

Romans 7:14-25; John 8:34-36
Feast Day of Karl Barth

The Freedom of Christ's Household

The Rev. Dr. Patrick S. Cheng*
Episcopal Divinity School
December 8, 2011

As some of you know, I am completely fascinated by sin. Intellectually speaking, of course. In fact, one might say, in the words of today's gospel, that I'm a "slave to sin." I wrote my doctoral dissertation on sin. My job talk here at EDS two years ago was about sin. I'm teaching a course on sin in the spring. And my next book, which will be published in March, is about sin.

Now, this obsession with sin is not surprising because, like many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Christians, I've wrestled with the doctrine of sin all of my life. I remember being in junior high school and flipping through the pages of a thick Roman Catholic reference book in the local library. I came across the entry on "homosexuality," and I learned – to my horror – that I was "intrinsically disordered" and that I faced the prospect of eternal punishment for my mortal sins. In that Garden of Eden moment, my theological innocence was shattered, and my relationship with God was never again the same.

Even today, I get all kinds of hate mail – or perhaps I should say "hate prayers" – from fundamentalist Christians who feel the need to lecture me about sin. One person wrote me back in October, accusing me of "exclud[ing] all of God's words regarding sin to satisfy your own earthly, fleshly desires" and that he would pray for me. (Clearly that person doesn't realize that I've been so busy with my writing and teaching that I have virtually no time to engage in any "earthly, fleshly desires," whatever that might mean.)

Another person wrote me in June and criticized me of making "a god to suit yourself, one devoid of reference to sin, righteousness, and judgment" and that I would pay for it on Judgment Day. And still another person wrote me in April, urging me to recognize that "[God] sent His only Son to die on a cross for you, so you can be free, so you can 'go and sin no more.'"

So I'll be honest with you. Despite my years of theological training and reflection on the doctrine of sin, I still found today's readings about sin, especially from Romans and John, somewhat difficult to hear. Perhaps some of you felt the same way too. And yet, I remain convinced that those of us who are progressive Christians simply cannot afford to ignore the issue of sin. Sin-talk remains at the heart of the spiritual, emotional,

* Copyright © 2011 Patrick S. Cheng. All rights reserved.

psychological, and physical suffering of LGBT people – and many other marginalized people – today. We must address the issue of sin head-on, no matter how uncomfortable it might make us feel.

One person who has deeply influenced my thinking about sin is Karl Barth, the Swiss Reformed theologian and pastor whom we commemorate at today's communion service. Barth is widely acknowledged as one of the great theologians of the twentieth century. His theological masterpiece, the *Church Dogmatics*, was a 35-year-long project, ultimately spanning 13 volumes, almost 10,000 pages, and six million words. And it still remained unfinished at the time of his death! Barth may have had his problems, but writer's block was not one of them.

Barth was also a principal drafter of the Barmen Declaration, which condemned the German church of the 1930s for caving into the theological claims of the Nazis, who tried to glorify Adolf Hitler as a new "German prophet" and to subsume the church under the secular government of the Third Reich. When Barth refused to swear allegiance to Hitler, he lost his theology professorship at the University of Bonn and was forced to leave Germany.

What I find so helpful about Barth's work is its recognition of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of sin. According to Barth, the starting point for thinking about sin is *Jesus Christ*, and not just legalistic rules or biblical vice lists. That is, sin is not a "thing" or a doctrine with an independent existence, but it is always relational. We sin when we oppose – or turn our backs on – what God has done for us in Christ.

Take, for example, the resurrection and the ascension. Through the glorious events of Easter and the Ascension, God has raised up Jesus Christ and, along with Christ, all of humanity. As Athanasius wrote about the doctrine of *theōsis*, "God became human, so that humans might become gods." Now, if sin is defined as opposing what God has done for us in Christ, then sin in the context of the resurrection and the ascension can be understood as *sloth*, or our resistance to being raised up with Christ.

That is, we sin when we keep ourselves down or hold ourselves back. We sin when we doubt ourselves, when we lack confidence, when we fail to speak up against injustice, when we think that we are unworthy, when we trivialize or downplay our own accomplishments, and when we refuse to believe that we are made in the image and likeness of God. In Barth's words, we sin when we hide and turn our backs on God, "rolling [ourselves] into a ball like a hedgehog with prickly spikes."¹ Don't you just love that image of a hedgehog, turned in on itself?

Indeed, since the 1950s, feminist and womanist theologians and religion scholars like Valerie Saiving, Judith Plaskow, and Delores Williams have written about the "feminine" sin of self-abnegation, as opposed to the "masculine" sin of pride. Thus, sin for many of us – and not just women, but also men and genderqueer folks – is not just a

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/2, p. 405.

matter of pride, or lifting ourselves up too high – but it is equally about shame and self-hate, and not lifting ourselves up *high enough*.

What I found most intriguing about Karl Barth, however, was his extremely unorthodox lifestyle. Did you know that Barth spent thirty-five years living in the same household with two women? Has anyone heard this before? He not only lived with Nelly, his wife and the mother of his five children, but also with Charlotte von Kirschbaum, who is really the unacknowledged co-author of *Church Dogmatics*. It is said that von Kirschbaum was the one who actually wrote most of the densely packed and incredibly learned small-typeface portions of the text that frequently cite the Bible and the early Church theologians in Greek and Latin. (The text also talks about Mozart, who was Barth's favorite composer, and I'm grateful to Pat Michaels for playing Mozart before and after today's service.)

A number of years ago, I spoke with one of Barth's former students (who I think is now in his eighties), and he said that students would go to Barth's house and be welcomed with cookies and tea at the front door by Frau Nelly (that is, Mrs. Barth), and then be taken upstairs to be welcomed to his study by Fräuline Charlotte. Barth's relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum was so deep that when she developed Alzheimer's in 1964 and was moved into a nursing home, Barth ultimately ceased work on the *Church Dogmatics* – he was unable to write any more – and died a few years later.

And that's not all. Interestingly, all three of them – Karl, Nelly, and Charlotte – are buried together in the same family grave, and all three names are engraved together on a single grave stone. To paraphrase today's gospel, they've managed to remain in the same household forever.

As a queer theologian, I admire the fact that Karl Barth took the doctrine of the Trinity so seriously in his own three-way relationship of thirty-five years. Or, to put it in another way, I appreciate how Barth modeled his own household after the rather queer Bethany household of Martha, Mary, and Jesus. (And, yes, I know there's also Lazarus in that household, but that's a whole other sermon!)

So, ironically, I've come to see the truth in today's gospel passage about the slavery of sin and the freedom of the Son. Karl Barth has helped to free me from the slavery of sin by gently shifting my focus away from sin itself, and pointing me towards what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

By looking to Jesus Christ, or grace incarnate, as the starting point for our theological reflection about sin – instead of, say, that thick Catholic reference book from my junior high school days – I've come to realize that the Son has, in fact, made us “free indeed.” In the resurrection and the ascension, we are promised a place in God's household, no matter how unorthodox or queer our earthly households may be. And *that*, to me, is what the Good News is all about.

Amen.+