of God and Son of Man, God and man.

This principle also explains why the first motif of Barth's ethic is obedience and not love; why the primary understanding of sin is pride, the superordination of that which is rightly subordinated; why Barth must rail against natural knowledge of God and man, which also superordinates that which must rightly be subordinated.

The method if this paper has been to come by way of induction to a problem posed: whether we can judge the adequacy of a theological position by the adequacy of its specific ethical positions, or in a weaker form, whether the weakness of a specific ethical position points out the weakness of a theological method.