AWAKENING POWER

The Pneumatology of Karl Barth as Seen Through Wesleyan Eyes

by Matt Cromwell
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ST530 Dr. Ray Anderson
he work of the Holy Spirit is an often unaccounted for doctrine in many prevailing theologies. The Holiness Tradition, founded on the theology of John Wesley, and my theological heritage, has a keen interest in the work of the Holy Spirit. In approaching the theology of Karl Barth, I find myself drawn to his thoroughly Trinitarian approach. This interest combined with my Wesleyan background, led me to this present topic: the pneumatology of Karl Barth.

My task is to interact with the pneumatology of Karl Barth as described particularly in his *Church Dogmatics*. We will explore the nature of the Holy Spirit, humanity’s relationship with the Holy Spirit, and the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. Each section will conclude with reflections from a Wesleyan perspective. In presenting a brief sketch of Barth’s pneumatology I hope to show that Barth’s conception of the Holy Spirit is a key distinguishing factor between his thought and some traditionally Calvinist beliefs. Further, I hope to show that Wesley would benefit from Barth’s conception of the relationship of the Holy Spirit within the Church.

**The Nature of the Holy Spirit**

Pneumatology is not an isolated science or field of study. Pneumatology completely affects and is affected by one’s conception of the Trinity. Therefore, asking *How Barth conceptualizes the Trinity* is our first task. Barth declares himself to be neo-Orthodox; clinging to the doctrines of the Reformation that made it a true re-formation. This means that God is one and only one for Barth. It also means that God is three. It seems that the nature of God is the perfect canvas for Barth’s dialectical theo-graphic art; asking *How can one God be three?* is the perfect dialectic dilemma. Barth maintains a strict monotheism while affirming the importance of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Barth explains this seeming inconsistency by claiming that God is...
revealed to humanity through repetition of God’s nature. Such repetition “is grounded in His Godhead; hence in such a way that it signifies no alteration in His Godhead; but also in such a way that only in this repetition is He the one God.”¹ This repetition is not a post-Pentecostal event. Barth, in a somewhat unorthodox fashion, defends the filioque clause in the Nicene Creed by claiming, as Colin Brown says, that “the procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son is not limited to the giving of the Spirit in time at Pentecost, but expresses an eternal relationship within the being of God.”² So it may be concluded that the work of Jesus on earth was equally and simultaneously the work of God as well as the Holy Spirit, as the work of the Spirit in our lives today is equally the work of Jesus and God.

Being utterly monotheistic, what then is the role, or function, or personality of the Holy Spirit that requires a three-fold repetition of God’s nature? Though Barth continually affirms the universality of the promise of Christ to all of humanity, he distinguishes Christians by those who “are breathed upon,”³ by Christ’s breath, which is the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Spirit is the very Word of God breathed upon the life of humanity, the very Revealedness of God. Barth describes the functions of Father, Son and Spirit as Revealer, Revelation, and Revealedness in order to show that revelation itself is what creates such tension and difficulty of being three-in-one. In Jesus, the Word was revealed in flesh. The flesh of Jesus was the Spirit as well as divine. Jesus did not cease to be God or Spirit when he became flesh. Each act of Jesus was three acts: that of the Word, the Word revealed in flesh, and the revealedness of the Word by the Spirit. So, the Holy Spirit can not be reduced to an emotional experience, a spiritual entity, or any other exclusive mode of being. The Holy Spirit is the active participation in the life of Jesus, as that life is also the life of God, as is the life of the Holy Spirit. This keeps Barth from being modalist.

¹ Barth, Karl. Church Dogmatics (henceforth CD), I:1, pg. 402.
² Brown, Colin. Karl Barth and the Christian Message. pg. 76.
³ Barth, Karl. Dogmatics in Outline (henceforth DO), pg. 138.
Though humanity encounters each person of the Trinity in different ways, humanity does not encounter different purposes, plans, or personalities of God in the different persons. Instead, humanity encounters all three persons in each work encountered.

**Calvin/Wesley Reflections**

Calvin states that, “to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.”

Certainly this is similar to Barth. God could not begin any activity without also using the wisdom of the Son and efficacy of the Spirit. But it still suggests a type of separation that Barth seems to ignore in Calvin. God seems to act as one of the three persons in Calvin’s thought, rather than all three in one as in Barth’s thought.

Wesley himself, never preached on the Trinity specifically, but the Methodist Book of Discipline interpreted Wesley’s thought as such:

*There is but one living and true God. . .and in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity— the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*

Later it is added of the Holy Spirit:

*The Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, is of one substance, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son.*

The mentioning of the Holy Ghost’s proceeding seems redundant which suggests that either the purpose or priority (or both) of the Holy Spirit differs from the other two persons of the Trinity. Their unity of substance is clear but the operation of the three seems separated.

Methodists would do well to interact more directly with Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity; though their keen emphasis on the work of the Spirit will bring more light to the subject later.

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4Calvin, John *Institutes*. Book 1:13:18, or pg. 143.

5The United Methodist Church (U.S.). *The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church* (henceforth UMC). Part II, ¶68, Section 3 Article I.

6UMC Part II, ¶68, Section 3 Article IV.
The deity of the Holy Spirit is firmly established in Barth’s theology. Now it becomes important to recognize the way in which the Holy Spirit relates to and interacts with humanity. Barth draws a picture of the work of justification to explain where in life the Holy Spirit interacts with humanity (at left). The chart shows not only the historical event of Jesus entering the world but also the personal encounter or “subjective realization of the atonement,” which is the point of justification in each individual’s life for Barth.

Atonement is the divine act of God in Jesus; this is an objective reality. But, atonement has both an objective and subjective side, “in so far as...it is both a divine act and offer and also an active human participation in it.” This subjective realization is the active human response of the divine reconciling work of the Holy Spirit. It is subjective because it is personal. Though it is personal, it is never self-attained; the work of the Holy Spirit has everything to do with such realization. Atonement does not occur by human initiative. Therefore, in order for humanity to be reconciled with God, God must provide a reconciliatory gift of God’s own freewill. Therefore, “God in this particular address and gift, God in this awakening power, God as the Creator of this other man, is the Holy Spirit.” Humanity has no natural point of contact with God whatsoever, so even the realization of justification completely depends upon the self-revelation of God to humanity in the Spirit.

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Barth, *CD IV:1* Chapter XIV §62, or pg. 643.

7ibid.

8Barth. *CD IV:1* Chapter XIV §62, or pg. 645.
The subjective reality is the “awakening power” of the Holy Spirit in one’s own life which testifies to the Word of God. It is not a self-proclaimed idea or theology, but an awareness of the miracle of Jesus having justified you. The Spirit as “God’s Revealedness, as the third and final facet of His being and as the accomplished goal of His self-disclosure, guarantees the Christian admission to true knowledge of the intradivine life.”10 Such self-disclosure creates “in man, response and obedience.”11 Therefore, by providing a subjective means of receiving the awareness of the knowledge of God’s grace, the Christian is called into a life response. This aspect makes Barth’s pneumatology participatory by definition. Faith, hope, and love are the goals that the Spirit calls and “quickens”12 the Christian to participate in. Ethics are the stuff of life which enable dialogue and criticism to shape the participation of the Christian towards more of what the Spirit has revealed in him or her.

The objective reality of the “awakening power” is that such awakening produces evidences which are observable, public, human responses. Such public responses are the place where church happens. The Holy Spirit is likewise “observable” because He is evidenced in the community which has responded to Him. “The receiving of the Holy Spirit which makes the community a Christian community and a [hu]man13 a Christian will work itself out and show itself in the fact that only now will they really expect Him, only now will they want to receive Him; and where He is really expected, where there is a desire to receive Him, that is the work which He has already begun, in the infallible sign of His presence.”14

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11 Barth. *CD IV:1* Chapter XIV §62, or pg. 648.
12 Barth. *CD IV:2* Chapter XV §68, or pg. 729.
13 For the benefit of humanity, without disrespect to the author or intent to alter his message, I choose to inclusivize non-gender specific words where necessary. I additionally want to make note that I feel that referring to God as Him, He, or His is not adequate, but the limits of the English language give no superior options.
14 Barth. *CD IV:1* Chapter XIV §62, or pg. 647.
CALVIN/WESLEY REFLECTIONS

Wesley consistently refers to the work of the Holy Spirit as a renewing force, a constant awakening to one’s own sinfulness and God’s holiness. This is consistent with Barth. On the other hand, Barth’s pneumatology works so well because of his emphasis on the communal response and participation in the work of the Holy Spirit which Wesley accentuates, almost to a fault, in the individual but glosses over as regards the Church.¹⁵

For Calvin, all of which the Holy Spirit does is limited only to the Christian. Calvin explains the journey of discerning one’s own assurance of salvation through the Holy Spirit in one’s own life. This could be called an awakening, but it does not awaken one out of sin and into salvation, but rather, from the hope of salvation to the assurance of salvation. Thus the Holy Spirit does not take part in the justification of sinners except that Jesus was also the Spirit. The Holy Spirit then is purely the Comforter, given for those who seek assurance. Where Wesley would benefit in ecclesiology, Calvin would benefit in piety and evangelism.

THE ROLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN SALVATION

A short discourse on Barth’s theory of sanctification and justification is necessary in order to discuss the role of the Holy Spirit in salvation. This is the point in which I see Barth and Wesley joining hands. Barth adamantly supports the inseparability of justification from sanctification while simultaneously setting them as different “moments.” Barth even claims that by confusing the two, one’s soteriology could suffer.¹⁶ Barth suggests that the two moments are forever bound by the one divine event of Jesus’ death for all of Creation. Therefore, one divine

¹⁵ My own perspective on the reasoning for this is because of Wesley’s own insistence in staying with the Anglican church. If he had presented a full ecclesiology, it would look too significantly different from the Anglican model and he would have, therefore, been more readily expelled from his parish and ordination.
¹⁶ Barth. CD IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 504.
event results in two “indissolubly bound up,”17 human moments. Barth, by saying that in speaking of sanctification “we are not dealing with a second divine action which either takes place simultaneously with it, or precedes or follows it in time,”18 is not simply refuting the importance (or unimportance) of timing, but more importantly, Barth is refuting who the event is coming from. Sanctification is not a second “divine action,” but it is a “human moment,” distinct from justification. The divine action is singular: that of the atonement. The human actions that result from the atonement are multiple: sanctification and justification. So the human process of sanctification (and human reality of justification), are “indissolubly bound up” in the divine action of the atonement by the revealedness, and awakening power of the Spirit.

Similarly, Wesley firmly professes the promise of sanctification. All who are justified are also sanctified. This is a promise from God. Speaking of Methodists, Wesley once said that “they do not speak of justification so as to supersede sanctification, so neither do they think or speak of sanctification so as to supersede justification. . . Therefore they maintain, with equal zeal and diligence, the doctrine of free, full, present justification, on the one hand, and of entire sanctification both of heart and life, on the other; being as tenacious of inward holiness as any Mystic, and of outward, as any Pharisee.”19 Wesley does not separate the promise of sanctification, he simply shifts the “when” of such sanctification away from the exact moment of justification. More specifically, Wesley believes that the process of sanctification begins at the moment of justification and is promised to come to completion in a persons lifetime— rarely soon after justification.

Though Barth refutes the importance of the timing of justification and sanctification, he nevertheless supports a view of sanctification which is an ongoing process throughout the life of

17 Barth, CD IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 499.
18 Barth, CD IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 501.
the believer. Barth believes that sanctification could also be described as “regeneration (\textit{regeneratio}) or renewal (\textit{renovatio}), or by that of conversion (\textit{conversio}), . . . or comprehensively by that of discipleship.”20 Barth finds the root definition of sanctification in the setting apart of Israel. This may be the longest process or journey imaginable; that Israel should be set apart in the First Testament in order that she might be justified by the coming Messiah who will redeem the whole world to himself through her. Further, that Jesus’ sanctifying work of the world is “originally and properly. . .the sanctification of Him and not of them.”21 Therefore, all forms of sanctification, “the sanctification of Israel and the community with the distant goal of that of the whole of the human race and the world, are included”22 in the form of Jesus’ own sanctification on the cross. For Barth, the process of sanctification is not merely individual or restricted to one lifetime, but he urges the reader to consider sanctification in light of the entire history of salvation.23

Being firmly established that sanctification is a process, not only of the individual but of the Church in and of history, we can now see how the Holy Spirit contributes to such sanctification. If justification is the human acceptance of the gift of salvation from God to humanity, then sanctification is the human decision to change one’s life in accordance with such a holy gift given to an unworthy recipient. Sanctification is the active choice of the Christian to live life in the power of the Spirit’s revealedness, thus creating a new person. This is best exemplified in Jesus Christ, “the true man,” who “has dynamically entered the human sphere, not merely demanding conversion and discipleship, but in the quickening power of His Holy Spirit calling and transposing into conversion and discipleship.”24 Thus, the Holy Spirit does not simply

\footnotesize{20} Barth, \textit{CD} IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 500.  
\footnotesize{21} Barth, \textit{CD} IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 514.  
\footnotesize{22} Barth, \textit{CD} IV:2 Chapter XV §66, or pg. 515.  
\footnotesize{23} \textit{ibid}.  
\footnotesize{24} Barth, \textit{CD} IV:2 Chapter XV §68, or pg. 729.  

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make aware to the Christian the fact of their justification, but simultaneously calls and virtually
drags them into a life change resulting in discipleship.

Barth consistently accounts for each person of the Trinity in every aspect of his theology. He also consistently makes the reality of God relevant not only to the individual, but also to the Church as the Body of Christ universal. The sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit awakens and quickens the Church into revelation just as well as the individual. Barth explains specifically that “sanctification. . .is concerned with the work of the quickening power of His spirit with which Jesus Christ builds up Christianity within the world.”  

So the Church, as a communal reality, must also be sanctified while working to sanctify the world by the Spirit as well.

**CALVIN/WESLEY REFLECTIONS** Wesley has said that the Church is only as holy as those it consists of, but is that consistent with the role and acts of the Holy Spirit with humanity? If the atonement has been done for all of humanity, if the Holy Spirit awakens and quickens the Church as well as the Christian for the sake of the reconciliation of all humanity to God, then is it personal holiness of individuals that will redeem the world or the collective holiness of the Bride of Christ? Barth’s dialectic would say neither. There is no human holiness, individual or collective, which can redeem the world, but the holiness of the Spirit which the Church and Christians testify to through their own sanctification in that Spirit can. The difference is not merely semantical. The Church does not testify to the wonderful ministries of the Church, or the beautiful worship in it’s services, nor does the Christian testify to their own great deeds. The Church and Christians alike testify that the Spirit moves across the land awakening humanity to the miracle of Jesus in their life.

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25 Barth, *CD IV:2* Chapter XV §67, or pg. 617.
Barth often defended that his theology was simply a reinterpretation of Calvin and
Scripture. Several key issues refute that. For Calvin, sanctification is simultaneous and
instantaneous with the moment of justification. The Christian journey is not the search for
sanctification, but assurance of salvation. This is not consistent with Barth’s conception of the
awakening and quickening work of the Holy Spirit towards sanctification. Further, sanctification
is a purposeful, intentional, human choice to shift the mode of one’s life away from sin and
towards the revealedness of the Spirit. Thus, humanity is free; the Spirit is resistible. Calvin’s
soteriology and theory of predestination completely depends upon the irresistibility of the Holy
Spirit. It seems, again, that as Wesley would benefit from the communal aspects of Barth’s view
of holiness and sanctification, so would Calvin benefit from the individual.

CONCLUSION

Barth is an illusive figure, winding his way through doctrine and dogma like a stream
through a wood. Where he pushes too far for one, he pulls to weakly for another. The difficulty
for Wesleyans today is not so much in seeing the similarities and dissimilarities between Wesley
and Barth but in helping the Church understand Wesley (or Barth) rightly. The search for
holiness in the light of the Spirit has become a self-indulgent banter over a mythological concept
of the “second blessing.” Prayer has become as constant petition to God to forgive menial
thoughts at the expense of the object of piety: loving thy neighbor. Can Barth help Wesleyanism
become relevant again?

Another intriguing correlation between Barth and Wesley (which could not be covered
here) is their emphasis on preaching. The relevance of that here is that the challenge of every
theologian is to be practical in the life of the laity, to be preachable. This is a difficult task with
Barth. The dialectic methodology is complex and often times purposefully puts answers out of reach of human understanding. Yet the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian and Church is of central concern to the Holiness Tradition. Barth has aptly given the tools necessary to preach of the awakening and quickening power of the Spirit in the life of the Christian. Wesleyan preachers may well interpret such power as the Spirit’s impetus towards holiness as well as the moving of the Church for a revival (perhaps, even in the camp meeting sense) that moves the Church into the world, spiritually as well as socially.

Lastly, much of Wesleyan thought is understood as specifically against Calvinist thought, and rightly so. The priority of human free will, real holiness in this lifetime, and works proceeding from faith which transform the believer are paramount for Wesleyans and intolerable for Calvinists. But could it be that these two camps are representatives of the constant ambiguity and synthesis that we find in the dialectics of Barth’s theology? Could both Wesleyans and Calvinists actually have their cake and eat it too? Barth’s winding stream of thought in the woods of theology seems to be carving a new, less traveled path over old, well traveled territory.

I love the Wesleyan tradition for it’s tools for personal and social transformation and I will be hard pressed to sway from it. But Barth has showed me that revelation is far more complex than traditional labels suggest. Whether Barth, Calvin, or Wesley, the Spirit reveals, awakens, and quickens us all to the ambiguous synthesis of the kingdom of God on earth and heaven.


