

BOOK REVIEWS

Faye Bodley-Dangelo, *Sexual Difference, Gender and Agency in Karl Barth's***Church Dogmatics (London: T&T Clark, 2019), pp. x+196. £91.80.**

Rachel Muers

University of Leeds, UK (r.e.muers@leeds.ac.uk)

Why do we need to keep talking about sexual difference and gender in Karl Barth's theology? As Faye Bodley-Dangelo makes clear at the start of her book, the issue has already been argued over at length. Most students of Barth's theological anthropology and ethics probably think they know what the problem is – and either know that it makes Barth irredeemable, or know a robust defence that makes everything all right. Bodley-Dangelo's aim, in which she succeeds admirably, is to persuade both groups that they have been looking in the wrong place and arguing about the wrong things.

In brief, Bodley-Dangelo argues, the problem Barth's theology has with sex and gender – nearly, but not quite, a problem with women – is not to do with how Barth organises the components of his theological and anthropological system, in asymmetric pairings and inflexible hierarchies; it is to do with how he sets them in motion, and specifically with how he conceptualises and locates agency in his Christocentric understanding of the human person. Barth (Bodley-Dangelo demonstrates) first establishes a persuasive account of human agency in Christ that not only enables but *requires* a complex reciprocity of self and other, subverting pre-given assumptions about how the relationship is to be ordered; and then selectively ignores this account when – and only when – he is talking about the relationship between the sexes.

Using Barth's fascinating (and, she suggests, unduly neglected) exegesis of the Good Samaritan in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, Bodley-Dangelo explains how the human agent as the needy recipient of Christ's unexpected mercy is set in motion towards the neighbour whose need is a mirror of her own – set in motion to receive and offer mercy, and to become through grace a sign of Christ's love. Later, in III/2, this Christ-impelled movement towards the other is expanded into an account of reciprocal address, which is marked both by self-expression as a gift to the other in their need and by generous hearing as a willingness to accept what the other offers, with the whole movement being located within and enabled by the movement of divine self-revelation. This, Bodley-Dangelo argues in her second key move, is the pattern of neighbourly reciprocity – the pattern in which each needs the other *to speak*, to express him- or herself, to step forward with a gift – that is simply abandoned, first partially in the account of Adam and Eve, and then almost entirely when we reach the part of the special ethics concerned with relations between 'man and woman'. First Eve, and then 'woman', is constructed as an other who does *not* speak, does not exercise responsible

agency, and hence does not enter into the pattern of reciprocal address and neighbourly reciprocity.

How can a critical interpreter respond to this troubling inconsistency in Barth's theological anthropology? One of the many attractive features of the book is Bodley-Dangelo's performance of the pattern of Christian agency-in-relationship that she describes. At certain key points, Barth himself, 'the dogmatician', appears as a character who is attempting to exemplify this same Christocentric agency – playing 'the neighbour to his readers' (p. 55). In return, throughout the book and especially in the later chapters, Bodley-Dangelo herself plays the neighbour to Barth. She will hear him generously; but she will not allow him to dictate the terms of the relationship, because that would be – in his own terms! – a failure of her responsibility. She will speak as she finds, and in doing so will offer a gift to 'the dogmatician'.

Among Bodley-Dangelo's findings, it should be noted that, in her reading of *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (in particular), Barth emerges not as an ideological complementarian, but simply as a rather unreflective sexist. This is not nearly as bad news as might at first appear. If she is right – and her case is certainly plausible – Barth has very little invested in his account of sex and gender. The Christocentric account of agency expounded in I/2 and elsewhere can thus be taken forward for liberative theological anthropology, including theologies of gender and sexuality, and meanwhile his heteropatriarchal construction of the categories of 'man and woman' can be allowed to sink into obscurity without much being lost from the theological system.

Drawing out further the methodological lesson from Bodley-Dangelo's work, I suggest that she offers a particularly valuable gift to Barth and the inheritors of his complex legacy, and not only in relation to theologies of gender and sexuality. Her prospect of a multi-voiced conversation of theological 'near and distant neighbours' (pp. 163–4) allows defenders and detractors to be drawn out of fixed positions and categories and ideological constructions of the other, and to receive the neighbour's words as gift. If this sounds like an impossibly idealistic vision of how theological discussion could work, I would merely note that the volume reviewed here provides an excellent example of what is possible.

doi:10.1017/S0036930620000435

Han-luen Kantzer Komline, *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account*

(New York: OUP, 2020), pp. xv + 469. £81.00.

Adam Ployd

Eden Theological Seminary, St Louis, MO, USA (aployd@eden.edu)

During the 1992 US presidential election, the winning Clinton campaign had a famous, informal slogan within its camp: 'It's the economy, stupid!' Though her writing is never so rude, Han-luen Kantzer Komline essentially offers a similar refrain in her new study of Augustine's theology of the will: 'It's about God, stupid!' In *Augustine on the Will: A Theological Account*, Kantzer Komline provides a thorough (maybe too thorough?)