



## Baptism, Barth, and Born Again

To speak of our baptismal death and rebirth, writes Karl Barth in his *Romans* commentary, is to speak not of a “Heaven-storming” ideal or a “pure, harsh” doctrine, but of an event, an act of “the most positive and most exclusive existentiality of divine grace.”

To call upon the God who quickeneth the dead (iv.17b) is not doctrine; and, moreover, no theorist could for one moment allow himself so naked and so blatant a contradiction, so glaring a paradox. The conception of divine power in human weakness is neither ‘pure’ nor ‘harsh’, and unlike any ‘doctrine’, has continually to be thought out afresh as though it had never been thought out at all.\*

This reflection on Romans 6 by the great Basel theologian ties together the two goals of this issue of *Word & World*: (1) to think afresh about baptism; and (2) to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the first publication of Barth’s epoch-making commentary on Romans (in 1919). Barth’s strong comments on baptism in *Romans* make this a felicitous union.

Seventy-five years ago, Barth’s critique of nineteenth-century liberalism was heard as sharp and offensive. Now, his words will be heard as sharp and offensive by contemporary denials of actual referentiality in language and today’s positive assessments of general religious experience.

Baptism is a sacrament of truth and holiness; and it is a sacrament, because it is the sign which directs us to God’s revelation of eternal life and declares, not merely the Christian ‘myth’, but—the Word of God. It does not merely signify eternal reality, but is eternal reality....If, then, baptism is what it signifies, why should we not choose it as our base of operations in the temporal and concrete world? (192)

Further:

Death is not grace, if human possibilities are multiplied by it through the coming into being of a whole series of negative (!) things, such as, ascetism, ‘back to nature’, silent worship, mystical death, Buddhist Nirvana, Bolshevism, Dadaism, and so forth: so long, that is, as the attack does not culminate in the final negation of the [human] of this world and all [human] possibilities, and so long as we are not—*buried with him*. But—and this is what gives the attack its real

\*Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933) 193-194. Other page numbers in the editorial refer to this work.

power—the Judgement, the End, the sound of the Last Trump, pass straight through our ‘Yes’ and our ‘No’, through life and death, all and nothing, enjoyment and deprivation, speech and silence, tradition and revolution, in fact, through the whole busy activity of the [human] of this world....And then we encounter the power of the Resurrection. (194-195)

Then as now one can find reasons to argue with Barth—to say, “Yes, but...” or “Yes, and....” But the radical No and the radical Yes that mark the *Romans* commentary and that Barth particularly associates with baptism are words that keep us in touch with the radicality of Paul’s *Romans* and with our traditional claims about baptismal death and rebirth. Are we “born again”? Indeed! But that is fundamentally a story about what God has done in Christ, not a story about me. Even should we wish finally to say some other things, living as we do later in the century than Barth, we could do worse than start our discussions about baptism from this perspective.

The void brought into being by the death of Christ is filled with the new life which is the power of the Resurrection....[In baptism] we stand—and who does not stand with us?—on the threshold of the narrow gate through which we perceive the graciousness of the Judge and the mercy of the Holy One. From our union with Christ in dishonour and weakness and corruption we look out—and who does not look with us?—upon our union with Him in glory and power and incorruption: that is to say, we [humans], living in time, perceive the *Futurum resurrectionis* [resurrection future], which is our true and positive conformity to Jesus. (195-196)

We begin with *Arland J. Hultgren*’s examination of the origins, formulas, and metaphors of baptism in the New Testament. Though the data are varied, all point to baptism as a radical transformation in the life of the baptized. This biblical move from old life to new will color all subsequent talk about baptism in the church’s life and practice.

As a cultural anthropologist, *Gwen Kennedy Neville* views baptism from a different perspective. Is such a descriptive and comparative analysis appropriate? Neville suggests it is (even Barth seems to agree—*Romans*, 192-193) because human institutions and symbolic meanings are the vehicles through which we receive God’s holy gifts.

Turning toward baptismal practice, *Robert Brusic* traces changes in the church’s use of baptism during his thirty-some years in ministry. He reminds us how far we have come and encourages us to continue working out in practice the implications of baptismal theology.

*Mons Teig* concurs, seeing practice not as an afterthought, but as a way to proclaim in our ritual what we confess in our creeds and teach in our theology. He wants us to make our liturgies events of the gospel. In many ways, *Michael Button* does the same thing. Writing as a thoughtful parish pastor, Button wants to wed what is good and proper in theology and practice to what is real and possible in the life of the local congregation.

In all of this, can we rehabilitate the notion and role of godparent? *Elaine Ramshaw* thinks we can and has written a new book toward that end. Her present

article combines a historical review with direct and practical suggestions for godparenting in the present church.

*Dennis L. Bushkofsky* suggests that apprenticeship may be a better model for adult maturation in faith than classroom learning. He shows how that model might be used to lead adults toward baptism.

In the section of this issue reflecting on the significance of Karl Barth's *Romans* commentary, *Bruce L. McCormack* provides a historical review but then suggests that our interest in Barth should be more than historical, that Barth's God-directed "anti-bourgeois" theology may do more for the life of the church and the expectations of the laity than some of the more human-directed "bourgeois" theologies of the present. *Gerhard O. Forde* argues that, precisely because of its negation of human visions of the future that regularly prove disappointing, Barth's "resurrection future" is more hopeful and realistic than the more recent theologies of hope and urgings toward progress and possibility.

Among this issue's Resources, two Christian workers in the field, *Ida M. Martinson* and *Jon Olson*, converse Face to Face on the much-discussed topic of health care. Then we turn to a theme *Word & World* has visited more than once in recent years: Columbus's journey to America. Now, *Reinhard Schwarz* invites us to see what Martin Luther made of this event. Not surprisingly, it became for Luther an opportunity to speak of the gospel and the nature of the church—a church, says Luther, not made catholic by human institution but by divine promise. Finally, Texts in Context takes a somewhat different turn from normal. Your editor tries fantasy as a way to introduce to the preacher the themes and theology of Second Isaiah.

F.J.G.