

**HILARY C. MARTIN**

## **Eternity and Temporality in the Theology of Karl Barth**

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*This study outlines Karl Barth's doctrine of time in which he presents created time as outflowing from God's eternity. God's nature, seen as self-revealing, assumes the possibility of created time. Earthly temporality is understood as proceeding from the potentiality of God's eternity. The Incarnation is seen as a breaking in of God's eternity into humanity's temporality, bringing about a healing and redemption of earthly time. The fusion of past, present and future into one is essentially Trinitarian, the paradox of the Triune God being reflected in Barth's relationship of time and eternity. Barth's doctrine of time is considered in the light of modern notions of time as revealed by science. The proposal is made that Barth's comprehensive doctrine of time may serve to lessen some of the contradictions involved in reconciling God's timelessness and his intimate involvement with the created order.*

**Keywords:** eternity, temporality, Karl Barth, theology of time, incarnation

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### **Introduction**

A study of any aspect of Karl Barth's work requires some attention to the foundations from which he constructed his theology. He was heir to a cultural and theological heritage which he submitted to critical scrutiny, adopting an approach which gave primacy to the knowledge of God through God himself rather than through human history, culture and experience. He thus stepped back towards the tradition of pre-modern times in which the question of God's being and essence was supreme and independent of his interaction with the created order. The Protestant theological tradition of his time, since the influence of Schleiermacher, had focused upon God's relation to humanity as something which could be described through human experience. In the tradition of Anselm, the theology of Karl Barth is one in which the being of God is placed before the knowledge of God, his actuality over any considerations of his attributes. Therefore, Barth's approach ruled out any understanding of God through human history or natural science. His doctrine of creation was based upon the centrality of Jesus Christ as the key to an understanding of creation and humanity's relation to God.

### **Barth's doctrine of time**

Barth's doctrine of time is part of his doctrine of creation. It is firmly Christocentric and grounded in the doctrine of the Trinity, which is placed at the open-

ing of his great work, *Church Dogmatics*. Through God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ, Barth proposes that God's nature is shown to be that of a self-revealing God. This implies a passive, receiving role for human beings and affirms God's sovereignty. The Holy Spirit, in Barth's theology, is the work of God that enables this self-revelation to be understood within both humanity's capacity to understand and the process of understanding. God's self-revelation in time is the manifestation of his eternal nature. In Barth's theology, all notions of temporality are reinterpreted in Christological and Trinitarian contexts. God's self-revelation in Christ brings about a fellowship of God's eternity and creation's temporality. As deity meets with humanity, so eternity meets with time.

### The Trinitarian framework

In line with the fundamentals established by the Council of Nicaea in 325, Barth's understanding of the Trinity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit affirms that Christ is the same essence (*ousia*) as the Father; each has an individual reality (*hypostasis*) and mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*). The one correlates with God's freedom and the three with God's love and their perpetual union in God's eternal life. The Trinity is the *perichoresis* of the three *hypostases* in the one *ousia*. Particular to Barth's theology of the Trinity is the priority of the *ousia* rather than that of the *perichoresis*. This emphasis on divine freedom, rather than a mutual indwelling of the three, is, for Barth, at the heart of God: a God of revelation who 'does not will to live only for himself but also for another distinct from himself..., the God who so loved man that he condescended to become man himself in his own begotten Son.'<sup>1</sup> God's deity understood as such includes his humanity, the creation being the expression and outward flowing of God's 'freedom to love'.<sup>2</sup>

In the eternal Trinitarian life, God possesses beginning, succession and end perfectly and simultaneously: 'God's eternity... has them... from itself and therefore in itself. God is the prototype and foreordination of all being, and therefore also the prototype and foreordination of time. God has time because and as he has eternity.'<sup>3</sup> Temporal distinctions thus correlate with the Trinitarian *hypostases*. God's eternity embraces earthly temporality, beginning, succession and end, in the mode of simultaneity while upholding the temporal distinctions which are part of created time: 'Eternity is the simultaneity of beginning, middle and end, and to that extent, it is pure duration.'<sup>4</sup> The idea of duration, which is built into Barth's notion of time, is a duration of divine simul-

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1 Barth, K. *Church Dogmatics*, III/1 and *Church Dogmatics*, III/2. All Barth quotations, unless otherwise stated, from Hunsinger, G. *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2000).

2 *Church Dogmatics* II/2, p. 643.

3 *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 611.

4 *Church Dogmatics* II/1, p. 608.

taneity, which would appear paradoxical unless it is understood that the language governing Barth's interpretation of the Trinity has its reflection in his concept of eternity. As Hunsinger has observed, 'Eternity is the mutual coherency of three concrete temporal forms, distinct but not separate, that exemplify one undivided duration, identical with the *ousia* of God.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, in Barth's Trinitarian framework, past, present and future (or beginning, middle and end) are not three, but one, without separation or contradiction, in God's eternity. God's time is defined as being unlike any time that humanity can know as there is no earthly analogy that can explain this concept. It is 'as ineffable... as the doctrine of the Trinity, the theological analogy that gives it its form.'<sup>6</sup>

### Time and creation

Models of God's relationship with earthly time (or humanity's temporality in the context of its relationship with God) give rise to different perspectives on the nature of God's relationship with the world. In Barth's Christocentric, Trinitarian approach, God is neither the timeless God of Aquinas, nor the eternal God, seen from the standpoint of earthly time. God's nature, as that of a creating, self-revealing God, presupposes his own self-revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, an understanding of earthly time begins with the assumption of God's nature as one in which his eternity includes the possibility of creation's temporality. Our time is strictly created time and subordinate to the true eternity which 'includes this possibility... and potentiality of time'.<sup>7</sup> As a consequence, eternity neither opposes nor negates creation's temporality: the possibility of creation's temporality is contained within the being of God. This is characteristic of the supremacy of God and the *ousia* of the Trinity that permeates Barth's notion of eternity. From his study of Paul's letter to the Romans, Barth had come to comprehend God as infinite, 'other' and distinct from creation and Barth's theology views all aspects of the created order, including time and space, as having their source and origin in God.

### The downward vector

The incarnation is commonly perceived as God's taking upon himself a human form and sharing humanity with his creatures. However, seen from the perspective of God's eternity, the incarnation becomes, alternatively, Christ's taking upon himself our temporality: that which is eternal becomes that which is temporal. In Christ, God takes time to himself 'permitting created time to become and be the form of his eternity'.<sup>8</sup> That created temporality can be taken

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5 Hunsinger, G. *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2000), p. 198.

6 *ibid.*, p. 189.

7 *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p.616.

8 *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p.616.

up into God's eternity implies that time can conform to the shape of eternity and eternity to the shape of time. The incarnation may thus be viewed as the fulfilment of creation: God's nature is that of a self-revealing God and eternity is, by nature, formed so as to make our temporality a part of itself. God 'raises time to a form of his own eternal being'.<sup>9</sup> He allows created time to become the form of his eternity. The idea of God as purely timeless is contradicted by the sharing of Jesus in our temporality when 'God himself took time and made it his own.'<sup>10</sup>

### **Christ and the downward vector**

For Barth, Christ is the mediator between heaven and earth and between eternity and time. In him, the unity and distinction of eternity and creaturely time are echoes of the unity and distinction within the Trinitarian relationship. Eternity and time coexist in a form of mutual indwelling as God becomes human without ceasing to be God and eternity becomes time without ceasing to be eternity. In a breaking in of a new reality, the real past of sin and death is abolished on the cross, and the real future becomes a future of communion with God. Christ, as the eternal Word, brings God's eternity to human temporality, Jesus being the way from the real past to the real future: 'the past is that from which we are set free by him, and the future that for which we are set free by him'.<sup>11</sup> Earthly temporality is now time that has been healed and made new by God. To Barth, the self-revealing God meets our world in the incarnation, bringing God and God's eternity into our earthly, temporal state. The creature tastes eternity in its fellowship with God and thus time's healing comes from without, in the gift and miracle of grace. Earthly time, in its meeting with eternity, is transformed into a real time that is healed by God: through God's self-revelation, time is made new.

### **The upward vector**

Just as eternity becomes time without ceasing to be eternity, time becomes eternity without ceasing to be time. Through Christ, real created time acquires the character and stamp of eternity and created life within it acquires the special characteristics of eternal life. The imperfection of created time is transcended, overcome and healed in its contact with eternity. Just as communion with God may be a union that transcends the world, the idea of such communion as being not of this time may serve to illustrate a relationship that transcends earthly temporality. In Barth's theology, the healing of time is distinct from the notion of the remission of sin. The imperfections of creation are per-

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid.* p. 616.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.* p. 617.

<sup>11</sup> *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 628.

ceived as more than human sin and corruption. The incarnation is said to resolve a basic human plight that is a consequence of earthly temporality: the plight of finitude and dissolution into non-being. In the healing of time, through the incarnation, nature is perfected and its temporality is overcome by divine grace. In this sense, Barth is at one with Aquinas in believing in the perfecting of nature by divine grace. In contrast to Aquinas, however, his thinking accords with that of Duns Scotus: God would have come even to a world uncorrupted by sin. This demonstrates Barth's understanding of God's grace as that which is freely given to humanity without the requirement of humanity's response to God. It also suggests that Barth's interpretation of redemption is one in which grace frees humanity from sin *and* from the natural consequences of temporality.

### The union of eternity with time

The downward vector, the entry of eternity into time, is God with humanity without ceasing to be God and eternity becoming time without ceasing to be eternity. The upward vector, the elevation of time to eternity, is humanity's elevation to God without ceasing to be human and time's meeting with eternity without ceasing to be temporal as the new reality 'comes breaking in triumphantly'.<sup>12</sup> Barth's theology rests firmly upon the nature of Christ as both fully human and fully divine, his deity and humanity being essential to the process of both the downward and upward vector. The intersection of these vectors is the union of eternity with time in which time does not exist apart from eternity's embrace and in which Christ is the eternal one who precedes time's beginning, accompanies its duration and exists after its end. Barth describes three forms of eternity in relation to time as pre-temporality, supra-temporality and post-temporality, using concepts that have their roots in time. In accordance with his Trinitarian perspective, each embodies eternity as a whole as the *hypostases* and they coexist and cohere with one another as the three of the Trinity in the dynamic of the *perichoresis*. God's existence as the Holy Trinity precedes his relationship with the world. Everything in relation to the world presupposes his existence as the Trinity: creation, reconciliation and redemption and Christ, before the foundation of the world, as the Word who assumed our humanity. Thus God's eternity is supra-temporal, embracing all time from without and permeating all time from within through the event of the incarnation. It is post-temporal in that it will be when time is no more. God's post-temporal reality is the eternity and fulfilment towards which humanity moves. For Barth, to think of eternity is to think of God himself: 'He, the living God, is eternity.'<sup>13</sup> Again it is evident that the oneness of God is prior to the three persons of the Trinity in a doctrine that emphasises God as the source of and supreme power over creation above his immanence.

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<sup>12</sup> *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 627.

<sup>13</sup> *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 369.

## Barth's theology of time in contemporary theology

In considering the place of Barth's theology of time in contemporary thinking, it is important to note its separation from any attention to historical Christianity. Torrance has pointed out Barth's early interest in Franz Overbeck as having influenced his later work. Overbeck regarded the historicising of Christianity as a limiting of Christianity and that 'modern theologians of this historical Christianity simply perpetuate and advocate that betrayal'.<sup>14</sup> Barth's subordination of created time to eternity is noted by Metzger in that Jesus' life 'is not resigned to the historical past. It is both the eternal life of God, and the temporal life of humanity'.<sup>15</sup> Jesus' life transcends the distinction between time and eternity and the distinctions inherent in time itself: 'the life of Jesus Christ is eternal life, which does not extinguish but integrates and to that extent overcomes the differences between what we call past, present and future'.<sup>16</sup>

Hunsinger has drawn attention to the implications for human freedom in a model of God's time as an eternal 'now', encompassing all temporal moments, and the implications for God's freedom in a model of eternity as one that accompanies, shapes and directs the temporal process. Barth's model, in his view, 'overlaps elements of each while transcending both'.<sup>17</sup> He observes in Barth's theology the reconciliation of God's immanence and 'otherness', 'the unity of a being one which is also a becoming one'.<sup>18</sup> 'God in no way needs the world in order to be who he is'<sup>19</sup> but he 'seeks and creates fellowship between himself and us'.<sup>20</sup> The reconciliation of being and becoming is also noted: 'divine reality is unified, constant, and stable in itself, it is also endlessly vibrant in its life'.<sup>21</sup>

Hans Urs von Balthasar sees Barth's theology of time as one in which temporality is made valid in the light of God's eternity and through which we can come to praise our finitude. He rightly takes us from the human viewpoint of the confines and immanence of the world to Barth's perspective 'from above, from the place where God lays hold of man's temporality and finitude and reincorporates them in the fountain of their origin[;] in the time and finitude of Jesus Christ, time becomes the medium of the manifestation of eternity'.<sup>22</sup> Balthasar hints at a possible insight into the reconciliation of nature and grace

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14 Torrance, T. F. *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Earlier Theology*, London: SCM Press (1962), p. 42.

15 Metzger, P. *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Thought Through the Theology of Karl Barth*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (2003), p. 130.

16 *Church Dogmatics IV/3*, pp. 44-45.

17 Hunsinger, G. *op. cit.*, (5), p. 188.

18 *Church Dogmatics I/1*, p. 369.

19 Hunsinger, G. *op. cit.*, (5), p. 192.

20 *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 257.

21 Hunsinger, G. *op. cit.*, (5), p. 193.

22 Balthasar, H. U. von, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, 1951, trans., San Francisco: Communio Books (1991) p. 99.

in the relationship of creatures, willed and created by God in history, and a God who has willed to enter history with his creatures: 'God's revelation enters into history and announces its own transhistoricality and becomes the judge and measure of all worldly history only by becoming part of world history.'<sup>23</sup>

Richard Roberts is critical of what he terms Barth's 'ontological exclusiveness' and 'theological totalitarianism': his theology 'either exists and demands submission in the acknowledgement of faith or it cannot exist for those who refuse to grant its totalitarian demands'.<sup>24</sup> He rightly draws attention to the grounding of Barth's doctrine of time in his particular Christological and Trinitarian perspectives, without which his theology loses its foundation. The subordination of temporality to eternity may also be seen as going against the need for a belief in human freedom and an open future. In Barthian terms, however, human freedom, when seen as an overflowing from the freedom of God, may be considered as real as one which entertains an open future. It may be argued that one key to the grandeur of Barth's work lies in his insistence upon theology's separation from the ordinary and worldly perspective.

### **Barth's God of time – a summary**

Barth's theology of time is distinct from both the idea of the remote and timeless God and that of the intimately immanent God for whom the future is open. This doctrine may be said to bring together the ontological separation of God from the world and the real relationship that God has with the world. God's eternity is an eternity of the triune life, not the non-temporality of a timeless God. Thus Barth retains the 'otherness' and absolute sovereignty of God as well as his immanence in creation through his nature as the self-revealing Lord of time and space. The incarnation is God's encounter with time and yet a distinction between God and creation is maintained. God's transcendence is no longer seen in terms of an absence of time and space. For Barth, revelation necessitates a God who is, by nature, self-revealing. Time and space are thus integral to God's nature and his capacity to be present in and for the world. This distinction and togetherness is Trinitarian in the sense of 'the togetherness of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the distance posited by the distinction that exists in the one essence of God'.<sup>25</sup>

### **Barth and modern notions of time**

Although Barth's reference was from the standpoint of theology, his statement that 'there is no such thing as absolute time, no immutable law of time'<sup>26</sup> is true

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<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 368.

<sup>24</sup> Roberts, R. H. *A Theology on its Way? Essays on Karl Barth*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark (1991), p. 57.

<sup>25</sup> *Church Dogmatics II/1*, p. 468.

<sup>26</sup> *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 456.

within a contemporary understanding of time as part of the physical creation. The enigma of time is not an issue confined to theology and philosophy and, in modern physics, time and eternity are now understood within a framework far removed from the ordinary linear perception of past, present and future. Barth's statement above is upheld by the theory of Special Relativity in which there is no universal 'present' nor an absolute uniform rate for the passage of time. The common-sense concept of time's passage is now recognised as being locked into the change, flux and flow of events in nature. Time for the physicist does not pass or flow: there is nothing in nature 'that singles out a privileged special moment as the present or any process that would systematically turn future events into the present, then past, events'.<sup>27</sup> This notion of time accords with the 'block universe' theory<sup>28</sup> in which the universe exists in an unchanging four-dimensional 'block' rather than as a three dimensional space modulated by the flow of an instant defined as 'now' that forms the border between the past and the future. Barth's idea of God's eternity as a divine simultaneity of past, present and future bears a relationship to this model and is close to the classical model of God as a God whose existence is external to earthly time. However, criticisms of God's remoteness from Creation, often associated with this model, are tempered by the idea of a created temporality proceeding from the eternity of a God who chooses to become present among his creatures within created time. Barth's theology of time, therefore, embraces the notion of God's 'otherness' to temporality and also his revelation within the temporal order: a God external to the temporal and spatial dimensions of the universe but whose presence has raised earthly temporality to himself. The breaking into earthly temporality of the self-revealing God is by God's own action. This upholds the primacy of the *ousia* in that God's immanence proceeds from an outflowing of divine eternity.

Objections to the notion of 'block time' have rested upon the common-sense understanding of reality. An awareness of linear time is, for human beings, an essential part of their nature: it is 'no mere idiosyncrasy of human psychology but an intrinsic feature of reality...'.<sup>29</sup> It has been pointed out that the God of the Old and New Testaments demonstrates 'a deep engagement with the historical process, with the becomingness of the world'.<sup>30</sup> That no place exists in which to accommodate the concept 'now' has been considered more to do with the incompleteness of science than any valid model of reality.<sup>31</sup> However,

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27 Davies, P. 'That mysterious flow', *Scientific American* September 2002, 40.

28 See: Isham, C. J. and Polkinghorne, J. C. 'The Debate over the Block Universe', in Russell, R. J., Murphy, N. and Isham, C. J. (eds.) *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action*, 2nd edn, Vatican City State: Vatican Observatory Publications; and Berkeley, Ca: Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences, (1996), pp. 139-148.

29 Polkinghorne, J. *Belief in God in an Age of Science*, New Haven: Yale University Press (1998), p. 67.

30 *ibid.*, p. 71.

31 See *ibid.*, p. 67.

although present theories in modern physics point to there being no absolute temporal frame of reference, it is not unreasonable to entertain its existence beyond created temporality: an external and eternal absolute of time within the nature of a creator God to which earthly temporality is subordinate. Indeed, divine temporal dipolarity has been posed as a possible model of a God in which both God's eternal nature and his involvement with the temporality of creation are brought together: 'a mutual complementarity between the unchangingly steadfast and the providentially responsive'.<sup>32</sup> Barth's Trinitarian, Christocentric theology of time thus presents a way in which God's transcendence and immanence are brought together in God's eternity and his self-revelation within created time. John Polkinghorne has asked whether we might not suppose that 'it was the *temporal pole* of the Second Person that became incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, while the eternal pole continued its timeless participation in the divine essence'.<sup>33</sup> He describes the incarnation as 'the utmost conceivable engagement of the divine with the temporal',<sup>34</sup> reflecting Barth's doctrine of time in which the love of God for creation is contained within the encounter between the incarnate God and his creatures.

### Future possibilities

Near the start of his great volume on the doctrine of creation Barth asserted that 'there can be no scientific problem, objections or aids in relation to what Holy Scripture and the Christian Church can understand by the divine work of creation'.<sup>35</sup> However, a few lines further on, he notes that 'future workers' in dogmatics will find 'many problems worth pondering'.<sup>36</sup> Natural theology and Barth's dogmatics may be uneasy partners but, in the area of time, there would appear to exist a degree of reconciliation between the notions of God's timelessness and his involvement in the temporal order. Barth's starting point of the nature of God himself, Lord of time and space, stands in contrast to a 'bottom-up'<sup>37</sup> theology that gives primacy to the human apprehension of the divine nature, characteristic of much modern theology. His Trinitarian and Christocentric theology of time may be charged with being exclusive and thus unacceptable in a culture that would seek to adopt a more pluralist approach to the science and religion interface. It may be argued, however, that a theological response to creation which has the breadth and depth of Barth's doctrine of time may play a part in reconciling God's separation from and involvement in

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32 Polkinghorne, J. *Science and the Trinity, a Christian Encounter with Reality*, New Haven: Yale University Press (2004), p. 105.

33 *ibid.*, p. 115.

34 *ibid.*, p. 115.

35 *Church Dogmatics III/1*, p.9, from Webster, J. *Outstanding Christian Thinkers: Karl Barth*, New York: Continuum (2000).

36 *Church Dogmatics III/1*, p.10, from Webster, J. *op. cit.*, (35).

37 Polkinghorne, J. *op. cit.*, (32) p. 116.

creation and point to there being less of a contradiction between some modern notions of God's relationship with human temporality than is often supposed.

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