

Karl Barth on Creation-care

Subjects: **Religion**

Contributor: Nixon de Vera

At the height of the current pandemic, this article seeks to explore the identity of the Creator God in Karl Barth's doctrine of creation. Attention is given to his understanding of the eternal covenant God has made with humanity and how we are cared for within a covenantal fellowship. The study also concerns itself with how Barth's distaste for the notion of *analogia entis* is somewhat unsustained in his treatment of creation. I argue that, to some extent, the analogy of being vis-à-vis the cosmos is complementarily employed with *analogia fides* in Barth's articulation of creation care. This is the case as he reconfigures the talk on creation rigidly in and through Jesus Christ as Creator and creature.

Covenant

Karl Barth

Creation-care

analogia fides

analogia entis

creatio ex quod

Sabbath rest

1. Introduction

In the wake of the Great Lisbon earthquake in 1755, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart composed his masterpiece: Symphony in G minor. Karl Barth commented that Mozart had the gift of *hearing* the world holistically, that is, 'He heard the negative only in and with the positive' (Barth 2009. III/3, p. 298). That is exactly the aim of this article—to view the current pandemic with the goodness the Creator has in store for his creation.

It has been almost one and a half years that people worldwide have been in lockdown due to the pandemic.^[i] The havoc wrought by COVID-19 encourages wondering what lies ahead with the new normal.^[ii] The relevance of Barth's theology in this pressing predicament cannot be ignored—his articulation about God *in* the world still challenges the contemporary reader. Although he lived in a time different from the present, it is not so different at all as his thoughts were shaped by global upheaval as well.^[iii] Far from suggesting a panacea, Barth's theology could provide hope during the pandemic.

The study aims to discover why Barth conceives of the divine creative act in tandem with the divine communal act. Furthermore, it argues that although Barth advances the notion of *analogia fides* (analogy-of-faith) in his theology, he somehow turns to *analogia entis* (analogy-of-being) in support of God's creation care. To achieve this, Barth's doctrine of creation paired with his conception of God's covenantal fellowship will be investigated. The article begins with a brief account of 'creation as the external basis of the covenant' followed by the 'covenant as the internal basis of creation' with attention to the Creator God as Lord, Advocate, and Guardian. It expounds the four key reasons to hope in the covenant by looking at creation, namely: by seeing the light amidst the darkness, by inhabiting the space between waters, by staring up at the sky, and by celebrating the Sabbath. It concludes with a reflection on how Barth helps us redirect the talk on creation-care in Jesus Christ—the agent and lynchpin of creation.

Barth's doctrine of creation in the *Church Dogmatics*, specifically expositing God as the Loving Creator (Barth 2009, §41) is foundational. The study is twofold: pedagogical and pastoral. It is pedagogical since it functions as a guidepost to the pathfinder in this dark situation, and it is pastoral because it delivers hope in seemingly hopeless situations. What the study will not do is delve deep into the issues of theodicy. This will be engaged nonetheless, in strict conjunction with Barth's rendition of the Creator as a relational Person towards the creature.^[iv]

2. Doctrine of Creation

Barth admitted that he is 'much less confident and sure' in writing the doctrine of creation (see the 'Preface'. Barth 2009. III/1, p. ix). He, however, had to do it to continue his series on dogmatics; he began with the hermeneutics of the first two chapters of Genesis. Barth's take on creation is informed by the dusk and dawn of World War II (Barth 2009. III/1, p. x). According to him, the doctrine of creation poses a challenge to people spiritually and mentally—it is a 'doctrine of faith and its content a secret' (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 4). Barth attests,

The insight that man owes his existence and form, together with all the reality distinct from God, to God's creation, is achieved only in the reception and answer of the divine self-witness, that is, only in faith in Jesus Christ, i.e., in the knowledge of the unity of Creator and creature actualised in Him, and the life in the present mediated by Him, under the right and in the experience of the goodness of the Creator towards His creature.(Barth 2009. III/1, p. 3)

There are three facets noticeable here: the doctrine of creation is coupled with the doctrine of God—the subject is the Creator, not the creature; the reason why the doctrine of creation is of faith is that it is founded upon Jesus Christ as Creator God; and the content of creation is a secret as creation is rooted in God's self (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 111). However, for Barth, even if the core of this doctrine resides in the divine being, the Creator, in his freedom, is determined to be in a tight relationship with the creature. Creation, that of faith and a secret, will be the springboard of our theodical discussion.

To analyse why Barth views creation with the covenant, we first need to understand what he thinks of creation. He enunciates that creation is the work of the Trinity (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 42), and that it is a pure saga.^[v] Creation is first in the triune outworking for it, which is where God displays who he is and what he aims to achieve. God 'finds a correspondence in the very different but not dissimilar fellowship between God and His creature' (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 50). The Godhead determines itself to relate with human beings. Moreover, since Barth views the creation christocentrically, the role of Jesus Christ is indispensable in considering his doctrine of creation.

In Christ, the Creator is said to break into creation without being confounded with creaturely reality. Here we can quite capture Barth's thought on the simultaneity of eternity with time when he speaks of the being of God (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 77). The Creator God is understood in the creature Jesus as divine transcendence converges with divine immanence. This can be traced back to the Göttingen period (Barth 1991, pp. 388, 437, 441). We can deduce therefore that Barth is consistent in articulating the Creator's everlasting commitment to the creature.

At the outset of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth advances the idea of divine constancy in creation. God remains immutable in the outworking of the decree (Barth 2009. I/2, p. 50). In volume II, Barth is right in viewing God to be

truly dynamic, especially in being free to decide in God's self (Barth 2009. II/2, pp. 64–65, 106–7). The decree is the triune determination to be for humanity. Then in volume III, Barth concentrates on the Creator in time but not being coerced by it. The accent is on the Creator becoming a creature. In subjecting himself to creaturely reality, however, God remains the fountainhead of it. It is in this line of thinking where Barth presents a series of encounters between the Creator and the creature, and it is where Christ is seen as the Overseer of the created world. This is why in volume IV, the self-existing and self-sustaining being is revealed in the fact that, though the world is that of sin and death, the Creator can enter it fully in himself (Barth 2009. IV/1, pp. 187–88). Barth further argues that the Creator cannot be conditioned into a 'world-cause, a supreme or first cause or a principle of being,' that God is a being *in se*—someone that cannot be caused or moved by external actions and events (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 13). In the encounters between the Creator and the creature, the former is the One who caused and moved the latter. This order is irreversible. Further, the divine activity cannot be mixed into human activity (Tanner 2005, p. 94). In the being of Jesus Christ, God overrules creaturely reality though he is human. This is probable, in Barth's assertion, since this human is *also* divine at once. In Christ, therefore, what is distinct in toto can be in complete harmony (Barth 2009. III/1, pp. 59, 102).

The concern now is to examine Barth's treatment of the history of creation as pre-historical, i.e., a *biblical history*. As we are dealing with something metaphysical, such history cannot be validated empirically; it can only be a history of the covenant in the form of a pure saga.^[vi] This form, Barth clarifies, is neither a tale nor a fiction because it is true yet unverifiable. It is historical in a sense that it is not an imaginary false notion, but rather, an event that had taken place in creaturely reality. God is real and so is God's act in the world (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 92).

To understand what Barth means by biblical history, we have to scrutinise his idea of the covenant vis-à-vis creation. He deals with the simultaneity of eternity with time as he treats it with 'the history of God's covenant with man' (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 42). This history arises from the election of the Son to be in the flesh by the will of the triune God. This is the goal of creation as well as the beginning of the covenantal history, Barth reasons. This, accurately speaking, is the eternal history (*Geschichte*), verifiable in the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, not elsewhere making it unique from the history often inferred (*Historie*).^[vii] On the one hand, the covenantal history is eternal as it is rooted in the Son of God being the Son of Man. It is in time, on the other hand, that this history is demonstrated, specifically, in Jesus of Nazareth (Excursus in Barth 2009. III/1, p. 115).

Creation, argues Barth, is conditioned to be in the closest proximity with the Creator, and such contiguity is called a 'fellowship' (Excursus in Barth 2009. III/1, pp. 39, 47). We can see here that when Barth refers to creation, he first speaks of the covenant. To talk about the latter as a mere preface will not suffice in how he handles it consonant with the divine outworking. The covenant points to the shared history. In it, humans are united with God, *not* in union with God. In this respect, humankind is united with God as the 'history of creation' is subservient to the 'history of the covenant' (Barth 2009. III/1, p. 60; cf. p. 73). In another respect, humankind is not in union with God; ergo the two histories are inseparable—they coalesce, not fused. In other words, Barth connects them without blurring their distinctions—the history of the covenant is the antecedent of the history of creation. Tracing the impetus of the covenant is a formula to map what he has in mind in juxtaposing the eternal with the temporal.

Furthermore, given that christology is the rubric through which his formulation of creation-care is critiqued (Barth 1996, p. 50).

[i] A city-wide quarantine was first enforced in Wuhan, China on 23 January 2020.

[ii] COVID-19 stands for coronavirus disease 2019.

[iii] Such as the First and Second World Wars, the Great Depression, the Cold War, and the outbreak of the Spanish flu.

[iv] Whenever the term 'the creature' is used, it pertains at once to the human creature.

[v] Barth defines 'saga' as a tale or story; it is an 'indication of the distinctive *genre*' (Excursus in Barth 2009. III/1, p. 42). Barth qualifies it as 'biblical history' in contrast to legend, anecdote, and myth. 'In what follows I am using saga in the sense of an intuitive and poetic picture of a pre-historical reality of history which is enacted once and for all within the confines of time and space.' (ibid., p. 81).

[vi] In the citation of Gen 1–2.

[vii] Refer to de Vera, Nixon (2020). *The Suffering of God in the Eternal Decree: A Critical Study of Karl Barth on Election*. Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, pp. 85–86.

Note: The complete article is accessed on *Religions* journal.

Retrieved from <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/history/show/34767>