

From Special Issue 1/Aug. 20, 2007

## ***The Word of Grace vs. the word of man***

*In his multi-volume work on theology, Church Dogmatics, Karl Barth describes our human reaction to the Word of God which says to us "You are Mine!"*

We might imagine the conversation to which it gives rise and some of the forms which it necessarily takes.

The man to whom it is said thinks and says that he is not this new, peaceful, joyful man living in fellowship. He asks leave honestly to admit that he does not know this man, or at least himself as this man.

*The Word of grace* replies: "All honour to your honesty, but my truth transcends it. Allow yourself, therefore, to be told in all truth and on the most solid grounds what you do not know, namely, that you are this man in spite of what you think."

*Man*: "You think that I can and should become this man in the course of time? But I do not have sufficient confidence in myself to believe this. Knowing myself, I shall never become this man."

*The Word of grace*: "You do well not to have confidence in yourself. But the point is not that you can and should become this man. What I am telling you is that, as I know you, you already are."

*Man*: "I understand that you mean this eschatologically. You are referring to the man I perhaps will be one day in some not very clearly known transfiguration in a distant eternity. If only I had attained to this! And if only I could be certain that even then I should be this new man!"

*The Word of grace*: "You need to understand both yourself and me better than you do. I am not inviting you to speculate about your being in eternity, but to receive and ponder the news that here and now you begin to be the new man, and are already that which you will be eternally."

*Man*: "How can I accept this news? On what guarantee can I make bold to take it seriously?"

*The Word of grace*: "I, Jesus Christ, am the One who speaks to you. You are what you are in Me, as I will to be in you. Hold fast to Me. I am your guarantee. My boldness is yours. With this boldness dare to be what you know you are."

*Man*: "I certainly hear the message, but . . ."

In this perplexed and startled "but" we see the attack, and who it is that is attacked.

Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics, Volume IV, The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part Three, First Half*. Eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance. T. and T. Clark: Edinburgh, 1961. p. 250.

What is Karl Barth telling us in this imaginary conversation between the Word of grace and the "everyman"?

He is telling us that the Father "has blessed us in Christ Jesus with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places." (Eph. 1:3.) When we hear the Word of our ascension with Jesus to the right hand

of the Father (Eph. 1:6) Satan attacks us and tempts us to say “yes, but . . .” Baxter Kruger calls it the “yes, but” shuffle.

We say, yes, I am in Christ, but I still need to perfect myself. Yes, I am reconciled but I am not redeemed. Yes, I am included but I’m not sanctified. On and on it goes. Barth knows what we say, he has studied our humanity in the light of Christ and his dialogue is an excellent description of what the Word of God is up against when he speaks to darkened human nature.

The Father is not asking us to become something we are not, or to work our way towards a goal of perfection. He is telling us to believe that Jesus has already made us something we were not. He is asking us to believe him when he announces our adoption in his Son. He is asking us to stop working and to start resting, to stop striving to live up to his love and to simply *be* what we already *are*: saved.

~ Jonathan Stepp

For a modern translation and interpretation of this passage, see “The Word of Grace Revisited” by Tim Brassell in the January, 2008, issue of *The Adopted Life* or in the “Christian Living” section of the “Articles” page on *The Adopted Life* website ([www.theadoptedlife.org](http://www.theadoptedlife.org)).