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drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2006

Attributes of God (X): Mercy and Justice

Our reflections on the attributes of God continue with another pair of characteristics: **mercy and righteousness**. These two attributes of God are often set alongside each other, and so it is not controversial to treat them together. However, there is no consensus on *how* to treat them in tandem. Consider the following as one way to think through the matter of their interrelationship in God.

Let's look first at **God's righteousness**. What does it mean to say God is righteous? Righteousness is liked to matters of justice, rights and law. To be righteous is to be found in accordance with law. When we say that God is righteous, we are saying that his being and action are in full accordance with law. But what law? Since God himself is the standard of justice and the ultimate law-giver, this attribute must be necessarily reflexive: God lives according to the standard of *his* law.

With such an understanding of righteousness, it should be obvious why we might encounter some choppy waters when we turn to **God's mercy**. Mercy is most basically understood as withholding the execution of what is just or right. You deserve one thing, but get another -- that's the heart of mercy.

If mercy is so understood, **how can God be both merciful and righteous?** For God to be perfectly merciful, there must be a lessening of his righteousness. For God to be perfectly righteous, there is a definite limit set on his mercy -- if he can be said to be merciful at all.

There are **a number of solutions to this puzzle**. We could abandon divine righteousness. We could abandon divine mercy. We could say God moves from righteousness to mercy (maybe by means of some kind of crude OT/NT distinction). We could try to hold them together as inherently paradoxical affirmations that bear witness to God's mystery. We could just give up on the theological task altogether, opting to speak haphazardly of both attributes in so-called "balance."

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In the contrast of these alternative solutions, my approach (big surprise!) would be to **redefine mercy and righteousness according to the history of God's dealings with us**. Where is God in his mercy and righteousness revealed? In Jesus Christ, God deals with us rightly and merciful.

In Jesus Christ, God's righteousness is not a subservience to an abstract law. God's right is precisely his freely chosen covenant of mercy whereby humble and even sinful human beings are brought into fellowship with God and each other. God doesn't speak his law into a vacuum, but gives his law to his people. That God even has a people is a consequence God's merciful decision. Thus, **God's mercy is the content of God's righteousness**.

In Jesus Christ, God's mercy is not a lessening of the demands of righteousness. God's mercy is executed by God's righteous right hand, whereby he takes sin seriously and opposes it as his enemy. That God is righteous -- that God takes a stand for what is right between him and us -- is good news for us. It is through his righteousness that God enacts his mercy. Thus, **God's righteousness is the form of God's mercy**.

So, when understood in tandem with each other and in correspondence to God's history with us, the divine attributes of mercy and righteousness bear witness to the character of God as the one who is in himself for us and with us.

Any thoughts?

Have I misrepresented the general definitions of righteousness and mercy offered as foils at the beginning of this post?

Do my reformulations of mercy and righteousness sound right? On what basis would you judge them?

Has this exercise served to commend my preferred procedure (used throughout this series) of defining God's attributes in accordance with God's history with us in his covenant with Israel fulfilled in his Son, Jesus Christ? Does this particular example indicate any flaws or dangers in this procedure?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 5:46 PM

[3 comments](#)

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At [6:50 AM, December 14, 2006](#), Anonymous said...

If I am not mistaken, this is the section of CD 2.1 where Barth goes on this small-print binge talking about the atonement. I'm thinking of doing my paper for BLM's class on this small-print section and how it relates to the material on atonement in 4.1. I know that you work in

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these areas and I wondered if you have any insights into these matters.

At [10:09 AM, December 14, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

Yes, you have correctly identified my inspiration for thinking through the pair "mercy and righteousness" (as well as last week's "grace and holiness"). Barth speaks about the atonement in his doctrine of God. That is spot on in my mind. I keep my source-citing to a minimum on my blog to keep from making it about theologians instead of about God.

Yes, that would make a good paper on the atonement: to sketch how Barth's thought on the atonement develops from "Mercy and Righteousness" CD II/1(1940)to "The Judge Judged in our Place" in CD IV/1 (1952ish). One thing worthy of note is that Barth moves from speaking of the satisfaction of divine righteousness in II/1 to the satisfaction of divine love in IV/1. This material development may be linked to a formal shift of emphasis from a highly dialectal treatment of divine attributes in the II/1 to a more extended narrative-historical characterization of God in IV. Both sections are terrific and can be read in tandem for the most part, with some interesting yet minor differences. Have fun with that!

At [10:26 AM, December 14, 2006](#), [WTM](#) said...

Thanks!

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