

# The Age of the Spirit

## by Mervyn Davies

It has traditionally been one of the central tasks of theology to determine man's relationship to God in his state of redeemed sinfulness. The various solutions put forward in answer to this question contributed greatly to the divisions of Western Christendom as we now know it. The controversy has nearly always turned on the question of what role man can play in his own redemption. For Luther man could only be said to be righteous on account of the merits of Christ imputed to him while he in himself always remained a sinner. Trent gives an somewhat milder form of the doctrine of *Simul Justus et Peccator* in attributing to man an actual righteousness by which he can make redemption his own through works. Much of the discussion is a matter of terminology, as Hans Kung has shown in his book on Barth's doctrine of justification.<sup>1</sup> Such discussions seem at their liveliest when a need is felt to return to a more theocentric theology. Luther felt that the Roman Church was turning man away from God with her doctrine of merit and so glorifying man. He felt called to remind the Church that nothing is possible without the grace of Christ and that man can never claim any righteousness of his own. The tendencies to which Luther objected can be said to have been repeated in the 'reductionist' theologies of Kant, Hegel and Schleiermacher. The present interest of Catholics in the teaching of Marx and the theology of 'Secular Christianity' would certainly have seemed to him as it does now to Barth, as further examples of the reprehensible tendency to anthropocentric religion. The needle of the theological compass never seems to settle between these two poles.

In addition to this, however, there seems to come a point in different stages of history when God appears to be at his most distant and elusive. It is a commonplace to say of our own time that we feel the irrelevance of God like no other and that we are rapidly approaching the stage when even God's absence will not be noticed. In such conditions as these, man feels compelled to return to the society which has rejected God and to seek his salvation in its transformation and hence to look no further than its bounds. Whereas the tendency of theocentric theology is to encourage man to abandon the world and the political community in which he lives so that he may contemplate his own depravity as revealed to him by the Word of God, the counsel of the other theological trend is to

<sup>1</sup>Hans Kung, *Justification*, London, 1964.

despair of the active presence of God in the world and to minimize the eschatological teaching of the New Testament (as I think is the tendency of the Slant *Manifesto*). James Douglass has suggested in his excellent article in the September number of *New Blackfriars* 'From Bonhoeffer to Gandhi: God as Truth', that a fundamental reason for secular man's indifference to God is our failure to introduce him to the crucified Christ. Within the terms of reference which he sets, he is surely right. But granted this, what is also required is a theological perspective which will do justice to both the anthropocentric and theocentric emphasis, since clearly both are an important part of Christian teaching although in themselves incomplete. To put the matter another way and in more biblical language, the problem that both these emphases are concerned with either directly or indirectly is in what sense, if any, can the Kingdom of God be realized in this mode of existence? Must one look to only an eschatological realization or can it in some sense be fully realized now? The true answer seems to me to be that the Kingdom can be fully realized only as sign, as sacrament, in this life. To put it like this is to suggest that man has a part to play in its realization even though the definitive work has been done by Christ. But how are we to express this?

The publication of Robert Barclay's *Apology*<sup>1</sup> in a new edition may serve to remind us of the sort of perspective that is needed, which holds the balance between God and man and also allows us to formulate the task that man has to perform. The fundamental starting-point of a work of this kind is that ultimately it is through the Holy Spirit that the Redemption is mediated to the individual and the transformation of the world is to be achieved.

Robert Barclay (1648-1690) was born at Gordonstown in Morayshire. His father became a Quaker in 1665 at a time when Robert was being educated at the Scots College in Paris by the Jesuits. His uncle was the rector at the time and under his influence he became a Catholic. But the influence of his father and frequent visits to Quaker meetings led to his own 'convincement' in 1666. This was a time of considerable persecution of Quakers in England and Scotland, but in 1677 he accompanied William Penn and George Fox and others on a visit to Holland and Germany which may at least partially explain why his command of the Continental theologians is so good. He was also involved in schemes to found Quaker proprietary colonies in America and was appointed non-resident Governor of New Jersey by Charles II. The *Apology*<sup>2</sup> was first published in Latin in 1676 and in English in 1678, achieving six English editions by 1736. It provided the only really systematic statement of Quaker belief and practice for some time to come

<sup>1</sup>*Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, edited by Dean Freiday and published by him at 2 Garfield Terrace, Elberon, N.J., U.S.A., 465 pp., £1 8s.

<sup>2</sup>Its full title is: *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity As the same is Held Forth and Preached, by the People called, in scorn, Quakers. It contains an address to Charles II.*

and had a considerable influence on Methodism. This present edition is an attempt to present the work in a modernized and abridged form with supplementary explanatory notes provided by the editor. Such an undertaking is of limited value to scholars but the work is eminently readable, and although the editor has given himself considerable scope for abridgment at no point does the substance of Barclay's thought fail to come through. The value of pre-masticating theological works of this kind for the benefit of the general public is questionable, but the editor is justified in his claim that this is a work that deserves to be better known as an important representative of seventeenth-century theology. The introduction and biography are good, and the explanatory notes useful but heavily dependent on popular works of reference. Barclay's own notes and references are pruned and made considerably more intelligible than the original. Within the terms of its brief this is a competent piece of work and a useful service has been performed in presenting Barclay in a more readable form. He is a daunting writer but a rewarding one, and perseverance is needed to read him.

Barclay treats of a wide number of topics in his *Apology*. He begins with a discussion of Revelation which he distinguishes into two kinds: inward and unmediated revelation, and that which is embodied in the Scriptures. He wants to stress inward and unmediated revelation because he believes that from the beginning all descendants of Adam have within them the inward testimony or seed of God. At the Fall they lost the sense of this and were subject instead to the seed of the serpent. In this state man can know nothing correctly. The coming of Christ made it possible for this seed of God which is hidden in man to be once more united with the true Light. In general it may be said that his theology of redemption is a universalist one which bears striking resemblance to that of some of the Federal theologians on the Continent, notably Zwingli and Bullinger. The Covenant, according to them, is open to the whole human race because of God's *foedus aeternum* and this is really Barclay's view also. He deals, in fact, with most of the issues which were occupying theologians of his time especially justification, worship and the ministry. He reveals himself to be a true Quaker in his distrust of external rites, emphasizing the interior character of religion. Yet a good deal of what he says about human perfection and the guidance of the Spirit would not have seemed strange to St Francis de Sales or St Teresa of Avila. His is not a rebellious temperament, nor does he advocate constraint of any kind, for these are not the ways of Christ:

Men will needs wrestle with the Flesh and Blood, when they cannot prevail with the Spirit and with the Understanding; and not having Spiritual weapons, go about with Carnal Weapons, to establish Christ's Kingdom which they can never do. . . . These men labour against Men's Wills and Consciences, not by

Christ's Power, but by the outward Sword, to make Men the Power of Christ, which they can never do.<sup>1</sup>

But such doctrines are of largely historical interest.

Of the topics discussed by Barclay, those of most considerable contemporary interest seem to me to be (1) his doctrine of Justification; (2) his doctrine of the Spirit; and (3) what he has to say about the Church. I have chosen them because I think that they are relevant to the solution of the problem of the conflict between the anthropocentric and theocentric emphases in post-Reformation theology.

1. In his doctrine of Justification, Luther insists that the beginnings of justifying faith must be the total *humiliatio* of the sinner before God who throws himself on God's mercy. This is the faith which justifies and from which flow good works. No other works are of any value and, indeed, coupled with this notion is an extremely pessimistic view of man. Such a view of justification really excludes any idea of man's redemption being achieved both by a *humiliatio* such as Luther describes and of works performed by man even under the grace of God. Hence what is also excluded by Luther is any idea that the Kingdom is to be brought about as part of man's act of appropriating the redemption to himself. Indeed I think that on the Lutheran account the Kingdom is essentially something connected with Judgment and the life to come, and not realizable in any form now. A doctrine of co-operation with the grace of God which Trent affirmed, really allows us both a much more optimistic view of even fallen man, and scope for a doctrine of the Kingdom of the kind we appear to need.

Barclay both by his universalist doctrine of redemption and his solution to the problem of justification stands on the Tridentine side in the debate. There has always been a tendency among the later English Divines to moderate the Reformed position on Justification and Works, although the earlier Divines were more or less faithful. Richard Baxter allows Works as a remote, moral, preparatory cause of our Justification (*Of Justification: Four Disputations*, London, 1658). Bishop Bull speaks of faith as obedience to the Gospel and interprets St Paul's condemnation of works as referring to the Mosaic Law (*Harmonia Apostolica* (English translation), Oxford, 1842) and in this he is followed by Newman (*Lectures on Justification*, London and Oxford, 1832; 3rd ed., 1874). Barclay, however, rehabilitates works to such a degree as to say that Christ's intercession for us is based on our human efforts, although adding that we cannot be saved by our efforts alone. We not only have a righteousness which is imputed to us on account of Christ's merits but have one which is genuinely our own. But Barclay rejects any idea of merit, saying that God rewards our works from his own free

<sup>1</sup>*An Apology*, Prop. XIV, par. ii, p. 492. All quotations are from the English edition of 1736.

will. This was a time of considerable interest on the part of English Divines in Protestant and Catholic thought on the Continent and this may partially explain the rather startling positions of Barclay and Bull which are very different from that of Hooker, the classic exponent of the Reformed position in England.

2. In determining in what precisely justification consists, Barclay puts himself firmly in the Evangelical tradition. For him it is the presence of the Spirit within the individual which constitutes his justification. But for Barclay, the Spirit does more than justify, he is present in all men's activities and is at the heart of any movement towards God at all even before the coming of Christ. Indeed, Barclay's systematic presentation of the Quaker doctrine of the Spirit makes it integral to the whole doctrine of revelation and reconciliation. The Spirit is present in the hearts of those who believe in Christ, but also in the hearts of all men to guide them towards a true knowledge of God. The Spirit is present as a seed or Inner Light<sup>1</sup> as indeed the Father and the Son are present, too. But it is in the Spirit that we have the appointed means whereby we know God and are saved. Following Gregory the Great, he speaks of the Spirit as the interior Teacher who enables us to seek God within the soul. There is a sort of trinity of knowledge: the only knowledge of the Father is by the Son, and the only knowledge of the Son is by the Spirit, and God is revealed to his children through the Spirit. Possession of the Spirit is thus the token of the Christian. Nothing can be obtained or done correctly without the Spirit, since he leads and instructs the hearts of each Christian.

As might be expected, however, there is a move at this point to reject much of Christian tradition as being contrary to the inner workings of the Spirit. The weakness of this theology at this stage is to stress the presence of the Spirit in the individual so that its presence in the community is minimized, and this is not helped by his distinction of 'inner' and 'outer' which appear to be always in opposition to one another. The ultimate goal of faith for Barclay is the inner revelation of God which does not conflict with Scripture because the source of both is the same. What is missing from the analysis here is a sense of the Spirit as present within the community through which it is mediated to the individual so that Barclay tends to reject the value of the sacramental life of the Church. Nevertheless he speaks interestingly of the inward anointing by the Spirit:

He that hath an Anointing abiding in him, which teacheth him all things, so that he needs no Man to teach him, hath an inward and immediate Teacher. (*An Apology*, prop. II, par. xii, p. 52.)

Thou shalt feel the New Man, or the Spiritual Birth and Babe raised which hath its Spiritual Senses, and can see, feel, taste, handle, and smell the things of the Spirit. (*Ibid.*, prop. II, par. xvi, p. 66.)

<sup>1</sup>Cf. Leif Eeg-Olofsson, *The Conception of the Inner Light in Robert Barclay's Theology*, Lund 1954.

The important point that we can detect here for our purposes is that for Barclay the presence of the Spirit is the means by which we receive the capacity to discern what are the things of the Spirit. Barclay rejects violence as a means of furthering the Kingdom precisely because the Kingdom is only brought about by means of the discernment of which he speaks here. Without it all is folly. To be justified or to begin the road to justification is thus also to grow in discernment of the things of the Spirit. Everyone has this power of discernment in principle in virtue of the seed that is in him. Through the power of Christ we have only to accept this seed for the Spirit to come within us. Barclay does not seem to be too clear what he means by this seed which is in all men, but it will be obvious that his doctrine is similar to the traditional doctrine about the image of God in man. His point might be rendered, I suggest, by saying that in faith we accept that we were made in the image of God and, perhaps, see it for the first time. The acceptance of God in faith and the acceptance of what we are is the indispensable step to receiving the Spirit of Adoption. In faith we recognize that despite sin we have always had the mark of God upon us but we need the Spirit in Christ to reveal this to us. A hundred and fifty years later, Charles Simeon, the Anglican Evangelical theologian, was to write in a similar vein:

This then is the end for which we are to desire the gift of the Holy Ghost: we should feel sensible that we cannot know Christ unless the Spirit reveal him in us: or come to know him unless the Spirit form him in our hearts. This is a point by no means considered as it ought to be. We have an idea that the Holy Spirit is to 'help our infirmities'; but we have no conception of the extent to which we need that help, and especially in relation to the knowledge of Christ.<sup>1</sup>

A curious echo of this passage and of Barclay's teaching can be found in Newman's writings, of whom it seems true to say that he found great inspiration in Evangelical theology. On the doctrine of the Spirit, Newman is in close agreement and dependence on Wesley who was in turn influenced by Barclay. Newman writes:

The Condescension of the Blessed Spirit is as incomprehensible as that of the Son. He has ever been the secret Presence of God within the Creation: a source of life amid chaos, bringing out into form and order what was at first shapeless and void, and the voice of Truth in the hearts of all rational beings, tuning them into harmony with the intimations of God's Law which were externally made to them.<sup>2</sup>

These are exactly the sentiments of Barclay at the beginning of the *Apology*, although differently put. They form also a striking parallel with much of the theology of the second chapter of the Decree *De Ecclesia* of Vatican II.

Two very important points are being made by both Barclay and

<sup>1</sup>*Horae Homilecticae*, IX, no. 968, p. 420, London, 1820.

<sup>2</sup>*Horae Homilecticae*, IX, no. 968, p. 420, London, 1820.

Newman. The first is that there is some sort of purpose or presence of the Spirit within the created order; the work of giving order to the shapeless void at the Creation is something that *continues* in the course of history but it has to be discerned by the Christian. The second point is that this discernment, of which both writers speak, is something essentially given by the Spirit and is essential if the governing of men's affairs is to be done in accordance with the purpose of God mysteriously present with us. But there is an important point upon which Newman and Barclay diverge. For Barclay Christ does not inhabit us directly for that would be to make man as God. But he dwells in us by means of the seed that has always been with us but which is now re-awakened by the coming of the Word. It is very like the doctrine of Athanasius who said that the Word came to man to raise his gaze from things of sense to God once more. The seed of which Barclay speaks is the seed of holy substance, the Word of God and the light of the Spirit. He calls it all of these things. This position really leads him very much to the view that the atonement is more a restoration rather than a new beginning. On the other hand, in a sermon preached on the Feast of Pentecost, Newman speaks of the Holy Spirit dwelling in the body and soul as in a temple and stresses that this is a complete transformation:

It is plain that such an indwelling brings the Christian into a state altogether new and marvellous, far above the possession of mere gifts, and exalts him inconceivably in the scale of things, and gives him a place and an office which he had not before. . . . He becomes a vessel unto honour, sanctified and meet for the Master's use and prepared unto every good work.<sup>1</sup>

The office is clearly to be an instrument of the purpose of God and one can only be a true instrument if one has this power of discernment which is given by the Spirit. But Newman takes this a stage further by pointing out that this same new creation, which is achieved by Christ becoming our righteousness, is the beginning of the Kingdom:

It does seem like a want of faith not to hold, and a superstition not to profess, that in some sufficient sense, Christ as our righteousness, fulfils the Law *in us* as well as for us; that he justifies us, not only in word but in power, bringing the ark with its mercy seat into the temple of our hearts; manifesting, setting up there his new kingdom, and the power and glory of His Cross.<sup>2</sup>

Yet if Barclay does not stress the new existence that the Christian has as much as Newman it is perhaps because he is primarily concerned with the consequences of Christ coming as the Word, as Revelation, and because he wishes to stress that the Spirit continues to reveal the will of God. The new birth of the Christian for him is really a noetic one but even so, he emphasizes the sacrificial character of the Christ-event also:

<sup>1</sup>*Parochial Sermons*, vol. 2, p. 248.

<sup>2</sup>*Lectures on Justification*, p. 113.

The Original and Fundamental Cause of our Justification, is the Love of God manifested in the Appearance of Jesus Christ in the Flesh; who by his Life, Death, Sufferings and Obedience, made a way for our Reconciliation, and became a Sacrifice for the Remission of Sins that are past, and purchased unto us this Seed and Grace, from which this Birth arises, and in which Jesus Christ is inwardly received, formed and brought forth in us, in his own pure and holy Image of Righteousness; by which our Souls live unto God, and are clothed with him, and have put him on. (*An Apology*, Prop. II, par. viii, p. 266.)

For both Barclay and Newman, the gift that is promised us by Scripture is the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit within us. To be justified is thus to become at emple of God. Barclay's characteristic phrase is to be 'inwardly formed' with Christ so that he comes within us by means of the Spirit. From such a man who has Christ formed within him, there come forth good works by the Spirit.

3. It is especially important for Barclay that the promptings of the Spirit within the Church should not be stifled. Barclay has no thought of the Church as a *structure* possessing the Spirit but says that each can become a minister by the inner prompting of the Spirit who may give different gifts to each. He made a passionate plea for the liberty of conscience not just because he saw it as a democratic right but rather because he felt that all human advance would be stifled if the inner promptings of the Spirit in each man were not allowed full expression. This was a view shared to some extent by Newman also, although he put it rather differently in his *Lectures on the Prophetical Office of the Church*, where he speaks of the prophetical spirit 'pervading the Church like an atmosphere' and not confined either to the hierarchy or to credal statements. Again, Newman's emphasis on the 'office' that the Christian receives as a result of this justifying indwelling of the Spirit, is something that belongs to all members of the People of God. But it is only in the Spirit that man ministers God to man and transforms society around him. What is interesting about Barclay and what, indeed, distinguishes him from present-day Quakerism in England, is his emphasis on ministry and the gifts of the Spirit which are to be used to further the purposes of God. In so far as the Quakers have always been interested and concerned about social problems, we would naturally expect some modification of the Reformed doctrine of works. The modification, somewhat surprisingly, takes the form of a universal ministry of all believers through the inner anointing by the Spirit.

What is clear from both these writers, who are in many ways so similar, is that the establishment of the Kingdom is brought about through the power of discernment which is given to us by the Spirit; this we use to perceive the mysterious purpose of God which is, in a sense, in the created order, but epitomized in the Christ-event. But further, this establishment of the Kingdom is first and foremost



a living out and a bringing forth of that new reality which we already are so that it may become embodied in our community structures. A Roman Catholic would of course want to stress (as Newman himself did in his *Lectures on Justification*) that this new creation is mediated to us by the Church as a structure through the sacraments. However, we can surely agree with Barclay in saying that this only becomes truly significant and sacramental in the wider sense in so far as this transformation is embodied by us throughout our human activity. The seed must grow into a great tree. For this to happen there must be an emptying of self and a removal of the natural products of self-will which must be thoroughly crucified. Then a 'holy birth' takes place and so the seed of righteousness planted by God has a place to rise. Man will then stand in God's presence, hear his voice and comply with the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Christ, then, has performed his act of atonement. What remains is the work of the Spirit mediating that atonement to the world. It seems clear to me that for both Barclay and Newman, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit was a means of avoiding both the pessimism about man and the world which was characteristic of Luther and Calvin, and the excessive confidence in man and his works which the Reformers found so intolerable. Put in other terms, the truth of the matter is that there are no purely divine or purely human solutions to the human predicament but that the Father works by the Spirit through his adopted sons to bring about a sacramental presence of his Kingdom in the world. It is a genuine state of co-operation even if the ability to co-operate has first to be given.

What a study of Barclay and Newman serves to remind us of, at a time when theology is becoming more and more concerned with a scrutiny of man and his destiny, is that the perspective chosen, the questions asked, and the solutions propounded are in danger of going astray unless attention is paid to the theology of the Spirit. There is a danger of a new form of Pelagianism based on the irrelevance of God and the permanent absence of his Spirit from the world. That there are *serious* problems connected with belief today and Christian practice as it has been traditionally understood, it would be foolish to deny. Yet it would be equally foolish to neglect what we are repeatedly told by Scripture: that the Spirit is with us in our hearts and that ultimately the shape of our lives must be in conformity with him. The Spirit is both a presence and a direction so that in the last resort the leaven in the community lump is not the Christian, but the Spirit and he leavens for a Kingdom which of its nature cannot be fully realized within purely human terms of reference. A theology that neglects this soon finds itself turning Christ into nothing more than a superb example of what it is to be human and neglecting the fact that he is the ground of our being and we are his temple.