Volume V : The Doctrine of Redemption (Eschatology)

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Introductory note from George M. Plasterer

Of course, Barth did not complete his *Church Dogmatics.* However, throughout this work, in his "lecture fragments" and in his *Ethics,* he gave hints as to what he intended. Most of this section devotes itself to those hints. It will mean re-reading some of the previous material. I hope this section proves helpful, as Barth completes his theology with reflections on the Holy Spirit, on eschatology, and on hope. Given the fragmentary nature of the material, the reader will, I hope, excuse the fragmentary feel of the this section.

From the Prolegomena

Barth gives this statement on what he intends to say in his Doctrine of Redemption.

Now, it obviously remains to consider the final truth: God is redeemer. The One who has made humanity and reconciled humanity to himself, encounters humanity in the Word of God in order that God may be the entire future, fulfilling, and consummating what is promised in the creative and reconciling work of God. Again, one has to recognize this in the action of God as creator and reconciler. It is only here that God meets us clearly as the God of everlasting faithfulness, who neither seeks us, nor allows God to be sought by us, without allowing us to find God.

We can understand Jesus Christ in the New Testament only as the Savior who is to come. If God is not the one who comes, God is not the one who has already come. If we do not understand the atonement that has taken place in God in the future tense, we cannot understand it in the perfect tense, which means that it cannot be understood at all. Our regeneration, justification and sanctification, the church and the sacrament, the whole existence and the whole work of Jesus Christ in the present are eschatological, that is, they are actual only in the coming Redeemer.

In the doctrine of Redemption, we must let the Word of God the Son speak to us as the Word of the God who is the end towards which we move. As the Word of redemption, this comprehends humanity from the standpoint of the eternal, as completed and consummated in the lordship of God. We find human existence illuminated by the resurrection of God as the revelation of the life of God, the promise of resurrection, and the eternal life towards which humanity may now advance. We need to draw three circles here. First, we consider the circle of the life of humanity in hope in which the objective

content of faith, Jesus Christ, is present. Second, we consider the circle of the content of this faith as the content of the promise and its future realization. Third, we consider the circle of the attainment of the goal of theological ethics as the claim made upon humanity by the command of God. We can do this because, according to the promise, we are heirs, expectant of eternal life in the kingdom of God. By this command of God, the promise holds out the consummation, ascribed and appropriated, because the command of God summons us to live and bow before the Word of God as we advance towards a genuinely better future.

Concerning the Holy Spirit

The Trinitarian reflection that forms the basis of Church Dogmatics would continue in this volume as a reflection upon the Holy Spirit in the role of redeemer. Barth has focused upon the Spirit in his exposition of the Doctrine of Reconciliation. One might note in particular 62 and 63 as part of his exposition of the subjective response of faith to the justifying grace of God. Much of 64.4 focuses on the direction of the Son, but it includes the work of the Holy Spirit in believers and in the community as to empowering Christians to move in the direction of the Son. In 67, Bart focuses upon the role of the Holy Spirit in building up the Christian community in love. In 69.4, Barth focuses upon the promise of the Spirit in the prophetic work of Christ, explaining the "already" and the "not yet" character of the saving work of Christ. In 70.1, the true witness is present through the work of the Holy Spirit. In 71.2, he describes vocation as a spiritual process. In 72.1, he holds forth the notion of the Spirit and Jesus Christ being the one action of God in two forms that constitute the being of the church in the world.

Concerning Eschatology

In 70.3, Barth refers specifically to questions of eschatology, as well as some hints as to how he would answer them.

To be damned is to be committed to an eternity in which God has rejected us and therefore we are lost. It is to have to be finally, what we wish to be when we change truth into untruth and live in and by this untruth. This sword has not yet fallen. This worst thing has not yet taken place. However, it is indeed bad enough to have to exist under the threat of damnation. Human life stands under the warning sign, the painfulness of which we have briefly indicated. We have always been careful to speak only of the attempt by humanity to change the truth into untruth. It can never reach its goal. The truth is identical with the living Jesus Christ, its true Witness. The truth is identical with the personal work of His self-declaration as the self-revelation and self-impartation of the reconciliation effected in Him. The truth is identical with His prophecy, with the promise of the Spirit, and therefore with the present reality of God and humanity in this time of ours. It goes into offensive action against this attempt in all its superiority to untruth. Thus, the human being who produces untruth is continually confused, unsettled and attacked by it. Can we count upon it or not that this threat will not finally be executed, that the sword will not fall, that God will not pronounce the condemnation of humanity, that the sick person, and even the sick Christian, will not die and be lost rather than be raised and delivered from the dead and live? This question belongs to eschatology, but we might suggest two delimitations may be apposite in this context. First, if this were not the case, it would be because we cannot count on the unexpected work of grace and its revelation. Rather, we can only hope for it as an underserved and inconceivable overflowing of the significance, operation, and outreach of the reality of God and humanity in Jesus Christ. To the human being who persistently tries to change the truth

into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience and therefore deliverance any more than God does those provisional manifestations. Secondly, we can be open to the possibility that in the reality of God and humanity in Jesus Christ we might find contained much more than we might expect and therefore we might find the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that final threat. This would mean that in the truth of this reality there might be contained the super-abundant promise of the final deliverance of all people. To be more explicit, we need to be open to this possibility. We must forbid ourselves from counting on this as though we had a claim to it, for humanity can have no possible claim to this possibility, since such a possibility is supremely the work of God. However, we can hope and pray for it as we may do already on this side of this final possibility. That is, we might hope and pray cautiously and yet distinctly that, in spite of everything that may seem quite conclusively to proclaim the opposite, divine compassion should not fail. We would then hope and pray in accordance with divine mercy that is "new every morning" where God "will not cast off forever," as stated in Lamentations 3:22-23, 31.

Barth (73.2) gives a foretaste of what he wanted to do in his final volume concerning eschatology.

Ethics (1928-1931)

Chapter Four: The Command of God the Redeemer

15. The Command of Promise

The command of God applies to me inasmuch as, being the child of God, I am an heir of eternal life. In speaking with me, God promises me the presence of God as my redeemer, first, from the provisional state in which I am here and now a creature of God. God promises me the presence of God as redeemer, second, from the contradiction in which I am here and now a Christian. God thus bids me wait for this divine future and hasten toward it.

1

To the extent that, in this chapter, we shall have to speak about the goal of humanity, the proper course here is formally to lay down our arms and accept the inadequacy of the most eloquent theological endeavor in relation to this theme, to the eschatological character of this theme, which we cannot truly ignore in ethics either. Inevitably, our breath runs out when we venture to speak about the last things. If we try to say a lot, we do not know what we ought to say. Yet, the little that we have to say cannot just as well become something we leave unsaid. Far too many works of theological ethics suffer because their authors seem not to have remembered that dogmatics has an independent eschatological standpoint that inalienably has a place with all the others, even through differing from them. How can we seriously present what God wants *of* us without recalling what God finally wants *with* us? We have tried to sum up our understanding of the command of God thus far in the formula: Be what you are, a creature of God, in such a way appropriate to one reconciled to God. Yet, this formula leaves something out, consisting in the future. We are beings claimed by the God who not merely wanted something with me in creating me, and not merely wanted something with me in the presence of the conflict between divine grace and human sun, but also wants something with me as the goal and purpose of what God wants Creator and Reconciler. We should note the great presupposition of the invocation in the Lord's Prayer, namely, that we may and should really address "Our Father." We should also note the Pauline statement: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God, as in Romans 8:14. We should also note John's saying: See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, as in I John 3:1. Too many treat these verses as small change by those who ought to know better, as well as by those who know no better.

Eschatological means about all final, conclusive, definitive, and unsurpassable. “Final” is only one aspect of eschatological. The other is that eschatological truth is truth as the future in the present, as the truth the Word of reconciliation that comes to us. In the twofold sense of being final and of coming, then, it is an eschatological truth that we are the children of God. I say that the Word of God requires of us the obedience of children.

2

Because obedience, considered in this light, has the character of an orientation, within the great ‘Be what you are,” we must consider briefly the goal of this orientation. As God is not only our Creator, but also speaks to us as such, giving us the Word of God by means of which God reveals Himself as our Redeemer. As Redeemer, God stands above the provisional state of this world, wills to give us a share in this freedom from death, a share through the Word of God, and a share in the promise. We are the children of God. Our citizenship is in heaven, as in Philippians 3:20, in the Jerusalem that is above, as in Galatians 4:26. Such statements express a truth as sure as the fact that we must die. In fact, it replaces that truth. Where we see death coming, the Lord comes, the kingdom of God, that which is perfect, as in I Cor. 13:10. We are responsible to this future of ours. Whether our conduct can stand when measured by the standard that we are the children of God and on the way to this goal is the ethical question from this final standpoint. It is required of us that we should walk and act as those who have the promise, who are heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, as in Romans 8:17.

3

We overlook a whole sphere of ethical problems if, in understanding the claim under which we stand, we do not take into account as supremely relevant the eschatological determination of humanity. Ethicists who find a place only for a command

of life or law when they come to speak of this not wholly concealed tendency in human life, and especially in the Christian life, usually reject it with an unkindly glance. They tend to speak about mysticism, illusionism, enthusiasm, and the like. Ethics should speak only about the order of creation and the law of he neighbor, usually trying to reduce the two to one and the same thing. Anything beyond that is an approach we must suspect as a humanistic and idealistic failure to take seriously the true human situation. We have a heavenly calling that we cannot reduce to what we said about calling in the previous chapters. We have more than life and more than law. We also have promise, the promise of redemption, of the perfect that is coming. In addition to life and the neighbor, does not our being as children of God form a third point of orientation without which we do not really see the other two even though this is itself a will-o-the-wisp if we have not first sought the other two? Some would go to the extremes of enthusiasm, while others, such as Ritschl, suggest that only sobriety is worthy of Christian.

We will have to deal with the possibility of prayer. Prayer, as talking with God, in which we can count on an answer as well as a hearing, can be understood only if we humans are more than the creatures of God and more than sinners saved by grace. Prayer is the actualization of our eschatological reality that is possible here and now. Christian prayer must say finally, "Not my will but they will be done," in Luke 22:42. The purpose in prayer is to talk with God and to be heard and answered b God. Perhaps all that we need to say about our claiming by God from this third standpoint we may best understood if people will see it in the light of prayer.

Enthusiasm is a good word for non-sobriety. As we have to say in relation to the ultimate possibility of prayer, the good Lord does not take pleasure only in human possibilities that are from a psychological standpoint subdued and controlled. For all we

know, the beautiful control or moderation that may rightly be a directive for Christian life in the mainline churches can also conceal indifference and skepticism. Therefore, we might just as well look beyond this sobriety to livelier Christian possibilities to what are supposedly more secular forms of excitement. We need to realize that in our own times, God might be better pleased for people to worship God in less sober ways than our philosophy dreams.

When we ask concerning the relation of our action to the possibility of prayer, we ask whether it has the openness that it ought to have as obedience to God, as real walking before God. What counts is openness to the goal, to the perfect that is coming.

16. Conscience

The command of God strikes me as my own strictly moment-by-moment co-knowledge of the necessity of what I should do or not do in its relation the coming eternal kingdom of God. In this concrete fellowship of mine with God the Redeemer, it claims me and I have to listen to it.

Conscience means our human knowing of what God alone can know as the one who is good, as the giver of the command and the judge of its fulfillment, namely, of the goodness of badness of the act that I am about to commit or upon which I look back as already committed. How does this knowledge arise? If there is concrete fellowship with God the Redeemer, then there is such a thing as conscience. To have a conscience is to have the Holy Spirit. To have a conscience is to know what is in God, to know divine judgment upon our conduct. To have a conscience is to look and reach beyond the limits of our creatureliness and our reconciliation, as we do in prayer. When we have a conscience, we are not on our own; we are also our own judges. A conscience that tells us the truth has to be this conscience that is captive to the Word of God, and this captivity has to signify no more and no less than its elevation to participation in the truth itself. As we carry through the primal and basic eschatological act of prayer, we have a conscience

that tells us the truth. In prayer, we ask God not only that God would view us in a very different reality from merely that of creatures of God and sinners saved by grace. We also ask that God would give us this reality, the reality of the people of the Spirit. In the superabundance of this action, we have concrete fellowship with God our Redeemer, we have a conscience, the command of promise claims us in the form of our own co-knowledge and our own speaking with ourselves, and in order to hear we must listen to what we tell ourselves.

2

Against this understanding of conscience as a principle that we can control, as a general principle that we can seize and use at any time, we are protected by regard for the eschatological character of the concept. We shall now try to consider what we can know and say about conscience from three angles. First, in conscience, our own voice is undoubtedly the voice of God. Second, we have to speak about the content of what conscience declares. II Peter 3:12 asks us about our waiting and hastening. Ultimately, we may simply say that we are asked whether we have a hope, not just any hope, but fundamentally and radically the hope. Such hope is the orientation of what we are and do to what we are to become according to the Word of God, in keeping with the will of God, and in divine strength. Conscience is the living and present message of the coming kingdom of God. Busy waiting for the Lord at its core was also the concern of Pietism. "Hastening," means that we are summoned. It means that we are summoned in the present, but for our future. To surrender, but to surrender to the living God. To rest, but to rest in the unrest of the act of life. The surrender and rest have to be taken seriously if our hastening is really to be obedience to the command of conscience. The surrender and rest have to be taken seriously if our hastening is really to be obedience to the command of

conscience. What conditions the form of conscience is that its subject is primarily God. Only secondarily is the subject of the form of conscience the human I, not in the present of this I, but in its future reality as this moves from the eternity of the will of God for humanity into the human temporal present. We cannot make a great parade of our co-knowledge of the truth of God, as we have it in conscience, in the present in which it is given to us. The possibility of conscience, the real ability to introduce it as a power, and then necessarily we introduce it as a power superior to all other powers, the powers of our own present and of that of others. This prophetic possibility is a real one, but not for us, for it does not lie in our own power, but is the possibility of the miracle of God. Normally, we can listen to conscience only in the hiddenness in which we have it, and especially when we speak to others based on conscience we cannot be aware enough of the modesty that is commanded with this hiddenness. We will note three points in relation to this hiddenness of conscience. First, we all have conscience only as our own conscience, and therefore we all have what it says to us only as what it says to us. The truth that is manifest in conscience comes to us with a drive for expansion. The attitude of a person whose conscience has spoken is quite uncapriciously a missionary attitude. Based on conscience, we think we are in the position of having something to say to others. However, precisely in this respect modesty is enjoined. God's speaking to me does not give me God's power over others. Second, connected with this is what I have referred to in the thesis as the strictly occasional nature of conscience as our co-knowledge of God's truth. What I mean is this: what conscience tells us relates, strictly speaking, only to the present in the strict sense, only to the given moment. God speaks a Word personally. It is thus an event and not a thing. It does not exist; it takes place. Conscientiousness has to mean fundamental openness and willingness to be guided by

conscience. Third, a final part of the eschatological determination of conscience is that what we call a good conscience is not another phenomenon of conscience that one experiences alongside a bad conscience or in alternation with it. Rather, a good conscience is something negative, an expression for the absence of a bad conscience, the latter filling up the total possible range of phenomena that offer themselves for observation.

17. Gratitude

The command of God always means a liberation of my action. It claims me. It claims me, and I have t listen, as it wins me not only for the commanded orderliness and humility, but also for the God to whom I owe my existence, my salvation, and my final relationship to God.

1

In the preceding section we have learned to find in the concept of conscience the place where the command of God comes to us as that of the Redeemer. Conscience is the place where we have to stand according to this command. We might also say that we have answered again the question: What shall *we* do? The question concerns the noetic basis of the divine command. We have now to investigate its content for a third time, with the emphasis on: What *shall* we do? When we look particularly at this meaning of our standing before God in the previous sense, our encounter with God is an encounter with God the Redeemer. As our attention focuses upon the promise, we receive the command of God. The content of the promise is that we belong to God, that no one and nothing can pluck us out of the hand of God, as in John 10:28-29, and that in our creatureliness as the righteous sinners that we find ourselves in the present we are one with God as children are with their father. We live by this. Here and now, and not just in the future, we live by the fact that it is promised to us in all the hiddenness of future truth.

As we live by the fact that it is promised to us, we are pointed to the gift of God, and what is required of us, the measure by which our conduct is measured from this third standpoint, is gratitude. We can also note question 86 of the Heidelberg Catechism. Here again its content means that we must recognize how we stand with God, that we must confess our situation before him, that we must honestly be what we are. From the standpoint of creation, this meant that we must recognize the order of God. From that of reconciliation, it meant that we must be ready to be humble. From that of redemption, it now means that we must be grateful.

Now, for two reasons, we must show why it is only in an eschatological context that this gratitude, this "My myself," can be conceptually possible as the content of the divine command. First, how does it come about that of myself I myself am won for God as the command requires? In creation, God wills to win me for God as the Lord of my life. In reconciliation, God wills to win me for God as the Savior of my life. In Redemption, God wills to win me for God as the new and future human being. We are to live in gratitude. We live by the fact that we are children of God, already standing at the side of God, triumphing over the contradiction and the limits of our existence. We need to accept the fact that God gives us this gift. As I Corinthians 15:28 tells us, God will be "all in all." Second, in our theses we have described the process of grateful action as a liberated action. The command of God frees me by winning me for God the Redeemer. Christian freedom remains obedience to the command of God, but one that we embrace. I avoid the word "redemption." Redemption is the fulfillment of the promise. What comes into our present with the command, however, is not the fulfillment and redemption itself. Redemption is the promise. In the present, we are still sick and frail. We still experience imprisonment, bondage, and confinement. We find this view in Romans 7 and 8. Paul

fully confesses the sighing of creation and the yearning expectation of divine sonship. Nevertheless, there is a release and relaxation even in this sighing, even in the despair that often enough does overpower the comfort.

2

At this point, where we understand the required character of our action to be gratitude, it is in place to consider the bold thesis that our conduct bears the mark of good, of what is pleasing to God, when it is not done in earnest but in play. This is in truth a thesis that we can understand correctly only from an eternal standpoint, which we cannot advance except in this context. Ultimately, in the last resort, our life is truly only a game. Asserted too hastily and casually, this theses can only too easily mean that we overlook our being claimed by the command of God, the validity of the command, and the seriousness of our situation as those who refuse to obey it. We despise the riches of the mercy of God by which God upholds us in all our opposition to the command, and finally the miracle that God calls us the children of God. It would be more profitable for us, instead of rejoicing in the character of our existence as a game, to wake up finally out of sleep and see what it really means to be before the face of God, moving each moment into the judgment of God. What this thesis demands of us is that our action should be play. Our reference here is to the release of which we have just spoken and of which we have said that it is both a task and a gift, and that its presupposition is the Holy Spirit.

Having said this, we should not fail to say that as the children of God, God releases us from the seriousness of life and allows us to play before God. A question that this view puts to our conduct is whether it has also the character of play or whether it is only serious, in which case it cannot really be good. For three reasons, the term play is in truth appropriate for good conduct, the conduct that is required of us, when we consider

this in the present context. First, God commands us to find the concept of our essential relationship to God in the promise that we are the children of God in the sense of the little children of God. Even in our most serious roles in life, we are the little children of God at play. One can walk before God in full seriousness only when one realizes that God alone is fully serious. Second, our participation in the promises characterizes our action as provisional, as preceding our true action as those who live eternally in the kingdom of God. We can understand our eternal life and conduct only from the perspective that God promises it to us. Thus, we cannot allot final seriousness to what w do here and now. We do it under the divine patience that gives us time. We can regard our action only as play. Children play before growing up. Even the greatest people still have to grow up. We are children, and will be so until the end. Third, we have described gratitude as an action in which we act gladly, voluntarily, and cheerfully. It encourages us to be present to ourselves and fully open. In conclusion, the insight that, from the eternal standpoint, the good action required of us has the character of play brings to light two special possibilities of life that theological ethics can only now consider. I have in mind art on the one said and humor on the other. We must consider art and humor in an eschatological context because one does them gladly, voluntarily, and cheerfully, something we can do only in light of our eschatological reality. Art and humor play with reality. They focus upon future possibilities, refusing to take reality as it is. Art does not take reality with final seriousness, or even that reality does not have the final word. We experience liberated laughter and artistic expression.

18. Hope

I fulfill the commandment of God. That is, my work is good, my work is obedience to the command of promise, and is conscientious and grateful work, to the extent that God tells me I do it in unity with the will of my Redeemer. Such telling is the work of the Holy Spirit, the reality of hope.

1

For a third time, in conclusion, we must search for a concept, which on the one side denotes a definite mode of human action, but on the other clearly expresses divine control of its ultimate quality. We concluded the preceding chapters with discussion of the concepts of faith and love. The concept that suggests itself now, in this innermost eschatological circle of ethical reflection is that of hope, third part of the triad mentioned in I Cor. 13:13.

2

We begin by asking what it must mean that my conduct as a child of God is good at this moment, that it is now a fulfillment of the command of promise, that I am now obedient to my conscience, and that I am now truly grateful in what I do. We have reason to consider that what we might mean is not other than what the Lord's Prayer calls the doing of the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven, so that the limit and distinction that this petition denotes cannot be removed. Hope gives us the possibility of a good will, a human will united to the will of God. In hope, we are citizens of the future world in the midst of the present. The voice of conscience has its basis in hope. In hope, we must be grateful. Of course, hope could be folly. It might only be a fanatical dreaming of our way into a suprreality to which we can have no relation in our present. To be the children of God and therefore to be good in hope might be a wicked and highly impractical arrogance. However, when we pray, confessing that we have no control of our own over this future of ours, but hat we have to seek it, and that we have to seek it, not just anywhere or in any way, but with God, hope becomes wisdom. Christian hope is this prayerful seeking with God for our won future and for the goodness of our conduct

therein enclosed. Like faith and love, hope bridges the gap between and humanity without removing it, but rather in such a way as to affirm it and thus to give the glory to God and not to humanity. To repeat, the person who hopes looks gladly, willingly, and joyfully beyond the present and away from self. Why? Because such a person has been born again to a living hope, as in I Peter 1:3, because such a person practices his or her own new existence as one who hopes. Paul does not focus upon the person who hopes, but upon the God in whom we can hope. Like faith and love, hope rests in the Word that God speaks to us. Here, because the subject of hope is our own future, we are to understand the Word specifically as the Word of the Holy Spirit. As such, the Word is the pledge that God has given to us, as the Paraclete in a presence in which we may be certain of the coming Lord as such. In this Word that God speaks to us we are the children of God, and we have the divine hope in the light of which alone there can be human hope. The question, What shall we *do,* what is the good, leads back to that other question with which all ethics must begin, the question who we are, whether we are those who have heard the Word, that is, to whom it has been told. If we are, then how can we fail to tell it to ourselves and thus answer the problem of ethics by pointing to the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit? We confess to be those who have heard this testimony. It will prove to be legitimate by making impossible any mere consideration of the ethical problem, by pointing us beyond the reflection that is, of course, necessary, by plunging us into life itself, into the responsibility that we must always carry after having reflected. Yet, the distinctive thing about Christian or theological ethics is that we do not have to do any carrying without remembering that we are carried. Precisely to the extent that that happens, theological ethics can and must claim and occupy its true place in life itself.