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Calling People to Encounter God in Jesus Christ

In the preceding two chapters we have profiled the thought of noted fideists in church history and surveyed their approach to relating apologetics to human knowledge and experience. While not irrationalists, fideists seek to present the Christian faith without compromise and without succumbing to the rationalism that they think characterizes what is usually called apologetics.

Advocates of other approaches may still, though, wonder at classifying fideism as a type of apologetics. Do fideists even attempt to provide meaningful answers to common objections to the Christian faith? Do they seek to give a reason for the hope that is within them (1 Peter 3:15)? In this chapter we will see that the answer to these questions is yes.

Scripture as Witness

If there is an aspect of the fideist approach that especially troubles evangelicals, it is its view of Scripture. Fideists, seeking to center their faith, theology, and apologetics on Jesus Christ, tend to distinguish between Jesus Christ as *the* Word of God and Scripture as a “witness” to the Word of God, or of Scripture “becoming” God’s Word in its witness to Jesus Christ. In some cases they deny the inerrancy of Scripture as part of their polemic against a bibliolatrous centering of the Christian faith in Scripture.

Arguably, as with other aspects of fideism, the fideist view of Scripture owes something to Martin Luther. Specifically, while Luther viewed the entirety of Scripture as God's Word, he tended to "grade" the different parts of the Bible depending on the extent to which they were centered on Christ and the gospel of justification through faith in Christ. Thus a higher value or esteem was placed on Paul's epistles than on the rest of the New Testament, and a sharp contrast was drawn between law (which dominates the Old Testament) and grace (which dominates the New Testament). Luther went so far as to question the inclusion of the epistle of James in the canon of the New Testament. This stratification of the Scriptures is often described as having a **canon within the canon**. While most theologians today (including many Lutherans) eschew this approach to Scripture, it survives in popular and even scholarly reading of Scripture. In addition, the classical form of dispensationalist theology, still popular in many circles, applied much the same principle to Scripture. In dispensationalism all parts of the Bible are equally Scripture and equally inspired, but some parts (especially Paul's epistles) are more directly applicable to the church in this dispensation.

Fideists tend to apply a similar principle to Scripture. For them the purpose of Scripture is to witness to Jesus Christ as the one, living Word of God. Aspects or statements of the Bible that do not contribute to that function need not be accepted as true, and certainly should not be defended.

Kierkegaard found evidence of a fideist approach to Scripture in Luther:

In the sermon on the Gospel for Easter Monday, in the final passage, Luther makes the distinction: You have the right to argue the Bible, but you do not have the right to argue the Holy Scriptures. This is the old view that something may be true in philosophy which

is not true in theology. The Bible and Holy Scriptures are the same book, to be sure, but the way in which it is regarded makes the difference.

Here as everywhere we must pay attention to the qualitative leap, that there is no direct transition (for example, as from reading and studying the Bible as an ordinary human book—to taking it as God’s word, as Holy Scripture), but everywhere a *meiabasis eis allo genos*, a leap, whereby I burst the whole progression of reason and define a qualitative newness, but a newness *allo genos*. (*JP* 2358, 3:22)

The Bible as the Bible, as a collection of books with a literary and textual history, can be studied, analyzed, debated, and even, for some fideists, critiqued. The Bible as Scripture, on the other hand, as the authoritative canon of writings bearing witness to God’s reconciliation of mankind to himself through Jesus Christ, must be accepted by faith as beyond argument or debate. Notice that for Kierkegaard, as for Luther, Scripture is “God’s word.” To characterize Kierkegaard’s view of Scripture as merely a witness to God’s Word and not actually God’s Word would be incorrect. On the other hand, the fact that the same book can be viewed either as the Bible or as Scripture implies that, for Kierkegaard, the divine character of Scripture is in some way dependent on the context in which it is viewed. This is evidently why he is not uncomfortable with the presence of apparent errors in the Bible:

Up until now we have done as follows: we have declared that Holy Scripture is divine revelation, inspired, etc.—ergo, there must then be perfect harmony between all the reports down to the last detail; it must be the most perfect Greek, etc. . . . Precisely because God wants Holy Scripture to be the object of faith and an offense to any other point of view, for this reason there are carefully contrived discrepancies (which, after all,

in eternity will readily be dissolved into harmonies); therefore it is written in bad Greek, etc. (*JP* 2877, 3:275; similarly *JP* 3860, 4:18)

Note that Kierkegaard affirms that the apparent errors in Scripture will be resolved in eternity. This qualification should be kept in mind when considering passages from his writings like the following:

Take all the difficulties in Christianity which free-thinkers seize hold of and apologists want to defend, and see, the whole thing is a false alarm. The difficulties are simply introduced by God in order to make sure that he can become only the object of faith (although it is necessarily implicit in his essence and in the disproportion between the two qualities: God and man). This is why Christianity is a paradox; this explains the contradictions in Scripture, etc.

But the intellectual approach wants to put everything into a direct relation—that is, wants to abolish faith. It wants to have direct recognizability, wants to have the most absolute harmony throughout Scripture, and then it will believe Christianity, believe that the Bible is the Word of God—that is, it will not believe. It has no inkling of God’s sovereignty and what the requirement of faith means.

The apologists are just as stupid as the free-thinkers and are always shifting the viewpoint of Christianity. (*JP* 1144, 2:21-22)

The basic fideist distinction between Scripture as witness and Christ as the One to whom Scripture witnesses is found in Kierkegaard. “The Holy Scriptures are the highway signs: Christ is the way” (*JP* 208, 1:84). “He was the Scriptures given life” (*JP* 342, 1:143). This distinction was developed greatly by Karl Barth. According to Barth, it is as the Bible engenders faith in

God revealing himself that it functions as or is the Word of God. That is, God's Word is an event, the event of God speaking through the human words of Scripture. It is not up to us to make the Bible to be God's Word; rather, that is what God in his sovereign grace does. "The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it" (CD I/1, 109). "It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us" (CD I/1, 110). Because God's revelation is an event, the Bible "is not in itself and as such God's past revelation. As it is God's Word it bears witness to God's past revelation, and it is God's past revelation in the form of attestation" (CD I/1, 111). Barth accepts "direct identification of revelation and the Bible" only in the dynamic sense, stressing that as the Bible becomes God's Word it also becomes revelation. "Thus in the event of God's Word revelation and the Bible are indeed one, and literally so" (CD I/1, 113). Note, then, that Barth can accept a dynamic identity between the Bible and God's Word.

Barth says "we distinguish the Bible as such from revelation" by describing it as a witness to revelation. At the same time, he hastens to add that "the Bible is not distinguished from revelation" in that "it is for us revelation by means of the words of the prophets and apostles written in the Bible." Thus the Bible is revelation mediately, not immediately. "A real witness is not identical with that to which it witnesses, but it sets it before us" (CD I/2, 463). No denigration of Scripture is meant by this distinction; after all, Barth can speak of Jesus Christ as the true *Witness* and of the *witness* of the Holy Spirit to Jesus Christ. With the qualification that the book of Scripture is valued because in it the Holy Spirit witnesses to Jesus Christ, Barth can even affirm that Christianity is a religion of the Book: "If in reply it is asked whether Christianity is really a book-religion, the answer is that strangely enough Christianity has always

been and only been a living religion when it is not ashamed to be actually and seriously a book-religion” (*CD I/2*, 494-495).

According to Barth, the Christian’s faith that the Bible is the written Word of God has no logically prior ground. The authority of Scripture, because it is the Word of God, is self-attesting. Barth frankly accepts the circularity of this position:

We have to admit to ourselves and to all who ask us about this question that the statement that the Bible is the Word of God is an analytical statement, a statement which is grounded only in its repetition, description and interpretation, and not in its derivation from any major propositions. It must either be understood as grounded in itself and preceding all other statements or it cannot be understood at all. The Bible must be known as the Word of *God* if it is to be *known* as the Word of God. The doctrine of Holy Scripture in the Evangelical Church is that this logical circle is the circle of self-asserting, self-attesting truth into which it is equally impossible to enter as it is to emerge from it: the circle of our freedom which as such is also the circle of our capacity. (*CD I/2*, 535)

Christianity: Not Another Religion

Among evangelicals, it is popular to affirm that Christianity is not a religion but a relationship with Jesus Christ. This saying nicely captures the view of religion taken by fideists, with one qualification: they generally acknowledge that a religion named Christianity exists, but insist that it comes under the same judgment as all other religions.

Like apologists of other approaches, fideists affirm that Christianity is unique among other religions and that Jesus Christ is the only Savior. Kierkegaard affirms quite simply that

“Christianity is still the only explanation of existence which holds water” (*JP* 1052, 1:457), and offers two main arguments for why it is superior to all other religions. First, and somewhat surprisingly, Christianity is superior because it alone tells the truth about man’s tragic standing as a sinner. “And this is the very proof of Christianity’s being the highest religion, that none other has given such a profound and lofty expression of man’s significance—that he is a sinner. It is this consciousness which paganism lacks” (*JP* 452, 1:179). The fact that Christianity offends many people in its assessment of the human condition is for Kierkegaard just as important as the fact that many are attracted to it. “The double relationship in Christianity is the very thing that demonstrates its absolute truth, the fact that it goads just as intensely as it attracts” (*JP* 455, 1:179).

Second, Kierkegaard points out that Jesus Christ, alone among all the founders of the major world religions, made himself the supreme issue. “All other religions are oblique; the founder steps aside and introduces another who speaks; therefore, they themselves belong under the religion—Christianity alone is direct address (I am the truth)” (*JP* 427, 1:172).

In two different sections of the *Church Dogmatics*, one toward the beginning and the other near the end, Barth developed a fideist account of the exclusive claims of Jesus Christ in the context of religious pluralism. Ironically, he traces the liberal denial of the uniqueness of Christ to the excessive rationalism of some orthodox Protestant scholars of the early eighteenth century. He summarizes the import of their teaching as follows.

Human religion, the relationship with God which we can and actually do have apart from revelation, is not an unknown but a very well-known quantity both in form and content, and as such it is something which has to be reckoned with, as having a central importance for all theological thinking. It constitutes, in fact, the presupposition, the criterion, the

necessary framework for an understanding of revelation. It shows us the question which is answered by revealed religion as well as all other positive religions, and it is as the most satisfactory answer that the Christian religion has the advantage over others and is rightly described as revealed religion. The Christian element—and with this the theological reorientation which had threatened since the Renaissance is completed—has now actually become a predicate of the neutral and universal human element. Revelation has now become a historical confirmation of what man can know about himself and therefore about God even apart from revelation. (*CD I/2*, 289-290).

From the roots of this rationalistic view of religion and revelation eventually emerged the destructive developments typified in the thought of Wolff, Kant, Schleiermacher, Strauss, Feuerbach, Ritschl, and Troeltsch. “All these more or less radical and destructive movements in the history of theology in the last two centuries are simply variations on one simple theme . . . that religion has not to be understood in the light of revelation, but revelation in the light of religion” (*CD I/2*, 290-291). Barth concludes that the roots of liberalism and relativism in modern Protestantism are in the rationalism of the orthodox Protestant tradition (*CD I/2*, 291-292).

Against the rationalistic account of the relation of revelation to religion, Barth argues that religion is actually in antithesis to revelation.

Because it is a grasping, religion is the contradiction of revelation, the concentrated expression of human unbelief, i.e., an attitude and activity which is directly opposed to faith. It is a feeble but defiant, an arrogant but hopeless, attempt to create something which man could do, but now cannot do, or can do only because and if God Himself created it for him: the knowledge of the truth, the knowledge of God. We cannot,

therefore, interpret the attempt as a harmonious co-operating of man with the revelation of God, as though religion were a kind of outstretched hand which is filled by God in His revelation. Again, we cannot say of the evident religious capacity of man that it is, so to speak, the general form of human knowledge, which acquires its true and proper content in the shape of revelation. On the contrary, we have here an exclusive contradiction. In religion man bolts and bars himself against revelation by providing a substitute, by taking away in advance the very thing which has to be given by God. (*CD I/2*, 302-303)

On the basis of this view of religion, Barth concludes that in a sense *no* religion is true. “Religion is never true in itself and as such. The revelation of God denies that any religion is true, i.e., that it is in truth the knowledge and worship of God and the reconciliation of man with God” (*CD I/2*, 325). On the other hand, in another sense Christianity is the true religion, but only because God in his grace makes it so.

The abolishing of religion by revelation need not mean only its negation: the judgment that religion is unbelief. Religion can just as well be exalted in revelation, even though the judgment still stands. It can be upheld by it and concealed in it. It can be justified by it, and—we must at once add—sanctified. Revelation can adopt religion and mark it off as true religion. And it not only can. How do we come to assert that it can, if it has not already done so? There is a true religion: just as there are justified sinners. If we abide strictly by that analogy—and we are dealing not merely with an analogy, but in a comprehensive sense with the thing itself—we need have no hesitation in saying that the Christian religion is the true religion. (*CD I/2*, 326)

Barth's statement here makes explicit a pun or play on words noted by Geoffrey Bromiley in the title of this section, "The Revelation of God as the Abolition of Religion." Bromiley observes "that the word abolition is used here for the German *Aufhebung*, which in good Hegelian fashion can mean elevating as well as abolishing. Barth undoubtedly has this double meaning in mind."¹ Here Barth expounds that double meaning: the revelation of God elevates or exalts religion paradoxically at the same time that it abolishes religion; it does this by establishing a new religion that has as its central affirmation that God has judged sinners and their religion and now offers them a new standing of righteousness by grace. Thus Christianity is unique in its self-criticism. Rather than proclaiming itself to be the best or greatest religion, the highest achievement of man's spiritual quest, Christianity proclaims all religion, even that of its own adherents, to be under the judgment of unbelief: "We must insist, therefore, that at the beginning of a knowledge of the truth of the Christian religion, there stands the recognition that this religion, too, stands under the judgment that religion is unbelief, and that it is not acquitted by any inward worthiness, but only by the grace of God, proclaimed and effectual in His revelation" (*CD I/2*, 327).

Barth finds this judgment on the Christian religion expressed in 1 Corinthians 13, which, he says, "we shall best understand if for the concept 'love' we simply insert the name Jesus Christ."

The chapter summarizes the whole religious life of a Christian community at the time of Paul: speaking with tongues, prophecy, knowledge of mysteries, a faith that removes mountains, giving all one's goods to the poor, martyrdom in the flames to close—and of all this it is said that it helps the Christian not at all, absolutely not at all, if he has not love. For love alone never fails. . . . At the very heart of the apostolic witness (which

accepts the Christian as the true religion) Christianity could not be more comprehensively relativised in favour of revelation, which means a crisis even for the religion of revelation. (*CD I/2*, 330-331)

Toward the end of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth explains why the church is not arrogant to claim that Jesus Christ is the only self-revelation of God. Regarding whether there might not be other valid, prophetic sources besides the one Word of God incarnated in Jesus Christ and witnessed in Scripture, Barth replies with the first statement of the Barmen Declaration of 1934: “We reject the false doctrine that the Church can and must, as the source of its proclamation, recognise other events and powers, forms and truths, as the revelation of God outside and alongside this one Word of God” (*CD IV/3/1*, 86). He then explains that the intent of this statement is to exalt Christ, not to commend the church.

The statement that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God has really nothing whatever to do with the arbitrary exaltation and self-glorification of the Christian in relation to other men, of the Church in relation to other institutions, or of Christianity in relation to other conceptions.

It is a christological statement. It looks away from non-Christian and Christian alike to the One who sovereignly confronts and precedes both as *the* Prophet. (*CD IV/3/1*, 91)

Barth points out that the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New were just as aware of the plurality of religions in their cultures as we are of this plurality in ours. Yet none of them ever left a trace of the idea that these extrabiblical religions represented alternative revelations (*CD IV/3/1*, 92-93).

Barth then raises the question of the basis on which we affirm that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God, to which he proposes a counterquestion:

Hence, if anyone asks concerning the basis of our statement, we must put the counterquestion whether he sees and realises that Jesus Christ actually shows Himself to be the one Prophet of God. This is the question to which we must make answer to ourselves and others. The revelation of God vouches for its uniqueness as it does for itself as such. If Jesus Christ is the one Word of God, He alone, standing out from the ranks of all other supposed and pretended divine words, can make Himself known as this one Word. (*CD IV/3/1, 103-104*)

As Isaiah 40 sets forth the incomparable deity of Yahweh, all we can and should really do is to explicate what it means that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God (*CD IV/3/1, 105*). We do that by pressing the uniqueness of Jesus Christ as the Word of God. No other word reveals the omnipotent grace of God and his love for all mankind in providing full justification and sanctification in a once-for-all event (*CD IV/3/1, 107-108*). We are to press the point that it is not Christianity, the church, or even the Bible that cannot be compared with other words, but rather it is Jesus Christ who is incomparably the Word (*CD IV/3/1, 108*).

This does not mean that we are engaging in apologetics. Or if so, it is only the apologetics which is a necessary function of dogmatics to the extent that this must prepare an exact account of the presupposition, limits, meaning and basis of the statements of the Christian confession, and thus be able to give this account to any who may demand it. . . . In relation to the content of the Word spoken in Jesus Christ, we have tried to describe and explain this basis. The fact remains, however, that it can only speak for itself and show itself to be the basis of our statement. Without counting on the Holy

Spirit as the only conclusive argument, even the prophet of the Exile who advanced those arguments and proofs could not have undertaken to proclaim the uniqueness of Yahweh among the gods of the nations. (*CD IV/3/1*, 109)

To Know God Is to Know God Exists

Fideists approach the question of the knowledge of God from the starting point that God is personal. To prove that God exists is insulting, because He is someone we already know personally, and unreasonable, because God by his nature transcends our world and is beyond proof. Rather than try to prove that God exists, fideists urge Christian apologists to call on non-Christians to hear God revealing himself personally to them in his Word.

In some important ways, Blaise Pascal's *Pensées* anticipated a fideistic approach to knowing God. We reviewed his argument in some detail in chapter 16; we will simply summarize the main points here. According to Pascal, God has given "visible signs" to make it possible for people to find him, but has "disguised" them so that only those really seeking him will succeed (*Pensées*, 194).² These signs, therefore, are not rational proofs, nor can they be made the basis of such proofs. After all, if God does exist, he "is infinitely incomprehensible"; if he is beyond our rational understanding, he is beyond our rational proof. Atheists who ask for proof are asking for something that would *disprove* Christianity. It is in this context that Pascal offers his famous "wager argument": if we believe in God and he does not exist, we lose nothing; if we believe in God and he does exist, we gain everything (233). This argument appears to be a recommendation to unbelievers to take the Christian faith seriously enough to try it. As unbelievers are awakened to the need to take God seriously, some will be brought to faith

by the grace of God. “Faith is different from proof; the one is human, the other is a gift from God” (248).

Something like Pascal’s wager appears also in the thought of Kierkegaard, according to whom a person must “choose” to “venture” his whole life on the historical person of Jesus Christ. “This is called *venturing*, and without venturing faith is an impossibility.” Unlike Socrates, who wagered his whole life on his own inherent immortality, the Christian is wagering his whole life on another, on Jesus Christ (*JP* 73, 1:28).

Because of his view of God as wholly other than the world, Kierkegaard believed that natural theology and rational proofs of the existence of God were entirely invalid. Like Hume, he objected that an infinite God cannot be deduced from a finite world. Faith in God can neither be rationally certain nor empirically evident; revelation is paradoxical and requires a leap of faith.

For whose sake is it that the proof is sought? Faith does not need it; aye, it must even regard the proof as its enemy. But when faith begins to feel embarrassed and ashamed, like a young woman for whom her love is no longer sufficient, but who secretly feels ashamed of her lover and must therefore have it established that there is something remarkable about him—when faith thus begins to lose its passion, when faith begins to cease to be faith, then a proof becomes necessary so as to command respect from the side of unbelief.³

In the beginning of his *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard sought to expose the fallacious arguments in the standard demonstrations of God’s existence. “For if the God does not exist it would of course be impossible to prove it; and if he does exist it would be folly to attempt it.”⁴

An additional objection to theistic proofs stems from the personhood of God. God must be approached in the humility of subjection and submission, not in the arrogance of rational speculation. This is one of the recurrent themes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*:

So rather let us mock God, out and out, as has been done before in the world—this is always preferable to the disparaging air of importance with which one would prove God’s existence. For to prove the existence of one who is present is the most shameless affront, since it is an attempt to make him ridiculous. . . . But how could it occur to anybody to prove that he exists, unless one had permitted oneself to ignore him, and now makes the thing all the worse by proving his existence before his very nose?

Instead, the only appropriate “proof” of God’s existence is an expression of submission: “one proves God’s existence by worship . . . not by proofs.”⁵

Like other fideists, Barth grounds his objections to natural theology, or theistic proofs, on the nature of God. For example, he argues that the fact that God created everything else that exists *ex nihilo* (out of nothing) puts God beyond all arguments based on analogies to cause-and-effect relationships in nature:

Moreover, we have no analogy on the basis of which the nature and being of God as Creator can be accessible to us. We know originators and causes. We can again extend the series into the infinite. . . . But creation means that our existence and existence generally as distinct from God are opposed to nothing, to non-existence. Creator means one who alone exists, and everything else only as the work of His will and Word. Creator means: *creator ex nihilo*. But within the sphere of the ideas possible to us, *creatio ex nihilo* can appear only as an absurdity. (*CD* II/1, 76).

In addition, Barth objects to natural theology because it is incompatible with the doctrine of grace. He argues that grace does not merely reconcile us to God, it enables us to *know* God: “It [the church] must not withhold from the world, nor must it confuse and conceal, the fact that God is knowable to us in His grace, and because in His grace, only in His grace. For this reason it can make no use of natural theology with its doctrine of another kind of knowability of God” (*CD II/1*, 172).

The Personal Problem of Evil

The problem of evil is one of the most famous puzzles in the history of human thought. For fideists, that is exactly what the “problem” is with the “problem of evil”: it has been treated as an intellectual puzzle, a kind of apologetical Rubik’s Cube. The real issue, they say, is whether people will trust God. When people ask how God can be all-powerful and all-loving and still allow evil, the unvoiced question they are almost always posing is, How can I trust God? or, Why should I trust God?

Fideists typically answer this question in two ways. First, they argue that in a sense the question is inappropriate and shows that people have not really come to terms with what it means for God to be *God*. Luther, for example, urged people to avoid speculating about the matter: “Let, therefore, his goodwill be acceptable unto thee, oh, man, and speculate not with thy devilish queries, thy whys and thy wherefores, touching on God’s words and works. For God, who is creator of all creatures, and orders all things according to his unsearchable will and wisdom, is not pleased with such questionings.”⁶

According to Kierkegaard, it is unthinkable to blame God for anything, and no proof of his goodness is needed. “For this reason Christianity cannot answer the question: Why? For in the absolute sense, ‘Why?’ cannot be asked. The absolute is the absolute” (*JP* 486, 1:193).

The best proof that there is a just providence is to say: “I *will* believe it whatever happens.” All proof is foolishness, a kind of double-mindedness which by two paths (the objective and the subjective) wants to arrive simultaneously at the same point. The believer says to himself: “The most detestable of all would be for you to allow yourself, in any ever so hidden thought, to insult God by thinking of him as having done wrong. Therefore, if someone wishes to write a big book to justify or indict God—as far as I am concerned, I will believe. Where it seems that I might be able to understand, I will still prefer to believe, for it is more blessed to believe—as long as we human beings live in this world, understanding easily becomes something imagined, a chummy importunity—and where I cannot understand, yes, there it is blessed to believe.” (*JP* 1117, 2:9)

Likewise, Barth held that God gave Job no answer to the problem of suffering, but simply asked Job to trust him: “He [God] does not ask for his understanding, agreement or applause. On the contrary, he simply asks that he should be content not to know why and to what extent he exists, and does so in this way and not another. He simply asks that he should admit that it is not he who plans and controls” (*CD* IV/3/1, 431).

Second, and in some tension with the claim that no answer should be given to the problem, some fideists do offer a reply to the question of why we should trust God, to wit: in Christ’s suffering and death God has shown his trustworthiness beyond anything we have a right to have expected. Barth repeatedly gives this answer in his *Church Dogmatics*:

The New Testament answer to the problem of suffering—and it alone is the answer to the sharply put query of the Old Testament—is to the effect that One has died for all. (*CD I/2*, 109)

Thus even when we think of man in this negative determination, we still think of him as the one whom God loved from all eternity in His Son, as the one to whom He gave Himself from all eternity in His Son, gave Himself that He might represent him, gave Himself that He might bear and suffer on His behalf what man himself had to suffer. (*CD II/2*, 165-166)

If the created world is understood in light of the divine mercy revealed in Jesus Christ, of the divine participation in it eternally resolved in Jesus Christ and fulfilled by Him in time; if it is thus understood as the arena, instrument and object of His living action, of the once for all divine contesting and overcoming of its imperfection, its justification and perfection will infallibly be perceived and it will be seen to be the best of all possible worlds. (*CD III/1*, 385)

Barth takes this answer one step further. Rather than trying to justify God to the unbelieving world by constructing speculative, rational arguments, the church needs to show in its own response to human suffering that it is a people who know and trust God.

We do not believe if we do not live in the neighborhood of Golgotha. And we cannot live in the neighborhood of Golgotha without being affected by the shadow of divine judgment, without allowing this shadow to fall on us. In this shadow Israel suffered. In this shadow the Church suffers. That it suffers in this way is the Church's answer to the

world on the question of a “theodicy”—the question of the justice of God in the sufferings inflicted on us in the world. (*CD II/1*, 406)⁷

Miracles as God Revealing Himself

The fideist approach to miracles may be understood by comparing it to the approach taken in Reformed apologetics, in which the biblical miracles are problematic to non-Christians because they do not accept the Bible as God’s self-attesting revelation. For Reformed apologists revelation is essentially verbal: God communicates truth to us in propositional form, and included in this truth is the fact that God has done certain miracles for our redemption. The apologetic task, then, becomes to present God’s revelation in Scripture as his self-attesting Word, and belief in the biblical miracles will follow.

The fideists’ approach differs in this respect: for them God’s revelation is not essentially verbal, but active. It is what God does, particularly in Jesus Christ, that reveals God to us. Of course, part of what God does in Christ is to speak, and fideists do not deny that revelation includes a verbal aspect. But the point is this: in fideism one does not believe in the reality of miracles because God has revealed that they have happened; rather, one believes because in those very miracles one realizes that God is revealing himself. In Reformed apologetics miracles are believed because God reveals them; in fideism, because in them God reveals himself.

Barth articulates this view of miracles in the *Church Dogmatics*. He defines miracle as “an attribute of revelation”:

In the Bible a miracle is not some event that is hard to conceive, nor yet one that is simply inconceivable, but one that is highly conceivable, but conceivable only as the

exponent of the special new direct act of God in time and in history. In the form in which it acquires temporal historical actuality, biblically attested revelation is always a miracle, and therefore the witness to it, whether direct or indirect in its course, is a narrative of miracles that happened. Miracle is thus an attribute of revelation. (*CD I/2*, 63-64)

Barth clearly did not think miracles should be accepted simply because they are in the Bible. He makes this point explicitly when, following on the above-cited passage, he asserts that the believer in God's revelation in Christ might conceivably question some of the miracle stories in the Bible:

The fact that the statement "God reveals Himself" is the confession of a miracle that has happened certainly does not imply a blind credence in all the miracle stories related in the Bible. If we confess the miracle, we may very well, at least partially and by degrees, accept additional light from the miracles as necessary signs of the miracle. But even if we confess the miracle, why should we not constantly find this or that one of the miracles obscure, why should we not constantly be taken aback by them? It is really not laid upon us to take everything in the Bible as true *in globo*, but it is laid upon us to listen to its testimony when we actually hear it. A man might even credit all miracles and for that reason not confess *the* miracle. (*CD I/2*, 65)

Years later Barth was asked about this statement. His comments were, in part, as follows: "I only say that we do not have to accept all the miracles *in globo*. I did not speak of excluding any miracle. There is *one* great miracle that is reflected in all the miracles. . . . We cannot reason: the Bible tells us the truth; the Bible tells us of miracles; therefore we must accept the miracles.

No, the Bible tells us of *the* miracle of revelation. . . . We do not believe in miracles, but in God.”⁸

Jesus: The Christ of Faith

Fideists believe Jesus Christ needs no defense. They believe He is personally self-attesting: as people encounter Jesus Christ (through the witness of Scripture and the church), they are won to faith in him by the power of the love and grace of God that he embodies. To the question “Why should I believe in Jesus Christ?” the fideist answers simply, “Get to know him and you’ll see.” According to Karl Barth, for example, the life of Jesus is self-interpreting and self-validating. Since the history of Jesus’ life is the history of God’s revelation of himself in Jesus, the very history of that revelation in Jesus’ life reveals the meaning of Jesus’ life. This implies that “all verification of its occurrence can only follow its self-verification, all interpretation of its form and content its self-interpretation. His history is a question which gives its own answer, a puzzle which contains its own solution, a secret which is in process of its own disclosure.” (*CD IV/3/1*, 46-47)

Although fideists oppose traditional sorts of arguments designed to prove or defend rationally that Jesus is the risen Christ and Son of God, they do employ indirect arguments in keeping with Kierkegaard’s practice of “indirect communication.” For example, in Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*, Climacus’s “poem” about God becoming a man in order to be our Teacher and Savior is shown not to be Climacus’s invention or the creation of any other human being; it must therefore have come from God himself.⁹ Those who hear the story of the Incarnation and disbelieve it are always offended at the absurdity of it, a fact that

Climacus takes as indirect confirmation of its truth.¹⁰ Stephen Evans corroborates this view: “A person who wanted to make up a story would make up something much more plausible.”¹¹

Barth also indirectly argues that Jesus Christ must be the person attested in Scripture because no human being could ever have invented the story. He reminds his readers that he is “speaking of the Jesus Christ attested in Scripture,” who “is not then the creation of free speculation based on direct experience.” The biblical picture of Jesus “is not a picture arbitrarily invented and constructed by others. It is the picture which He Himself has created and impressed upon His witnesses.” We know who he is because in rising from the dead he has “shown Himself to be who He is. . . . If there is any Christian and theological axiom, it is that Jesus Christ is risen, that He is truly risen. But this is an axiom which no one can invent. It can only be repeated on the basis of the fact that in the enlightening power of the Holy Spirit it has been previously declared to us as the central statement of the biblical witness” (*CD IV/3/1*, 44). As the living, risen Lord, Jesus Christ takes the initiative to make us known to him. “We are first known by the One whom we may know, and it is only then that we may know and believe and confess” (*CD IV/3/1*, 45).

Having affirmed that Jesus’ life is a revelation of God, and that it is such in fulfillment of the Old Testament (*CD IV/3/1*, 48-71), Barth asks the apologetic question: “Hitherto we have presupposed and maintained that the life of Jesus Christ as such is light, that His being is also name, His reality truth, His history revelation, His act Word or Logos. We have simply ascribed to Him what the Bible calls glory and therefore His prophetic office. On what ground and with what right may we do this?” (*CD IV/3/1*, 72).

Barth elaborates on the question: Are we merely ascribing these things to Jesus after the fact, placing our own value judgment on him, describing him in categories of our own thought?

For Barth the key to responding to these questions is to ask, “Who is it who puts these questions?” But this question implies and calls for another:

But the question which we really ought to put first is whether we should decide, whether we are in any way competent, whether we can imagine that we have some light of our own which constrains and qualifies us, ever to put such questions. Is there any place from which we are really able to ask whether Jesus Christ is the light, the revelation, the Word, the Prophet? Is there any place where we are really forced to ask this for the sake of the honesty and sincerity which we owe ourselves? To ascribe to ourselves a competence to put such questions is *ipso facto* to deny that His life is light, His work truth, His history revelation, His act the Word of God. (*CD IV/3/1, 73*)

According to Barth, it makes no sense for someone who believes in Christ as the Truth to try and prove or defend that belief.

Let us suppose that someone does really presuppose and maintain that the existence of Jesus Christ is light, truth, revelation, Word and glory, and thinks that it is obviously reasonable and incumbent to confess this. Can it ever enter his head to think that he should justify himself in this matter, adducing proofs to convince himself and others, or to assure himself that he is really right, that what he does is necessary or at least possible? (*CD IV/3/1, 74*)

Barth is content, then, simply to present Jesus Christ as He has revealed himself to us and to explain what Christians believe about Christ. Ultimately Jesus Christ by the Spirit is the one who convinces us and others that He is who He claims to be. Barth admits frankly that in the end the Christian presentation of the claims of Christ will be circular:

The point of our whole exposition is positively: *Credo ut intelligam*, and polemically: “The fool hath said in his heart, There is no God.” As we have put it, the declaration of the prophecy of the life of Jesus Christ is valid as and because it is a declaration concerning the life of Jesus Christ. But is not this begging the question? Are we not arguing in a circle? Exactly! We have learned from the content of our presupposition and assertion, and only from its content, that because it is true it is legitimate and obligatory, and in what sense this is the case. (*CD IV/3/1*, 85-86)

For Further Study

Brown, Colin. *Miracles and the Critical Mind*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984. Detailed historical study of miracles in Christian and non-Christian thought, written from a generally fideist perspective.

Rodin, R. Scott. *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*. Issues in Systematic Theology 3. New York: Peter Lang, 1997. Thorough study of Barth’s treatment of the problem of evil.

¹Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 29.

²Parenthetical references in the text are to paragraph numbers, not pages, in Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Totter; see chapter 16 for a more detailed exposition of Pascal's arguments with documentation.

³Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 1:31.

⁴Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 49; so also *JP* 1334, 2:93.

⁵Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 485.

⁶Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (London: H. G. Bonn, 1857), 29-30, as quoted in R. Scott Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*, *Issues in Systematic Theology* 3 (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 26.

⁷For discussions of these and other statements by Barth pertaining to the problem of evil, see Rodin, *Evil and Theodicy in the Theology of Karl Barth*.

⁸*Karl Barth's Table Talk*, ed. John D. Godsey (Richmond: John Knox, 1963), 69.

⁹Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 35-36.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹C. Stephen Evans, "Apologetic Arguments in *Philosophical Fragments*," in "*Philosophical Fragments*" and "*Johannes Climacus*," ed. Robert L. Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary*, vol. 7 (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1994), 69.