

The Dialectic of Dissimilarity and Relation – The Position of Man and Woman as Seen by Karl Barth

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This article outlines the Christocentric anthropology of the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. It then proceeds to explicate Barth's ethics and his stand on how to conduct relationships between women and men. His main points of loyalty, relatedness and order are explained, as well as his special views on marriage. From there the article goes forth to evaluate which points are relevant and useful today, and which are to be dismissed. It also gives an outlook on where Barth's theological groundwork could also be taken, while still taking Barth's main decisions seriously.

Keywords: Barth, Christocentrism, relationship, marriage, man/woman

1 Introduction

The initial question with which I started out was: what is Barth's view on gender roles in general? It came up during a seminar discussion and would not stop bothering me. As interesting as I found Karl Barth's thinking to be, it was at the same time irritating me. When I admired him for his frankness and clean-cut ideas and theological decisions, these were at the same time the things that made me feel the most uneasy: How could he be so sure of his own ideas and thoughts? How did his world view fit with his theological groundwork? And, more importantly, what of that groundwork is still useful today, if any?

1.1 Outline of the Paper's argument

Now, to illuminate the initial question, it is highly useful to get an idea of Barth's Christocentric anthropology. From there it is most fruitful to dissect his ethical stance on the relationship between man and woman. Even though it was written in the 1950s - which makes it hard to swallow for modern readers - there are some aspects of his analysis that can be useful for the current thinking about relationships, responsibility for the other and how we see humans as individuals. This is mainly because Barth's theology strengthens the view of humans as beings with many layers and with a distinct eye for their vulnerabilities, as well as their differences. With that, it is possible to see humans beyond the dichotomy of man and woman, without reducing human relationships to the sex category, while still keeping in view that particular layer of human existence.

1.2 Methods

This research paper is the result of my bachelor thesis written in the Spring of 2018 and sums up the main thoughts and results of the thesis.



The most important part of the work for the thesis was the close reading of the ground texts by Barth, which I excerpted in excruciating detail and diagrams, that I then used to explain Barth's thoughts. Then the secondary literature was taken into account. Here helpful criticism and ideas were found and combined. It led to many sheets of paper scattered through the room with many arrows and links between them. In a last step I put them in an order that was useful for my argument, made a diagram of that and wrote the last chapters, including my own criticism and ideas on where these theological ideas could lead.

So far, the best-known reader of Barth from a feminist perspective is Magdalene Frettlöh. Apart from her works, this has not been done widespread. But it is relevant to theology to also incorporate new methods like feminist theology and its hermeneutics of suspicion into its scientific toolbox. So far Barth has not been read consistently from a feminist point of view. Questions of gender and gender roles need to be included into theological thinking.

1.3 Laying the ground

So, why Barth? Karl Barth, a Swiss theologian, known for his decisive and oftentimes provocative stand on theological and worldly matters, was also very prominent in the German church struggle in the time of national socialism. He was an important voice against the mainstream of the time by saying Christians can never take the so-called "Hitler oath", which he consequently refused to do himself. That oath said that Hitler is the highest leader, but in Barth's view, the highest authority for a Christian must always be Jesus Christ. This strong christocentrism is part of the enormous potential of Barth's theology: it is highly critical of ideology and therefore also often called "critical theology". This christocentrism is also the main point of Barth's anthropology: In Christ, the true human nature becomes visible. With that human nature all humans are endowed and are therefore equal before God. This could be called a "democratic foundation", to use a more secular term. Though theologically speaking this of course has a lot of implications about sin and redemption, which cannot be elaborated in this short piece.¹

Barth then introduces his thoughts on men and women, the configuration of humanity and their relationships. He sets a rather old-fashioned take on the relationship between man and woman as a given: Man has been created first, woman second. This sets the hierarchy between the two. But as they are both created in God's image, they are only together, as a duo, human. The otherness of either one, their dissimilarities and the ensuing tension field is what constitutes being human as fellow-humanity. This tension field has to be worked with in relation to one another. That humans must exist in this relation to each other is one of the main points. Humans inevitably exist as beings in relation to each other, in their bodily, living and vulnerable being. That is what he calls "fellow-humanity". Perceiving that

¹ Barth, 1948, p. 20-62.



otherness is very important for Barth. He wants humans to fully engage with each other, on all levels of their personality and to be constantly questioned by the otherness of the person one is dealing with.²

To equate that otherness with the sexes, that a man can only be fully questioned by a woman and vice versa, is what opens Barth's view up to attack.

2 The Three Main General Thoughts

But first, it is necessary to understand the concept Barth then unravels before the reader. He explicates the relation between man and woman in its constitution and implementation. For elucidation his three main general thoughts on fellow-humanity are inescapably important.

The first main general thought is that of the **demand of loyalty**. This means, that one should stay true to one's own sexuality, and in turn also to the other one's sexuality, though sexuality is a misleading term here. It does not only mean biologically, the sex, but also reaches as far as social behavior. But when Barth wrote this, there was no concept yet of distinguishing between sex as the biological part and gender as the social, cultural and habitual part. So, if in this text "sexuality" is mentioned, please be aware of Barth's indistinctiveness of the term. He sees loyalty to the sexuality threatened from two sides: on the one hand from not staying within one's own line, within ones assigned sex and gender and on the other hand in abstracting sexuality completely to a meta-level, thinking one could transcend the barriers between male and female and be content within oneself, without regard of the other, of the opposite sex and the irritation it evokes, that is needed to be fully human.³

That explicitly shows in the second main thought: that of **relatedness**. Barth explains that man and woman are irrevocably connected in some way. They have to be aware of the other, in their otherness, but also in their similarities. Barth calls this a "**with-being**"⁴. The otherness of the opposite sex continually questions the own sex, which is a very important part of being a man or a woman in Barth's eyes. By being continually questioned by the otherness of the other, one has to reassert the own sexuality, the own being human and in that instant give an account of one's own humanity to the other in one's own reaction to the other. Funnily enough, being continually questioned is a function that Barth usually attributes to the word of God.

² Barth, 1951, p. 128-133.

³ Barth, 1951, p. 170-181.

⁴ Barth, 1951, p. 184.



This “with-being” undoubtedly has a physical component as well, there is no relation without a bodily level. But this does not just mean sexuality.⁵

Barth then explicates the order in which relationships should be conducted. So that is the third main thought: **order**. – And the ones who think of that infamous Professor Umbridge when reading that word: You are not that far off.

As I said before, for Barth the “god-given” order is that of the man coming before the woman. At this point in the text, he even points out again, that before God men and women are equal in their human existence and all affiliated consequences. But at the same time, the man is the one who comes first, who takes the first step, who is the one that answers God, who is the strong and responsible one – which means on the downside, that he is responsible for both himself and the woman. The woman is the one coming after the man, but, as Barth puts it, it is no disadvantage to her or a disrespect, but on the contrary, it is a special value placed upon her and a “clever woman” knows to appreciate that. He calls that “each have their own place”. This hierarchical setting of order is obviously rooted in a long tradition within Christian thinking, but also modelled parallel to Barths view of the covenant between God and humans. Here also God is the one choosing humans as the partner of the covenant, the same way as a man is supposed to choose a woman.⁶

But with this Barth recedes behind his own anthropology.

2.1 The particularities of marriage

These three main thoughts, the demand of loyalty, relatedness and order are the framework for all relationships between humans. Barth then explicates further with the special example of marriage. I do not want to say that marriage is the only way of doing relationships, but Barth (obviously) chooses it as an example. It also highlights the analogy with the covenant of God, which will become important a little later.

In this piece, I will focus on the points that are most relevant for the argument I am trying to make:

Marriage for one is an ongoing **task**. Both parties have to put work into it, have to expose themselves to the other and be unsettled by the other again and again.

Marriage is also **complete** – in the sense that a woman and a man are supposed to become one. But he does not mean that they are just forcibly phased the same, he rather means that they should march in unison, seeing and being aware of the other. However, that marching in unison is not meant to erase all differences, it rather sets the tone: Two humans are supposed to work together towards a certain idea, a goal, but the completion of the task

⁵ Barth, 1951, p. 182-187.

⁶ Barth, 1951, p. 188-201.



can only be accomplished while experiencing and working with the different human being in front of them. That includes their bodily being as sexual beings as well as their vulnerability.

Marriage is also **exclusive**. Because loving means choosing, and you can only ever love and choose one – says Barth.

Marriage is **permanent**. This is again thought parallel to the covenant with God. If marriage is supposed to mirror the covenant between God and human, it is necessarily a permanent thing. But Barth does not totally rule out the possibility of divorce, if only as a last resort.⁷

Collecting these points together, one can say that the tension field, the relation in which humans interact with each other is characterized by their differences and their attentiveness and their togetherness, willing to be questioned by the other on every level: bodily, mentally, intellectually. And in that it becomes rather clear, that the splitting up by the sexes is at best unhelpful, at worst harmful, as Barth himself clearly points out, that the encounter between humans happens on other, equally important levels as well.

3 Conclusion: Fruits and Limits

Positively we can take away from this that Barth really pointed out some important concepts, like the idea that people need to be aware of the other and accept and embrace them in their otherness and also in their physicality and vulnerability, as a dialectic of fascination and irritation. Instead of trying to mold the other person into something one wants to see in them. Barth is both aware of the fragility of human relationships, as well as their many layers. Therefore, marriage becomes a crystallization point where this relatedness from one to the other is made both visible and concrete. With his view of relationships between women and men as something that needs to be aware of the whole person, not just their sexuality, he also puts a halt to sexual objectification – and is also inconsistent with his own claim that only the opposite sexes can question each other fully, because if the sex/gender category is only one of the many layers of human being, it cannot account for a distinction of this magnitude. To be human means to be more than just a sexual being. One's otherness is not only rooted in being different on a sexual level. The differentiation between the sexes could be replaced by a differentiation of human relationships within the depths of their layers: not every aspect or layer of human existence is in the same degree involved in every encounter with other humans. So that might explain why there are not only marriages, but also all kinds of relationships and friendships.

⁷ Barth, 1951, p. 202-256.



However: It remains highly problematic that he inscribes the hierarchical order of God's covenant with humanity into the relationships *between* humans.⁸ All the empowering and emancipating possibilities of his Christocentric anthropology, with human beings being equal before God, are overshadowed by the preordering of the man and the subordination of the woman. By inscribing that unnecessary hierarchy, Barth falls short of his own anthropology.

But the great strength of Barth's theology is to see humans as fellow-humans, as social beings, that need to be seen, taken seriously and understood in a variety of layers and vulnerabilities and in all their otherness. That opens up the possibility of a discourse beyond reducing interpersonal relationships only to questions of sexuality and gender without ignoring those dimensions of human beings and being human.

It can also lead away from a hierarchical analogy with God's covenant, to relationships in analogy to the inner-trinitarian God, who is in himself "God in relationship"⁹.¹⁰ It could also lead to analogies that emphasize less on the partnership with God, but more on friendship with God.

4 References

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⁸ Frettlöh, 2004, 103-146.

⁹ Barth, 1951, S. 128.

¹⁰ Frettlöh, 2004, S. 103-146.

