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## A Response to Elmer Colyer

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## A Response to Elmer Colyer

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1. I commend my colleague Elmer Colyer for an insightful and balanced evaluation of my theological method. Dr. Colyer has followed my writings through the years, and I have greatly benefitted from the questions he has raised. His observations are always substantial and go to the heart of the problem.
2. Colyer puts his finger on a major theological issue that emerges in my discussion of authority and method in theology. While God can be known only through God, are there not creaturely structures that carry the message of God's plan of salvation? Reformed theology has traditionally emphasized the incapacity of the finite to bear the infinite (*finitum non capax infiniti*), but this needs to be counterbalanced by the recognition that "the infinite is capable of the finite." The finite cannot of and in itself carry the infinite, but the infinite can use the finite to reveal itself. By the power of the Spirit the gospel can enter creaturely structures and thereby make them means of grace. The structures that God chooses are precisely those that have arisen within salvation history and that constitute this history. In my theology these structures are the historical Jesus Christ, the Bible as the written Word of God, the proclamation of the gospel in the church, the sacraments of baptism and holy communion and the fruits of a vibrant faith, including works of mercy and prayer.
3. The role of the Bible is especially important in this discussion, since I refuse to identify the Bible with divine revelation. I also reject any attempt to equate the wine and bread in Holy Communion with the body and blood of Christ or the sermonic proclamation with the very Word of the living God. The Bible and other signs of grace mediate God's Word through the action of the Spirit, but they do not contain divine grace and truth. The Bible is not in itself a mirror or echo of the living Word of God, but the Bible penetrated by the Spirit becomes a conduit of salvific meaning.
4. Finite instruments of God are not intrinsically holy, but these instruments through the providence of God hold infinite possibilities. I do not wish to speak of "holy objects" as do our brothers and sisters in the Catholic communions, since there always remains an infinite qualitative difference between God and humanity.<sup>1</sup> Yet finite vessels can be prepared by the Spirit to bear witness to the infinite. The Spirit does not speak through incoherence but through a coherent and reliable witness and message. Yet the Bible's truthfulness or reliability is hidden from empirical inquiry and can be known only through the interior witness of the Spirit. What makes both the Bible and the church unique is that they have been elevated by God to be bearers and heralds of divine revelation. The Spirit is not inherent in these creaturely structures -Bible, church and sacrament- but enters them from above again and again. The knowledge of God is finally a free decision of God to disclose his Word, but he graciously condescends to meet us in visible signs and words that bear witness to his self-revelation in Jesus Christ. God is not bound to these means of grace, but we are bound to them, since they are provided by God to guide us on our earthly pilgrimage. I realize that this brief excursus does not fully answer all the problems in my methodology.
5. Another major issue that Colyer alludes to, though does not explore in any depth, is the nature of the God who reveals himself. I am sometimes accused of actualism, since with Barth I see God as being in action rather than static being or an impersonal ground of being. It is also alleged that I view revelation in actualistic terms - as the act of divine disclosing rather than an objective disclosure in past history. My intention is to affirm God as logos as well as spirit. I also try to hold in tension both sides of revelation: the personal and the propositional. The Word of God includes information about God as well as the gracious presence of God, but what we can know conceptually is always incomplete and must never be identified with what God knows. Our formulations of the

content of faith may correspond to what is objectively revealed, but they can never duplicate what God says. This is why the church needs to express its faith anew, since the truth of faith is not an unchangeable dogma that can be transmitted by the church from one generation to another but a personal communication from God as a living subject that can be heard but never fully grasped. It can be expressed but not exhaustively because God's Word basically transcends the parameters of human reason and imagination.

6. With some justification Elmer Colyer sees my theology as a creative restatement of Karl Barth's position. While his observation has a measure of validity, it will become apparent as my Christian Foundations series progresses that I have substantial differences with Barth in several areas. Whereas Barth's emphasis was on the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, I speak of the inner word as well. While Barth covered this dimension of God's activity in his discussion of the Holy Spirit, I see the Spirit not simply as the catalyst that enables us to receive and know God's Word but also as the creative source for new understanding of God's Word. This "new light" does not contradict but expands the light of the gospel that shines in Holy Scripture. Again, Barth in his later years came to speak of Jesus Christ as the only sacrament. In his theology the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper become witnesses to revelation rather than effectual means of grace. While Barth viewed reconciliation as the core of salvation, I would put equal emphasis on regeneration or the new birth.<sup>2</sup> Barth's stress was on the cost of discipleship, on living out the ethical mandate of the faith. My emphasis is on the call to holiness, which includes the service of our neighbor but also encompasses methods of drawing ever nearer to God in personal communion. I agree with Barth that faith and obedience belong together, just as do gospel and law. Basically Barth offers us a kerygmatic theology centered in the proclamation of the Word. I propose a sacramental theology in which creaturely structures become important as bearers of the living Word of God.

7. Like Barth I am indebted to the tradition of evangelical pietism, but I am not as critical of this tradition as Barth is. A theology of Word and Spirit will also be a theology of the Christian life, for it is the Spirit who enables us to respond to the word of truth in a life of obedience and perseverance. In addition this kind of theology makes an important place for the church and sacraments, since God does not ordinarily reach out to us apart from external mediation. We encounter God not in his abysmal glory but in the form of the crucified and risen Christ - testified to in Scripture, proclaimed in the church and celebrated in the sacraments. Yet with Barth I will always distinguish the Word of God itself from the human witness to this Word and the Spirit of God from the human spirit that seeks to comprehend God's Word. What finally saves us is not baptism with water but baptism with the Spirit. What finally secures the remission of our sins is not acts of penance by the believer nor the absolution of the church but the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross.

8. In conclusion, while I have freely drawn on Barth, I have other significant mentors as well including Luther, Calvin, P.T. Forsyth, Kierkegaard and Augustine. Barth's protest was directed against a theology of immanence as found in Schleiermacher. To counter a theology of religious experience he expounded a theology of the Word of God. I believe we need to recover the experiential dimension of theology, and this means to give more attention to the Spirit - not simply as the illuminator of the Word but as the empowerer for Christian mission.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I would nonetheless deem it appropriate to refer to things set apart for a holy use (such as church and sacraments) as holy. While they are not inherently holy, their function is to direct us to the Holy.

<sup>2</sup> Barth does not minimize regeneration or sanctification but views it as an element in reconciliation.