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Barth and the divine perfections

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Abstract

Colin Gunton advanced the radical claim that Christians have univocal knowledge of God. Just this, he said in *Act and Being*, was the fruit of Christ's ministry and passion. Now, was Gunton right to find this teaching in Karl Barth – or at least, as an implication of Barth's celebrated rejection of 'hellenist metaphysics'? This article aims to answer this question by examining Gunton's own claim in *Act and Being*, followed by a closer inspection of Barth's analysis of the doctrine of analogy in a long excursus in *Church Dogmatics* II/1.

Contrary to some readings of Barth, I find Barth to be remarkably well-informed about the sophisticated terms of contemporary Roman Catholic debate about analogy, including the work of G. Sohngen and E. Pryzwara. Barth's central objection to the doctrine of analogy in this section appears to be the doctrine's reckless division (in Barth's eyes) of the Being of God into a 'bare' God, the subject of natural knowledge, and the God of the Gospel, known in Jesus Christ. But such reckless abstraction cannot be laid at the feet of Roman theologians alone! Barth extensively examines, and finds wanting, J. A. Quenstedt's doctrine of analogy, and the knowledge of God it affords, all stripped, Barth charges, of the justifying grace of Jesus Christ. From these pieces, Barth builds his own 'doctrine of similarity', a complex and near-baroque account, which seeks to ground knowledge of God in the living act of his revelation and redemption of sinners. All this makes one tempted to say that Gunton must be wrong in his assessment either of univocal predication or of its roots in the theology of Karl Barth.

But passages from the same volume of the *Church Dogmatics* make one second-guess that first conclusion. When Barth turns from his methodological sections in volume II/1 to the material depiction of the divine perfections, he appears to lay aside every hesitation and speak as directly, as plainly and, it seems, as 'univocally' as Gunton could ever desire. Some examples from the perfection of divine righteousness point to Barth's startling use of frank and direct human terms for God's own reality and his unembarrassed use of such terms to set out the very 'heart of God'.

Yet things are never quite what they seem in Barth. A brief comparison between Gunton's univocal predication and Barth's own use of christological predication

reveals some fault-lines between the two, and an explanation, based on Barth's own doctrine of justification, is offered in its place.

Keywords: *analogia fidei*, analogy, attributes, Gunton, univocal predication.

As so often happens, Colin Gunton prepared the way ahead. In *Act and Being* he gave voice – strong, confident voice – to the very topic I aim to explore here, the doctrine of divine attributes. Gunton was one of Karl Barth's most daring and militant descendants, and it is fitting that we begin an investigation of Barth's doctrine of the divine perfections with Gunton's provocative claims. Never fearful of drawing radical conclusions, nor shy of defending them in vigorous and clear argument, Gunton possessed a Christian confidence and air of good cheer which must strike us all as very much missing in theology and in the church today. Gunton, like his theological compatriot, Eberhard Jungel, boldly asserted the Christian's *knowledge* of God: not the mere *possibility* of knowledge, note, nor the bare act of negating what we know in the creaturely realm; not an enigmatic reaching forward into the divine darkness towards knowledge, nor even less, the miserable consolation of a 'theology as if', but rather the full-throated and confident assertion of true knowledge about the reality and perfections of God. Indeed, Gunton will take a step further than Jungel; really, a full gallop ahead of Jungel's elaborate account of analogical knowledge in Jungel's dense work, *God as the Mystery of the World*. In ways which would startle Jungel, startle or embarrass most Christian theologians as crude and 'unnuanced' – a great academic shame word! – Gunton simply steps forward and says plainly: Christians have *univocal* knowledge of God and of his attributes. Advancing a position most theologians have treated as epistemological heresy, Gunton calmly advocates for a rich and straightforward application of our creaturely concepts to God's own reality; and true to his own winning ways, Gunton makes us almost surprised no one else has said something so common-sensical, so persuasive, so refreshing as all this before. It is sometimes said that the mark of a truly innovative idea is that it carries in its train its own inevitability: of course that's so, we say of such an idea; and why didn't we say so before?

Now, I said 'almost surprised' earlier; and that 'almost' carries some weight here. For at issue for us today is the line of descent tying Colin Gunton to Karl Barth: has someone in fact 'said all this before' – namely, Karl Barth? Has Barth, despite all delicate hedging about in *Church Dogmatics*, II/1, simply plumped for a doctrine of the perfections that is univocal, indeed literal, in its execution, scope and referent? Has the 'narrow way' along which Barth walks, that celebrated christological concentration, demanded

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in the end a doctrine of univocal predication of God's ways and works which cannot, and should not, be denied? Is Gunton, that is, the proper, true and fearless descendant of his teacher, Karl Barth?

To answer, we begin with Gunton, and his final published work, *Act and Being*, subtitled, with uncharacteristic reserve, 'Towards a Theology of the Divine Attributes'. Here – despite any tentative throat-clearing in the subtitle – is Gunton in full military dress:

> The negative way [the *via negativa*] is essentially a form of *unbelief*, [you just have to love this kind of theological boldness!] seeking God prior to and other than through the incarnation and sending of the Spirit. We might say the same of the whole programme known as analogy, because it is tied up with it. Because we fail to realize that the (human) love that Jesus is, is, at the same time, the love of God in action, we fail to accept the *univocal* language which it licenses, indeed, *requires*, and seek instead a form of language that effectively ignores the means given. . . . Theologically, a large part of the error this tendency creates is a denial of the knowability of God which paradoxically conceals a Promethean 'hidden agenda': to achieve unity with the divine apart from the mediation of the Father by the Son and the Spirit. [Here, Gunton's strong trinitarianism.] Against this, it has been argued that we should take with utter seriousness that the Holy Spirit enables us to *know* the Father through Jesus, who is the eternal Son of the Father made man.[1]

Now, we need not enter into a detailed Gunton exegesis here – we are after the work of the teacher not the student, after all – but it may be instructive to pause a moment to examine Gunton's analysis of the *via negativa*, a striking element of Gunton's entire programme. Boldly, Gunton argues in this work, and in many of his earlier essays, that a particular school of ancient metaphysics has instructed and ensnared the Christian doctrine of God and our knowledge of him. Much of this must strike us as familiar scenery indeed: this viewpoint has been taken by many students of the *Church Dogmatics* to be a pillar of Barth's theological epistemology – his anti-Hellenism, we might call it or, more boldly, his anti-metaphysical dogmatics.

Now not just Gunton but Barth himself was hardly breaking fresh ground here. Protestant academic theology, especially in German-speaking lands, was decidedly 'anti-metaphysical', throughout the modern era, and the conviction that Kant's ruthless stricture against 'speculative knowledge' could be met only by a still greater ruthlessness against 'Hellenism' was widely held to be the sole path forward. The Luther renaissance of the inter-war

[1] Colin Gunton, *Act and Being* (London: SCM, 2002), pp. 155, 154; emphases added.

years solidified the conviction among these academic theologians that the Reformation, in its own idiom, taught the rejection of 'bare metaphysics' in favour of the living experience of faith; such was taken to be the proper, modern expression of Luther's call to stand under the Word of God, and flee the 'fictions of Aristotle'. An anti-metaphysics of this kind enters into Barth's own dogmatics with a pronounced distaste for the 'God of the philosophers', a God imprisoned, Barth says, by his own attributes of simplicity and unicity, a dark Monad, static, silent, lifeless. Barth's polemic against numerical oneness in the doctrine of God, his wary appropriation of such classic attributes as eternity and omnipotence, his great reserve in taking up such standard metaphysical categories as 'being', 'nature' or 'essence' – all these elements give the *Church Dogmatics* the air of a philosopher on holiday, a keen philosophical intellect who has suddenly shaken off the traces which kept his mind enthralled and immiserated. Indeed, we must say that in theological method, as well as guild membership, Barth really is free of all that; really a free and glad theologian. But it is germane for our purposes all the same to ask here: in his new-found freedom, has Barth in fact gone the distance that Gunton demands? Has he rejected 'Hellenism' in such a way that the doctrine of divine attributes has become, truly, a *metabasis eis allo genus*, a transformation to another kind?

I have to say that I am not sure. There is evidence, ample evidence, I believe, to place Barth both within and beyond Gunton's camp; and that is the source of my perplexity. The burden of this article is to lay out this evidence, and propose one possible way to make out of two, one, one coherent doctrine of the divine perfections.

Let me begin from the place where many of you might place Barth, where I certainly did before my recent reading of *Church Dogmatics*, II/1: the Barth of the 'turn to analogy', to borrow von Balthasar's famous phrase. This Barth does not reject analogy, does not embrace univocal predication; indeed affirms in the midst of revelation – divine unveiling – a deeper and sovereign and mysterious veiling, and from that divine movement builds an entire analogical structure predicated on christology, the celebrated *Analogia Fidei*. These are the sections of Barth's doctrine of God which tie most closely to his broadly methodological paragraphs in volume I, the doctrine of the Word of God, with its acute dialectical structure, its relentless recasting of major dogmas into the idiom of revelation, and its ready acknowledgement of the Kantian prohibition against all speculative trespass on the dark noumenal beyond. Everywhere in sections 26 (The Knowability of God), in 27 (The Limits of the Knowledge of God) and 29 (The Perfections of God), we hear the twin themes characteristic of Barth's early work in the *Dogmatics*: the sheer incapacity of the creature for God, in concept or in act; and the divine grace,

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sovereign claim, and freedom of God to reveal to the ungodly the knowledge of his own perfect life and act in the majestic gift who is Jesus Christ. These are the sections which bear witness most clearly to Barth's encounter with the legendary Thomist, Erich Pryzwara, and Pryzwara's own Roman Catholic interlocutors, including Gottlieb Sohngen. It is too tangled a web to unravel here, this story of Barth's appropriation and reworking of the Thomism of this remarkable generation of French and German Catholic intellectuals. But it is important for our purposes here to say that Barth encountered in these modern scholastics a doctrine of analogy already deeply embedded in the debate over natural knowledge of God, articulated in Vatican I, and deeply sensible of the steady pull of theology towards an analogy of faith, built out of the doctrines of grace and justification. Barth shows us in these sections that he has gone to school on these intra-Roman debates, and does not mistake the seriousness of this Catholic encounter with modern epistemology and the Augustinian 'cause of grace'.

Now Barth does not believe, not for a single moment, I would say, that the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church would endorse wholly or exclusively the place Sohngen accords to the *analogia fidei* in the creature's knowledge of God. In fact, it seems to me that Barth's scepticism on this point derives not from an ignorance of the full and proper doctrine of the *analogia entis* – a position frequently advanced in ecumenical circles these days – but rather from his direct and vivid encounter with Sohngen's and Pryzwara's complex doctrine of the analogy of being. Here is Barth on a Catholic counter-charge to Barth's *analogia fidei*:

> You ascribe being to God in his work and activity [a Catholic says to Barth]. But you also ascribe it to man, even if in infinite and qualitative disparity. Therefore, whatever may be said about the inadequacy of all other analogies, and as the meaning and justification of all other intrinsically ambiguous analogies, you acknowledge an analogy between God and man, and therefore one point at which God can be known even apart from his revelation. That is to say, you acknowledge the analogy of being, the *analogia entis*, the idea of being in which God and man are always comprehended together, even if their relationship to being is quite different, and even if they have a quite different part in being. As himself a being, man is able to know a being as such. But if this is so, then in principle he is able to know all being, even God as the incomparably real being. Therefore if God is, and if we cannot deny his being, or on the other hand, our own being and that of creation, necessarily we must affirm his knowability apart from his revelation. For

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> it consists precisely in this analogy of being which comprehends both him and us.[2]

A fair summary, I would say, of a careful and sophisticated handling of the doctrine of analogy: Barth knows his opponents well. And it is just his treatment of the *analogia entis*, this sophisticated rendering, which Barth rejects – and rejects for reasons central to our topic today. There may indeed be a 'turn to analogy' in Barth's dogmatics, that is, but it is not the doctrine of analogy many assume.

And Barth does not prosecute his own position as many expect. For example, Barth does not strike at the Catholic doctrine of analogy directly: no evocation of the spectre of Feuerbach; no warning about the titanic human control of God, as we heard tell in Gunton; no polemics against an alien Hellenism defiling proper knowledge of God. Rather, Barth here claims that the true and deep and deeply dangerous element in the analogy of being is its willingness to 'divide' or 'partition' the doctrine of God, into an 'abstract doctrine' – never an honorific in Barth's lexicon – in which divine being precedes act, and can be known, however partially or tentatively, as an autonomous reality, apart from the divine act of self-disclosure in Christ. God's utter unity has been sundered here, Barth charges: God's Lordship – his reality as *Dominum Nostra* – has been sheared off from his Being as such, and this bare Being is claimed to be known in its one-sidedness. The Roman doctrine of analogy then need not be opposed in detail or substance: 'There is no sense in contrasting their theses and ours in details and discussing in this contrast. Our primary contradiction is not of the "natural theology" of the Vaticanum as such. [*nota bene*!] . . . We cannot, therefore, attack it in detail. For how can we attack it? We can only say Yes and Amen to it as far as it applies to the god, the false god, to whom it refers. It is in itself incorrigible.'[3] Barth does not oppose the *analogia entis* directly, that is; there is no common ground on which such an opposition could be launched – a position towards radical disagreement enunciated already by Thomas Aquinas in the eighth article of the first question of the *Summa*. Barth is after something quite different here.

One way we might express this radical alternative in the doctrine of analogy is through the Latin maxim employed already in Sohngen's account of the *Analogia Fidei*: *esse sequitur operari*, being follows act. And another is through Barth's own summary of his 'turn toward analogy': 'If there is a real analogy between God and man [Barth writes] – an analogy which is a true analogy of being on both sides, [note that phrase] an analogy in and with which

[2] CD II/1, s. 26.1, p. 81 ET.
[3] CD II/1, s. 26.1, p. 84.

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the knowledge of God will in fact be given – what other analogy can it be than the analogy of being which is posited and created by the work and action of God Himself, the analogy which has its actuality from God and from God alone, and therefore in faith and in faith alone?'[4] There can be no knowledge of God, then, without this 'Divine incursion' as Barth puts it; this disclosure of the God who acts towards the creature, the sinful creature, as unfathomable grace, and who establishes himself in just this way as LORD, the 'God', Barth writes, 'who condemns to death and leads from death to life, the God who loves us in comprehensible mercy'.[5] It is impossible, Barth writes, for the creature to know a divine being who is not Redeemer and Judge: the sheer unity of God as the triune God-in-Act demands that our theological epistemology conform to the Lutheran *sola fide*, the justifying grace of God towards the knower. Just this is what it means to ground theology on revelation; just this what it means to speak in analogies.

Barth makes this very point in his excursus, some pages on, about the Lutheran scholastic, Quenstedt. Johannes Andreas Quenstedt was a seventeenth-century Lutheran divine, professor of logic and metaphysics, who presented a compendium of early modern orthodoxy under the marvellous title, *Theologia didictico-polemica sive systema theologicum*. Little wonder that Barth found such a work irresistible! In Quenstedt's didactic work Barth finds an evangelical theologian fully equipped to make use of the whole range of medieval scholastic terminology: equivocity, univocity, similarity of proportionality (no ignorance of Cajetan, that is), of attribution – the so-called *pros hen* analogy – and predicates both intrinsic and extrinsic. These intrinsic and extrinsic attributes are concepts which gain their suitability as predicates in virtue either of their own internal, proper qualities – the intrinsic – or in virtue of powers given the term from beyond – the extrinsic attributes.

Now, all this technical armature is put to use in describing the central term in any act of analogical predication: the notion of 'similarity'. Indeed, we miss Barth's deeper convictions about analogy if we look past the rather shop-worn term 'similarity'. That is because Barth uses this common, deflationary word to put aside any notion of what he calls 'calculus', any proportion or scale or matter of degree between the *analogans* and the *analogate*. In fact, Barth uses with real gingerness the more familiar scholastic vocabulary with which Quenstedt, or Gunton for that matter, is an adept. Rather than equivocal or univocal predication, then, we have the home-spun 'disparity' and 'parity'. And neither of those could apply in our language about God, for there

[4] CD II/1, s. 26.1, p. 83.
[5] Ibid.

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is no *commonality* of this sort between God, the LORD, and the knowing creature. Here, I think, Barth simply rejects Scotus' claims about the univocal moment in analogy. Rather, between the words we creatures use for God and God's own Word, his own self-knowledge, there must be 'similarity', the ordinary word which acts as place-holder for 'analogy'. In part, one suspects, Barth here resists a Latinate term which connotes 'proportion' or 'ratio'; 'similarity' carries few of these methodological dangers. Indeed the original term, 'gleichheit', is more earthy yet: 'likeness' might be a better, more rough and ready translation. Despite the earthiness, however, Barth makes a deft methodological move of his own with this ordinary, common-sense term. 'Similarity', Barth says, must mean something quite different from our ordinary idiom, when we take up similar creaturely terms in our predication of the true God. Here is Barth on the delicate matter of creaturely similitude:

> The Divine reality of this relationship [between Creator and creature] is not a relationship either of parity or disparity but of similarity. This is what we think and this is what we express as the true knowledge of God, although in faith we still know and remember that everything that we know as 'similarity' is not identical with the similarity meant here. Yet we also know and remember, and again in faith, that the similarity meant here is pleased to reflect itself in what we know as similarity and call by this name, so that in our thinking and speaking similarity becomes similar to the similarity posited in the true revelation of God (to which it is, in itself, not similar) and we do not think and speak falsely but rightly when we describe the relationship as one of similarity.[6]

Notice that we have now stumbled onto a form of the 'third-man problem', as this worry is styled in Plato's theory of the ideas – the problem of the 'infinite regress' – and even more, onto a form of the problem of 'likeness' laid out also in the *Parmenides*. Now, Barth is not adverse to a bit of question-begging: he often, as in this section, terms theological truth a 'virtuous circle'. But in our case, Barth offers another defence, one which will bring us back to Quenstedt and his own account of theological analogy.

> We have been analyzing the procedure by which the term analogy is selected to describe the relationship between what we say of God and what God is. But at bottom we have to do *the same procedure in the relationship itself*. If we can presuppose that the term analogy or similarity is 'correct' in the sense explained, the correctness of what we say about God, in its relationship to what God is, is everywhere based on the fact that God's

[6] CD II/1, s. 27.2, pp. 226–7.

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> true revelation comes from out of itself to meet what we can say with our human words and makes a selection from among them to which we have then to attach ourselves in obedience.[7]

Now I spoke a moment earlier about these passages as Barth's 'answer' to the problem of the infinite regress in theological speech – and I suppose it depends upon your taste in theological explanation whether Barth's position amounts to anything like what we customarily call 'an answer'. For it is just here, in the 'relationship of similarity', that we ordinarily expect to ground – or perhaps less ambitiously, to render coherent – what we mean by positive predication of creaturely terms to Almighty God. I believe that what Barth offers here would – in scholastic or Aristotelian circles – be considered little more than a lofty description of equivocal predication. But this is exactly what Barth denies!

So, we come to Quenstedt. Barth, in his fine-print excursus on Quenstedt, asks a brief but deceptively simple question: 'Now, have we said the same thing as he?' Several pages of dense single-space print are needed to answer, but we might summarise his response leaning on his own phrase: 'When two people say the same thing, it is not always quite the same thing.'[8] Their thoughts are similar, we might dare to say, but in an entirely unique similarity. Barth discerns in Quenstedt a pattern he already picked out in Catholic thought: a readiness to speak of a God abstracted from revelation; and we can now add, abstracted from the doctrines of grace and justification. Quenstedt knows better, Barth is quick to say. In his dogmatic treatment of Christ's justifying work, Quenstedt eagerly embraces the *sola fide* of the Lutheran *ordo salutis*; he recognises that 'we have no power to help ourselves' and that 'the truth is not in us'; he turns not to natural reason but to divine revelation; he calls the glorious work of Christ's atoning justice not 'partial' but whole, entire, perfect and complete; and he knows that not merit but grace, sheer unmerited pardon and grace, mark the relationship between the sinner and the justifying, righteous, gracious and loving God. Quenstedt, that is, rings the changes on the Reformation doctrine of justification. But all this fine-sounding orthodoxy drops away, Barth charges, when Quenstedt turns to creaturely predication of God.

> For there is not a single reference to God's revelation in the whole *quaestio* in which he speaks of this matter. And that *attributio* means for him something different from the grace of the divine revelation, is obvious from the fact that he defines it more closely as *attributio intrinseca*. If he had thought of the

[7] CD II/1, s. 27.2, p. 227, emphasis added.
[8] CD II/1, s. 27.2, p. 238.

> grace of revelation, if in this place, too, this Lutheran had remembered the Lutheran doctrine of the forgiveness of sins by grace alone, he would undoubtedly have decided terminologically for the *attributio extrinseca*. . . . But at this point Questedt did not remember the doctrine of justification.[9]

We might sum up this entire line of argument by saying that for Barth, analogy, or better, 'similarity', is the conceptual synonym – not just correlate, but synonym – to *justification by grace through faith alone*. Or, to borrow Barth's language directly: 'The static instead of dynamic understanding of the analogy between our word and God must be expressly repudiated.'[10]

At last, the parts fall into place and we are ready now to return to the spot Colin Gunton laid out for us at this article's opening. Just where do we now stand in the great matter of univocal predication of attributes to Almighty God? It might appear at first glance as if we have a resounding answer: Barth *affirms* analogy, and does so with a complex, sophisticated and historically 'nuanced' account of creaturely words taken up into the task of knowing and praising God. But here, Barth's words about Quenstedt seem especially fitting for Barth himself: 'When two people say the same thing', remember, 'it is not always quite the same thing'. A 'dynamic' relation of 'similarity', one animated by the grace of justification, transforms everything it touches; it is indeed the *metabasis eis allo genus*. For the doctrine of justification, for Barth, can be nothing more than a conceptualisation – an abstraction – of the living *relatio* of God with humanity, the person, Jesus Christ. In the end, the 'doctrine of analogy' in barth's hands just is christology, or better, the living name, Jesus Christ. To put this in more familiar conceptual terms: epistemology follows and is determined by metaphysics. To 'be similar' in this unique, God-centred fashion, is simply to 'be Immanuel', God with us. And this, Barth reminds us time and again, is *event*, the history of God's great incursion into our world; revelation simply tells this history, this one life.

Note, now, how this living, christological doctrine of similarity shapes and drives the doctrine of divine attributes. Here is Barth on the perfection of divine righteousness:

> God does not have to, but He can, take to Himself the suffering of another in such a way that in doing so, in founding and accomplishing this fellowship, He does what corresponds to His worth.[11]

Such righteousness cannot conflict either with the divine mercy nor with the divine holiness; rather they are each and all entirely God, wholly ordered

[9] *CD* II/1, s. 27.2, p. 239.
[10] *CD* II/1, s. 27.2, p. 231.
[11] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 377.

and unfolded in the act of Jesus Christ. 'God does not need to yield His righteousness', Barth proclaims, 'a single inch when He is merciful. As He is merciful, He is righteous. He is merciful as He really makes demands and correspondingly punishes and rewards.'[12] Here we see Barth's readiness in these early volumes to adopt a form of *justitia distributiva*, a readiness much muted in the later volumes on reconciliation. But this early readiness is tied directly to divine justification of the ungodly:

> from the belief in God's righteousness there follows logically a very definite political problem and task ... It becomes so when we appreciate the fact that God's righteousness, the faithfulness in which He is true to himself, is disclosed as help and salvation, as a saving divine intervention for man directed only to the poor, the wretched and the helpless as such, while with the rich and the full and the secure as such, according to His very nature He can have nothing to do. God's righteousness triumphs when man has no means of triumphing.[13]

Here we see Barth once again unifying, identifying and holding together what other theologians, early and late, divide and abstract and oppose: the 'poor and wretched' are not a particular class, nor a category of the pious or impious, but rather the whole human race, the whole lot of human flesh, lost and weak and condemned by the shadow of Adam, falling over our whole kind. Barth writes:

> God is righteous in himself, doing what befits Him and is worthy of Him, defending and glorying His divine being, in the fact that He is our righteousness, that He procures right for those who in themselves have no righteousness, whose own righteousness is rather disclosed by Him to be unrighteousness, yet whom He does not leave to themselves, to whom rather He gives Himself in His own divine righteousness and therefore becomes the ground on which, against their own merit and worth and solely by His merit and worth, called away from themselves and summoned to surrender themselves to His will, they can truly stand and live.[14]

Barth lays out in this section a four-fold doctrine of justification which mirrors, but also diverges from the celebrated four-fold doctrine of Christ's atoning work in *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1. Here, the incarnate Son undergoes

[12] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 383.
[13] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 387.
[14] Ibid. (Yes, that is just one sentence! Bromiley truly had his work cut out for him in this volume.)

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God's wrath against sin, the no of Good Friday, in order that substitution, expiation and satisfaction can be made to God's own righteousness, indeed, in order to *express* that righteousness, the enacted form of his mercy, his own divine worth.

Throughout this hymn to divine justification, Barth can say some astonishing things about God's perfections, things which would have made Colin Gunton nod his head in agreement. 'It is *God's own heart* which moves in creation on the basis of His own good-pleasure', Barth writes. '*God's heart suffers* what the creature ought to suffer and could not suffer without being destroyed.'[15] Or this:

> In the Word spoken by the blood of His Son, God hears that for those whose flesh this His Son has made His own, for those who are in Him, in Jesus Christ, there is now no more condemnation. In this His own Word answering Him out of the depths of humanity, God hears the Word by which we are justified, which as surely as it is His own Word is also our pardon. . . . Everything depends on whether we are present *at this divine colloquy*.[16]

Or this:

> God bore the conflict between man and Himself, as it had to be borne, to the bitter end, *as it affected Himself as the injured party* [a remarkable statement!] and man as the violator of His glory. His mercy consists in the fact that He took this conflict to heart, indeed, that *He bore it in His Heart* . . . For in Him who took our place *God's own heart beat on our side*, in our flesh and blood, in complete solidarity with our nature and constitution, at the very point where we ourselves confront Him, guilty before God.[17]

Here we see Barth assimilating the doctrine of divine perfections entirely into the doctrine of justification, or better, into the living reality and history which is Jesus Christ. Here we have Barth's correlate, I believe, to the 'Rahner maxim' that the immanent Trinity *is* the economic (*pace* Paul Molnar). As the Son just is the covenant realised and perfected between God and humanity in his own person, so Christ just is the divine perfection of justice, the *relatio* of God with us, in atonement, yes, but also in our knowledge, our knowledge of God's own heart.

Note that there is none of the language of veiling and unveiling here, none of the nearly unendurable tension between dialectical pairs held in unity,

[15] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 402; emphases added.
[16] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 403; emphasis added.
[17] *CD* II/1, s. 30.2, p. 402; emphases added.

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none of the appeal to an analogy properly conceived; really, none of this. Indeed, Barth's own extensive warnings against 'nominalism' – the belief that attributes of God are mere 'names' for the great unknown one – and against the still more dangerous 'semi-nominalism' – the analogical predication of Thomas Aquinas – prevents Barth from appealing to any of the safeguards the tradition has stored up in these two methodological structures. In their place stands *confession*, eloquent, impassioned confession of the personal work of Christ, who just *is* the dying and living and victorious merciful righteousness of God. This is the christological derivation of divine attributes taken at the flood, without hesitation or restraint, but gladly, confidently, in full measure.

Does this mean, then, that after all the heavy lifting of this part volume, Gunton has been right all along: we may and must speak, in the revelation that is Christ, univocally, confidently and boldly of our direct knowledge of Almighty God? Here I think we might advert to Barth's maxim for the final time, 'When two people say the same thing, it is not always quite the same thing'. For Barth and Gunton both speak directly and powerfully of revelation; both unhesitatingly of Jesus Christ as revealed Word of God; both of the history or narrative of God's ways and works with us fallen creatures. But for Gunton, Barth's delicate reflections upon 'similarity', the analogy which is unlike any similarity we know, must fall silent and find no corresponding echo. In its place stands Gunton's strong affirmation of direct, univocal knowledge of the triune God. And this is no small difference between the two! For this 'similarity', in Barth's hands, is the place-holder for God's sovereign selection and assumption of our creaturely words into God's own interior 'colloquy'; it is, not 'static but dynamic', not a given relation but an effective word and living voice; not in fact a theological epistemology at all, but a life, a person, Jesus Christ. In fact I would dare to say that Barth has made here a striking Platonising move in the doctrine of divine attributes: he has rendered metaphysical all epistemic categories, such that 'truth' or 'likeness' has become objective, substantial, indeed, personal. Jesus Christ in his person and work simply is the 'similarity' which 'comes out from God' and commandeers creaturely terms for his own. In his passion, he simply is the righteousness of God; friend of sinners and outcasts, he simply is God's mercy. And, to borrow from Bertrand Russell for a moment: not the 'is' of predication; but the far stronger, 'is' of identity. All our terms are most properly his, and through him and in him, they mediate what they have no merit or power or righteousness to bear, the truth and perfection of God. So we may say, yes: when we describe Christ in his personal work, we speak directly, univocally of this God with us, the Victorious Redeemer; but no, we cannot 'say' Jesus Christ directly – we hear the young Barth in his

most dialectical idiom here – for we cannot ourselves enter into the mystery, the hiddenness which is the incarnate union of God and humanity. So our creaturely terms, righteousness and justice, do indeed mean what we mean when we speak them, but that is so only because God has come among us to simply be our righteousness and to work for us divine mercy. And that univocal equivocity simply is what Barth means by 'similarity': the living heart that is Jesus Christ, the Lord.

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