

“ THE WORD ” IN BARTH AND LUTHER¹

“ THE WORD ” is Barth’s central theological idea. It has been so from the first, since the *Römerbrief* (Epistle to the Romans). The publication of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, that massive work with which Barth is at present occupied, is most revealing. Up to the present it embraces six volumes. None of the so-called introductory questions were considered at the beginning of the work, but it began with two thick volumes (together consisting of 1,500 pages) on the Teaching of the *Word of God* (*Die Lehre vom Wort Gottes*), 1932–38. Following these came two volumes on the Teaching about God (*Die Lehre von Gott*), 1940–42, in which Barth began to analyse the first article of the Creed, a task which he has not yet completed. According to Barth before one can speak about God one must speak of the “ Word of God ”, the only medium through which God reveals himself.

Barth has undeniably influenced present-day exegesis and systematic theology strongly. The attitude to the Word, the Scriptures, and concrete questions of Biblical exegesis, which is widespread can, in great measure, be traced back to his influence. To a great extent it is his spirit which prescribes the way in which questions are put when, in many different parts of the world, men speak of the Scriptures and the Word. So it is useful to raise the question : What is the meaning of “ The Word ” for Barth ? A right answer to that question would certainly give us not only an elucidation of Barth’s thought, but would, at the same time, allow us to grasp a certain element which is found in the thought of all of us, an element which needs to be exactly defined and examined. In the space of this article we shall confine ourselves to the question of Barth’s view of the Word.

If we want to obtain a clear view of Barth’s teaching on the Word, we ought to begin with what is central for that teaching, Barth’s exposition of John i. 14, “ The Word became flesh ”. In the doctrine of the Incarnation, in Christology, is to be

¹ Being a translation by Rev. V. C. Pogue, B.A., of Orphir, Orkney, of an article appearing in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* (Häfte 4, 1948, pp. 249–67), appearing here by kind permission of author and publisher.

found the roots of doctrine of the Scriptures. Barth interprets the sentence "The Word became flesh" as "The Word took flesh". Concerning that he writes, "God cannot cease to be God. The Incarnation is not understandable, but it is not absurd and it may not be treated as an absurdity. This is the factor that is not understandable, viz. that God's Word as such, without ceasing to be God, in such a way is with us that it takes human nature which is its creation, into his own nature and to that extent makes it its own nature."¹ The boundary between the human and the divine must be maintained even within the Incarnation itself: the tendency in the Lutheran teaching on the *communicatio idiomatum* is the very opposite.

Luther finds God just in Christ's humiliation, not in something which is superior to it and only united with it. The wish to set God over the man Jesus, the wish to keep the boundaries clear, is built on the presupposition that God is like us: unwilling to give, covetous and egocentric as we are, that is to say, is built on an unwillingness to believe the gospel. That Barth must criticise the Lutheran position is an accepted fact. In different places in his works the attack on Lutheranism at this point is met with. Of Lutheran Christology he writes in this vein: "What is problematic in this outlook may clearly be expressed in these questions: Are then the freedom, majesty, and glory of the Word of God so treated that they are not fully expressed in the incarnation but are suppressed in it? May it not be that Luther and the Lutherans dared too much in such an undertaking?"² It is evident that in Luther there is a tendency to bring God down into humanity and in that way Luther believes he can best give expression to the message of the Gospel. It is, in like manner, evident that in Barth there is a tendency to set God up above humanity and in that way Barth believes that he can best give expression to God's sovereignty. So the gulf between God and man gapes unbridged even in the Incarnation. Otherwise, Barth insists, we should make use of God, hold Him in our hands. It is singular that this particularly Barthian apprehension, the apprehension that there should be the possibility of God being deprived of his sovereignty over us, is scarcely to be glimpsed in Luther. Instead, Luther betrays a real fear when confronted with the thought of the God who is

¹ *K. D. I.2* (1938), pp. 175f.

² *Ibid.*, p. 182.

above the humanity of Jesus. He scarcely dares to speak of Him without fleeing to the manger or the cross. This Lutheran trepidation before the unincarnate God is something quite unknown to Barth but he warns us in many and mighty words that it is necessary for us to stand back from God lest man should become Lord.

The conception of what God's majesty is, the conception of His honour, is consequently entirely different in Barth and in Luther. A short description of that is in place as a background for what follows. Majesty, in Barth, is something which can be dimmed by the Incarnation. God's majesty must be protected. The observation, at which we just glanced above, that God does not put all His being into the Incarnation but keeps His distance from Jesus' humanity—it is that which protects and preserves God's majesty. God's majesty is up on high. But with Luther, on the contrary, God's majesty is down in the depths ; God's majesty, that is to say, demands that God should be able to *do* what He *wills* to do. God's honour is not something which God has in Himself and which He guards for Himself, but it consists in His fulfilling of His plans, in His lifting mankind out of the pit of corruption. So then, unbelief is the worst derogation to which God's honour can be exposed. Not to accept God's message in earnest, to act as if God were far away when instead He has come in Christ, that is to make of none effect the work God has done and to substitute therefor our own. He who holds to the tired man Jesus, holds to God's true majesty which is down here in the depths and carries on its eternal work under the veil of the cross and death. Barth represents in his conception of God's honour the old Reformed line which Luther faced in his controversies with the Swiss about the Lord's Supper. They insisted that the doctrine of the Real Presence was a blot on God's honour : God could not be in the bread and let Himself be handled by man, but rather God, Christ, is in heaven, while the bread and wine are partaken on earth. But in that case, Luther replies, God has been made a really worldly honour-hunter who sits on high and protects his reputation against insult. But such a conception of God's honour is *its derogation*. “ Thereby God's honour is made out to be entirely worldly and fleshly, just as it would imply loss of honour for an earthly king to be hanged or crucified. But our God's honour is such that He, for our sake, bows Himself very low, in flesh,

in bread, in our mouth, in our heart, and in our bosom."¹ To understand God we must always return to this, that Christ was crucified. Instead of constructing a conception of honour on our own which we cannot afterwards combine with the humanity of Christ, but for which we must instead provide scope beyond that humanity, we should, on the contrary, according to Luther, bow before the fact that God executes His work in one who was crucified, and from this draw the conclusion that God's majesty does not follow the rules which apply to our own majesty and our own honour.

The total impression of Luther's writings is, so far as the picture of God is concerned, almost the exact opposite of that of Barth. And the strange thing is that Luther, without any very great effort, gets across to his readers what Barth, in spite of all his continual striving, never fully succeeds in doing, viz. the insight that God is wholly other than we. The God whom Barth depicts is, in effect, just like us. God keeps to Himself in relation to man, just as man keeps to himself in relation to God. Into this framework Barth then afterwards presses the Incarnation, as the inconceivable paradox, the resolution of the opposition of God and man. But the original opposition remains even in the Incarnation itself. The relation between Christ's divinity and His humanity preserves the same basic pattern as the original, half-antagonistic relation between God and man in general.

We intend to turn at once to a more special aspect of the relation between the divine and the human in the Incarnation. Here we reach the kernel of Barth's teaching about "The Word" and we have not yet seen the concrete picture of Barth's conception of the Incarnation which makes his view of the Scriptures understandable. The relation between the Incarnation and the word of the Scriptures is defined schematically in Barth; these two are consciously woven together. God's word meets us in a three-fold form, says Barth. It meets us now as the *spoken* Word in the Church. Back of the preaching stands the Word as the *written* Word in the Bible. Back of the written Word stands the Incarnation as the entry of the Word into the world of flesh, the *revealed* Word in Christ (John i. 14).² The special stamp which Barth's teaching bears is carried over, by

¹ W.A. 23, 157, 28-32 (*Dass diese Wort Christi "Das ist mein Leib" noch stehen fest* [1527]).

² K. D. I. I (1932), pp. 89ff. Cf. *Christliche Dogmatik I* (1927), pp. 46ff.

inner necessity, to his conception of the Word in the Scriptures and from that to the preaching of the present. The opposition between the divine and the human remains in the Incarnation in spite of the unity, and the same division comes in again between God's Word and man's word in the Scriptures, to be carried over in exactly the same sense into Barth's view of preaching. As the revealed Word is conceived so is afterwards the written and the preached Word.

But first for some further examination of the opposition of God and man in general in Barth. Even in the *Römerbrief* it was this opposition which dominated his theological outlook and it has remained so until this day.¹ It was man's *creatureliness* which caused God's judgment to fall on him. What alone makes the central position allotted to the Virgin Birth fully understandable is the realisation of the fact that the speculative opposition postulated in Barth's theology between God and man is a thoroughgoing one and upsets all proper proportions. No one who reads the New Testament with open mind could possibly make the teaching of the Virgin Birth central for it. Clearly the central point of the Early Church *Kerygma* is Christ's death and resurrection ; all else is secondary to these. But where the Cross and Resurrection are taken as the kernel of the message one cannot hold to the false idea of God and man as two poles which stand opposed to one another. He is rather forced to alter his main thesis to this, that in the Cross and Resurrection a war is waged between God and God's enemy who holds man in thrall ; the main opposition is the opposition between God and Satan, God and sin, God and death. Christ's conquest means that God conquers but not in such a way that man's personality is suppressed ; on the contrary, where God conquers there the enemy of man is thwarted, that is to say, man receives life. If, on the contrary, the Virgin Birth becomes central then the unbiblical opposition between God and man can be preserved unimpaired. Here the two partners in the supposed basic opposition meet and this meeting, in and for itself an *assumptio carnis*, the taking of flesh, is the central miracle upon which theology can, and should be built. All depends on the fact that God alone can be active, man, on the contrary, passive. This facet of the general basic belief that God and man exclude one

¹ *Der Römerbrief, Achter Abdruck der neuen Bearbeitung (1947)*, pp. 292, 294, 353 (text unchanged since 1922).

another, this Barth can also preserve unimpaired thanks to his peculiar explanation of the Virgin Birth : the male is humanity's active side, the female is passive ; the Virgin Birth implies that the active side of humanity is excluded, while the merely passive side (Mary) may remain.¹ Only thus is God " enabled to find room among us ".² The opposition between God and man, God and the creature, is with Barth the basic opposition of existence. Therewith we have more the voice of Plato than the witness of the Prophets and Apostles.

But Barth recognises as well a *relation* between God and the world of men. The Incarnation does not stand in such an isolated position in Barth's theology as is often thought. The Incarnation is rather a special case of a more or less general relation between God and the world of men. God cannot certainly be a man, in a strict sense. But the divine can be *mirrored* here below in the depths. Here below something can happen which points to God and witness to him. One can come across something entirely material which refers to God. If one really keeps alert for this conception in Barth one very soon notices the wealth of terms for this conception which is found in all his writings from the *Römerbrief* to his latest offspring.³ The most usual terms are copy (*Abbild*), analogy (*Analogie*), analogue (*Analogon*), picture (*Bild*), correspondence (*Entsprechung*), identity (*Gleichheit*), parable (*Gleichnis*), hint (*Hinweis*), sign (*Zeichen*), witness (*Zeuge*), likeness (*Ähnlichkeit*). Though varied in hundreds of different forms the basic conception is always the same : God and man are two spheres which can never intermingle, but in the human sphere the realities of the divine can be reflected. Man is created to be a witness of God's glory. When God looked upon creation and found it was very good that meant, according to Barth, that the world was good as the stage of God's glory and honour, "*theatrum gloriae Dei*", as Calvin said, and that man was good as a witness to the honour of that same God, a witness who refers to God. " This is man's nature, that he is in a position to be a witness to God's works."⁴ The same conception of " reference " dominates, for example, all Barth's

¹ *K. D.* I, 2, pp. 187ff., *Dogm. in Gr.* (1947), pp. 111ff.

² *K. D.* I, 2, p. 209.

³ At the time of writing the latest publication of Barth is *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III, 2 (1948). There the thought we have been concerned with triumphs as never before. The record of *K. D.* III, 1 (1945) is broken by this volume. On *K. D.* III, 1 in this respect see Regin Prenter's review in *Theologische Zeitschrift* (1946), pp. 170ff.

⁴ *D. in Gr.*, p. 67.

teaching about the Church and the Sacraments, to mention only one detail. The Church calls to mind God's kingdom. Baptism is a "copy", and "imitation", of our redemption; it is not Jesus Christ, not grace, in a word, not the reality itself, but instead a reference to reality, a sign or a witness about that, a bringing of that to mind.¹ Barth employs the same conception with reference to the political life. It can be thought of as a "parable", a "likeness", something which resembles God's kingdom, though the recollection in this case remains more distant, more derivative than the recollection which the Church awakens. The thought of "*reflection*" rules in a thoroughgoing way throughout.

Now we have gained an insight into that way of looking at things which makes Barth's teaching on the Incarnation and "The Word" completely understandable and clear. The human element in Christ is just such a reflection of the divine in Him. The human element in the text of the Bible is likewise something which "witnesses", "refers", to a Word of God above the word of man in the Scriptures.

First of all, some of Barth's sayings about the Incarnation, suitably extracted from his latest book, volume III. 2 of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, which was published in the summer of 1948. Barth's task here is to reach a positive theological anthropology, a doctrine of man, and true to his principle he seeks to reach a new anthropology from the point of view of *Christology* with the Incarnation as its centre. "We ask after the humanity of the *man Jesus* so that we may reach conclusions about the form and being of man in general."² Then Barth sets out to make distinctions of grades downwards, so that he gets a descending scale of "correspondences" from God down to the ordinary man. First of all he distinguishes between Godhood (*Gottheit*) and manhood (*Menschheit*) in Christ. Then he passes on to manhood in Jesus and within that makes the distinction between the humanity of the man Jesus (*die Humanität des Menschen Jesus*) on the one side, and the divinity of the man Jesus (*die Divinität des Menschen Jesus*) on the other. Jesus' divinity means that Jesus is man for God, Jesus' humanity that Jesus is man for men.³

¹ *Die kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe* (*Theologische Studien* 14) (1943), pp. 7f. and 17f.

² *K. D.* III. 2, p. 247.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 247f.

Speaking generally, we must say of the man Jesus that the transcendent God found in Jesus alone His "creaturely correspondence, repetition and representation" (*creatureliche Entsprechung, Wiederholung, und Darstellung*).¹ If we enquire further about the inner relation between divinity and humanity in the man Jesus, we must say: "His humanity corresponds in the closest possible way to His divinity, it copies it, it mirrors it. One can, and must, turn the statement round thus: His divinity has its correspondence, its representation in His humanity; it is mirrored in it. So here arises resemblance."² In Jesus' humanity we reach stage No. 3 downwards. Jesus' humanity consists in this, that He is a man for men. Now comes stage No. 4. Humanity in general is a "likeness", a "correspondence" to Jesus' humanity. The fact that man does not live for himself but together with others witnesses of humanity's destiny.¹ Barth thinks here specially of the necessary relation of man and woman, which already in volume III. 1 of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* was made to be the important beginning for the interpretation of the account of the Creation. In our purely human life together we have a "sign", a "witness", of our destiny.³ Our "togetherness" gives a hint of the true humanity which is found in the Incarnation and which there copies, and witnesses to, divinity, etc.—a series of signs and witnesses which quite unbrokenly refer upwards, up to the transcendent God.

All this is the simple consequence of the basic conception which is set forth in the *Römerbrief*. There Barth could depict something human which at once called to mind the distant God. Now he sets forth to *define* what human relations they are which call to mind the distant God. But God and the world are conceived in exactly the same way now as in the *Römerbrief* and now, as then, it is just the Incarnation which is not taken seriously.⁴

As a consequence of the triumph of this opposition of God and man, the opposition of God and sin is weakened. It is this latter opposition which dominated Early Church and Reformā-

¹ *K. D.* III. 2, p. 161.

² *Ibid.*, p. 258.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 267ff.; especially pp. 290ff. Much piling up of like terms on pp. 384f.: *Bild, Urbild* (original), *Nachbild* (copy), *Entsprechung, Analogie, Gleichheit, Gleichnis, Ähnlichkeit*.

⁴ Barth talks most enthusiastically just about that which is for him unthinkable. Parallels to this peculiarity could be discovered in many different ideologies in history.

tion theology. Hence Luther can see God's majesty in Christ's humiliation. Majesty is, therefore, no longer an unconcerned majesty, but a conquering majesty, not a majesty in the distance but a majesty on the field of battle. For Barth sin is a shadow which God despises.¹ Instead of conflict and war between God and the Devil *for* man we have in Barth a contrast between two types of *being*, which are unlike, a human being (*Sein*) and a divine being, which do not come to grips with one another but which stand apart from one another as “ Height ” and “ Depth ”. The distinction between the Creator and the creature is the basic opposition of the system.² The opposition between God and sin takes an entirely subordinate position.³

Hence this speculative searching for analogies within the created world can be pursued so unrestrictedly and so successfully : the world, when all is said and done, is indeed only “ lower ” than God, not ruined nor depraved. Luther can find no analogies wherever he may turn. But he needs to find none, for he knows that God Himself is with us on earth in the man Jesus and so in the external word.

With that we have reached his real doctrine of the Scriptures. The sharp distinction between the divine and the human in the Incarnation appears now in the form of a distinction between God's Word and man's word in the Scriptures. Here again we meet with the concepts “ witness ”, “ testimony ”, “ sign ”, and “ reference ”. Men speak in the Scriptures, but that external phenomenon, that *matter*, must be interpreted with reference to its *form* as “ reference ” beyond itself to something higher. Here is not the terminology alone which is Aristotelian, but the whole conception of “ The Word ” is essentially dictated by the contrast between matter and form.⁴ Barth's *ipsissima verba* themselves provide the best proof of this :

¹ *K. D.* III. 1, pp. 119ff.

² *K. D.* III. 2, p. 442.

³ From a wholly different standpoint the same criticism is made of Barth by Hans Urs von Balthasar in *Divus Thomas* (1944), pp. 201ff. In the last part of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (1948), pp. 37ff., Barth makes distinctions between sin and creation which almost look like an answer to the criticisms of Balthasar though his name is never mentioned. But for the basic thought which is developed in the following 500 pages or so these remarks in the beginning of the volume have no significance. The same deficiency in Barth, the Neo-Platonic conception of sin, is discussed by N. H. Soe in a review of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III. 1 in *Dansk Teologisk Tidsskrift*, 1948 ; see pp. 33f. : “ And therewith we are face to face with what, so far as I can see, is the real defect in Barth : evil, in his hands, becomes insufficiently real.”

⁴ Cf. Sigfrid von Engestrom's criticism of Barth in *Forlatelsestanken hos Luther och i nyare teologi* (1938), e.g. p. 424 : “ Luther does not recognise the distinction between

"To witness means to point beyond oneself to something else. Witnessing is thus the service of this other, in which the witness stands forth for the truth of this other, a service which consists in pointing to this other. . . . Standing in this service, the Biblical witnesses point beyond themselves. If we understand them as witnesses—and only as witnesses do we really genuinely understand them, that is to say, as they themselves want to be understood—then we must understand their *self* which, in its inner and outer conditioning and controlling, forms, so to say, the *matter* of their service, from the point of view of its *form* as a reference *beyond* itself."¹

The tendency to regard the human and material as, in itself, excluded from God, which, as we have seen before, is prominent in Barth, makes itself felt in his view of the outer text of the Bible. The basic distinction is the distinction between God's Word and man's word in the Scriptures. Just as God is incarnate and at the same time is "beyond" the humanity of Jesus, so that his majesty is not abandoned, so is God's Word something that speaks to us from out of the Scriptures and only out of them and yet also from above the outer text itself and not impeded by it. This doubleness is expressed in the concept "witness".² The concept "witness" which dominates his view of the Scriptures from beginning to end is defined thus: "'Witness' is a *human* word which receives power from God to call God's rule; grace and judgment *to the remembrance* of others."³ "Here humanity does not cease to be human, and in and for itself it certainly is not divine. And God certainly does not cease to be God."⁴ The Word of the Scriptures is only "a word of witness", only at that distance, and to that extent, only in that *indirect* identity, a Word of God, "God's Word in the sign of a man's word".⁵ Barth's continual flight from the human to the divine, his basic relativising of the human, makes

the content and the form of the Word of God which is fundamental for Barth." An example of how the teaching of Dialectical Theology on "The Word" has become common property in the last decade is shown by treatment of Rudolf Johannesson in *Person och gemenskap enligt romersk-katolsk och luthersk grundskadning* (1947), whose systematic foundation is likewise a distinction between the form and the content of the Word which he carries through in an original and clever manner. For a criticism of his work see my review in *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift*, 1948, pp. 52, 54ff.

¹ *K. D. I.* 1, p. 114. Italics are Barth's.

² *K. D. I.* 2, pp. 512ff. The terms *Zeugnis* and *Zeichen* have always been pregnant in meaning for Barth. They bear the meaning of *Hinweis*, the finger that points beyond, up to God who is "also without".

³ *Der Christ als Zeuge (Theologische Existenz Heute* 12 [1934]), p. 5. The continuation of the same book is very instructive for our subject. The italics in the above text are mine.

⁴ *K. D. I.* 2, p. 554.

⁵ *Ibid.*; cf. also pp. 562f. and p. 570.

him truly indifferent about what can pass as historical.¹ When the external has nothing more than the significance of pointing to something else it becomes without importance whether it is historically reliable or dubious. Without doubt Barth has stressed the central position in theology of the Incarnation and the Bible more strongly and with more influence than any other individual of our time and yet it must be said of his theology that it is in danger of undervaluing both the manhood of Christ and the concrete content of the Scriptures. In both cases it is the ancient heresy of Docetism that is again brought to life in the middle of the twentieth century.

The content of Barth's doctrine becomes apparent when we raise the question of *what is concealed* in God's revelation through the Word, and compare his answer to this question with that of Luther. For Barth what is concealed consists in the Word's being "earth-bound". When God speaks, such an event is never so very differently characterised from the ordinary human event that the former can be separated from the latter. The Bible is one religious document among others, the Church is a sociological entity among others, etc.² God does not speak directly but indirectly, through something human, something of the world, something which "witnesses" of God. In this necessarily earth-bound condition lies the concealment. As a support for this thesis Barth produces certain sayings of Luther about the true theology as a theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*).³ Over against that Barth sets Luther's division of the Word into Law and Gospel, a distinction which, in a subordinate relation, may be permissible, according to Barth, but can never be central. Greater than the doubleness, greater than the opposition between Law and Gospel, is the mutual agreement and unity between them. Law and Gospel come together in one in "the Word of God", in God's *sole* Word.⁴ Within this sole Word Barth finds a human and a divine element, not a doubleness in a horizontal direction, not a doubleness in the sense of *being addressed* by the Word, but a doubleness in a vertical direction, a cleavage between "Height" and "Depth", whereby the

¹ Cf. N. H. Soe, *Karl Barth's Bibelopfattelse* (1939), pp. 51ff., and also R. Prenter in *Theol. Zeitschrift*, 1946, pp. 175ff. Prenter coins the terms *Schöpfungsdoketismus* ("Docetism of the Creation").

² *K. D. I.* 1, pp. 171ff.; cf. p. 216.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 173ff.

⁴ *Evangelium und Gesetz* (*Theol. Exist. heute* 32 [1935]), p. 4; cf. *Römerbrief*, pp. 161ff.

divine remains "on high" while the human accompanies that side of the Word which has come down, "witnessing", "pointing" upwards. The concealment consists in this, that such an "earth-bound process" is involved when God addresses us.

Now, it may be quite impossible to accept Luther's theology of the Cross and reject his distinction between Law and Gospel, as Barth does. For in this case the consequence is that the theology of the Cross is torn from its right setting and forced into a framework which is foreign to it. For Luther it is totally foreign to work with the thought of a cleft between the Word in "the height" and the Word in "the depth". Thereby he would have denied that Christ really was man. The usual outward Scripture is the Manger in which the living Christ rests and the Cross on which the Redeemer hangs; beyond the Manger and the Cross Christ does not dwell: there is only empty space in which neither protection nor help is to be found. Rather God's work in Christ is such that it comes to us *sub contraria specie*, disguised in its opposite. Where God gives us life we sense death, where God gives us justification we feel our sinfulness. Here is the concealment which is to be found in Luther's theology, the concealment in the doubleness of Law and Gospel, that the life-giving work of the Gospel is indissolubly bound up with the death-bringing work of the Law and that there is no possibility for any man on earth to get behind the Law and the Gospel to their unity in some solitary and simple Word of God. If we had such a "solitary" and "single" Word, then we should stand no longer *under* the Word but *above* it; then we should no longer be confronted by God's approach to us; instead, the Scriptures would only be the starting point for our continued thoughts about God; that is to say, we should be ripe for what Barth always does and Luther never does: for stepping up from the human in the Scriptures towards "the Height".¹ The unity between Law and Gospel we cannot see so long as we are slain by the Law and draw life from the Gospel, but we shall first view that unity in the light of glory when Satan is cast down and battle ends in victory.² So long as the battle continues one cannot experience God's Word in any other way than by *listening* to it, by *hearing* it. The doubleness

¹ See Hans Iwand's review of *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I. 1 in *Theologische Blätter*, 1935, pp. 74ff.

² See my article on "Guds Lov" in the Danish series *Under Guds Ord*, No. 49 (1947), pp. 2ff., and also *Luthers lära om kallelsten* (1942), pp. 245ff.

of Law and Gospel, the resignation before the fact that these two are, and remain, two and do not coalesce into one, the unbending Lutheran “ No ” before the attempt to make them one, it is this which keeps man in the position of a listener, restrains him from unfruitful speculation and protects him from abandoning the land of life where “ the Word ” is a living Word and where Christ is a man.

Only where the doubleness of Law and Gospel is allowed to remain uncorrupted can Christ’s humanity be clearly held to. To stand under the work of the death-bearing Law and the life-giving Gospel, that is to live in Christ’s Cross and Resurrection, to be in Christ, the Incarnate. The Law does not introduce anything unchristian into the Christian gospel, as Barthians often say in their criticism of Lutheranism, but Law and Gospel in indissoluble doubleness set the centre of Christian fellowship where, according to the united witness of the New Testament, the centre ought to lie : in the death and resurrection of Jesus. In Barth’s theology, as we have seen, the centre of the Incarnation is not the Death and Resurrection, not the battle with, and the conquest of, the slayer of man, as the Devil is called in John viii. 44, but the centre is the naked becoming flesh, the meeting of God and man in the *assumptio carnis* through the Virgin Birth.¹ So it is only natural for Barth to reject Luther’s distinction between the Law and the Gospel in favour of a vertical division : God’s Word—man’s word. But if one asks the question whether it is Luther or Barth who best represents the New Testament there can be no doubt about the answer.

We have seen how Barth conceives “ The Word ” in one form and in the other, that is to say in Christ and in the Bible, the revealed and the written Word. It remains to consider Barth’s conception of the Word in its third form, that is to say in preaching, the spoken word. It is useful here to turn to Barth’s exegesis of Luther’s pamphlet *Wider Hans Worst* of the year 1541.

In a certain place in this Luther says that preaching is the very Word of God. They who preach are sinners but the Word is pure. The priest shall certainly ask forgiveness for himself

¹ This is a result of the fact that the basic opposition in being for Barth is the opposition between the Creator and the creation, an opposition between two types of being, while the combat between God and sin is wiped out in his theology. Only where the battle between God and Satan dominates thinking can the meaning of Luther’s distinction between Law and Gospel be understood.

but not for the words he preaches, since these are not his words but God's. He dare not ask God's forgiveness for His own Word. Of what he preaches let him have full certainty and say : "*Hec dixit Dominus, Das hat Gott selbs gesagt* (Thus hath God himself spoken) ".¹ In 1927 Barth interpreted this passage very negatively, as a first outburst of triumph, an expression of Luther's usual bringing down to earth of the majesty of God, a capturing of God in the human. "That is going too far in just the same way as—and all these are linked together with one another—Luther's teaching of Christ's manhood, of the Last Supper, of faith, and of the church notoriously goes too far concerning the point at issue."² In 1938 Barth gave the same passage fresh consideration, and this time he felt he could agree with what Luther said.³ What led to the change was that Barth meditated on the context in *Wider Hans Worst* and found a saying of Luther which qualified the above statement.⁴ Luther says that we men must tremble before the thought that we speak God's Word—we are tempted to let go the certainty about it; we are just unworthy men.⁵ Here Barth sees Luther conceding that preaching is man's word at the same time as it is God's Word. With that Barth is fully satisfied ; he is back once more in the old distinction between divinity and humanity which we know from his doctrine of the Incarnation and the Bible. The saying of Luther which we quoted first maintains that preaching is the Word of God, the other—on our trembling and unworthiness—that preaching is the word of man : here then we find both "Height" and "Depth" just as Barth wishes it. Luther himself has shown in this second quotation that it is necessary not to omit the coming down from the "*Height*" referred to in the first quotation to the "*Depth*" which is its counterpart.⁶

The saying of Luther in question is not very full, nor is it easy to interpret. The problem is, moreover, somewhat complicated by the fact that Luther's manuscript shows a deletion and an insertion of a new text above what is deleted. The deleted words can easily be deciphered and, accordingly, one can postulate a *nuance* of meaning which Luther, as he gave more thought to the subject, wished to drop and another he wished

¹ W.A. 51, 516, 15-517, 16 (MSS).

² *Christliche Dogmatik* I. pp. 415ff.

³ K. D. I. 2, pp. 835ff.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 841ff.

⁵ W.A. 51, 519, 6-520, 5.

⁶ K. D. I. 2, p. 842. Italics are mine.

to express in its place.¹ Barth fastens a certain intention on the change of text, since the deleted text says that our trembling springs from sin, while what is inserted says, on the contrary, that our trembling springs from our solemn belief that God's Word is a holy and majestic thing before which we are unworthy. Thus the insight into our inability springs not from sin—“see how Luther corrects himself!”—but from belief in the majesty of God's Word (through which belief our insight into our own sin is first made possible).² From belief in the *majesty* of the divine Word springs, according to Barth, the insight on the part of the preacher that what he preaches is a *human* word and precisely as such a “witness” to God, a “sign” that his majesty is involved. The preacher is simply the *human* preacher.³ The opposition with Barth is, as usual, the opposition between the divine and the *merely* human, between the divine on the one side and the divine which is earth-bound on the other, between the absolute and the relative.⁴ But that such a scheme is totally foreign to the text of Luther which Barth has cited is not hard to prove.

For, with Luther, the opposition in the text we have quoted is between the true, holy Church, on the one side, and the *devilish perversion* of the Church, on the other. The opposition, with Luther, is here, as elsewhere, thought of in terms of battle, not of differences of value. Luther says that the trembling which seizes the preacher before the exalted and holy Word is not found anywhere where men traffic in God's gifts and concerns. Our opponents, devils, Papists, sects, and all the world, they are at peace and unperturbed; they venture impudently in their own holiness to cry out, “Here is God, we are the servants, the prophets, and the apostles of God's Church”, just as all the false prophets in all ages have done. So it is too that Hans Worst boasts that he is a “Christian prince”. But humility and fear for God's Word have always *been the sure sign of the genuine, holy Church*. Pride and boastfulness in human thoughts have been *the sure sign of the devil* and that can be clearly seen in the

¹ W.A.; cf. the textual apparatus. Barth takes for granted that it was Luther himself who made the correction. The editors in W.A. (O. Clemen and O. Brenner) seem to presuppose the same. There is no objection to be made against this belief, not even from the point of view of the contents.

² *K. D.* I, 2, p. 841.

³ *Ibid.* The italics are Barth's.

⁴ The opposition of absolute and relative is used incessantly as a parallel to that of divine and human wherever “the Word” is treated. See for example *K. D.* I, 2, pp. 55ff.

filthy decretals of the Pope. Here the whole opposition is charged with *battle* ; the battle between God and Satan shapes the thought. In the human field we have the activity of God himself, acting through the Word, which is God's own presence, and of the devil, who seizes and perverts the heart which is not in God's fold. Where the thought is taken seriously that sin is a power and certainly not a "shadow", there it is impossible to work any longer with the opposition of absolute and relative, divine and human ; instead, what stands opposed to God is so characterised that it is not just human but devilish, perverse, evil. And indeed it is a foundation stone of Luther's theology that it is the *doubting* who stand closest to God while the pious and confident, in their pride, stand farthest off. It must be so in a theology which at its heart has Christ's Cross and Resurrection, and which insists that life comes under the form of death, that the Gospel and freedom can never be separated from the Law and bondage. In trembling is Christ ; in ecclesiastical pride is the devil.¹

Doubt, for Luther, is at one and the same time something which should be there and something which should be overcome. To tremble and to believe freely, these two belong together. They are only antagonistic to one another as breathing in and breathing out are antagonistic to one another : both must be taking place if a man is to live ; as diametrically opposed the two acts belong together, if one is alone without the other then death will soon follow. For this reason Luther continually admonishes that we should believe and trust ; he fights against doubt, which destroys fellowship with God, against his own doubt and doubt in others. He can say that it is our *sin* which drives us to doubt and trembling. Then his thought moves forward and his attention turns to the "faith" which casts off all unrest and is changed into worldly confidence. He sees how such an isolated certainty contains even deeper death than isolated dread. Thus doubt-free are the Papists and the Fanatics, and they are a thousand times worse than all doubters. So Luther turns back to what he had written before : there it stands, that it is sin which causes our trembling, and that is true ; but the proud, the doubt-free, they are engulfed in sin without possibility of escape. No, doubt is the open door out of our sin, is itself *faith* in the majestic God who dwells in the Word. So Luther deletes

¹ W.A. 51, 519, 13-520, 5.

the words which describe doubt as due to sin and writes instead some words which attribute our trembling to serious faith and the consciousness of our own unworthiness. From the central point of Luther's theology the whole procedure is entirely understandable and simple. Both what he deleted and what he substituted provide in themselves and in their own context a genuine and accurate impression of what Luther in all his Reformation writings thought and held.¹

Perhaps someone will say at this point : this viewpoint of Luther is not tenable but hopelessly confused : man should either believe or he should fear and tremble, one cannot keep pace with life and maintain both as he does. To say that—and many critics of Luther to-day do say that—is just the same as to say : either Christ is crucified or He is risen ; He cannot be both. For trembling in the heart of man is the crucifixion of the old man, faith is the resurrection of the new man ; death and resurrection are as breathing out and breathing in and will go on till life's last breath, every day from baptism till the hour of death. Christ comes at one and the same time as the Risen One and as the Crucified and it is to the sinner that he comes with all His majesty in the external Word. Faith and sin are not in such a way opposed that the sinner cannot have faith. On the contrary, it is just he who in his own consciousness knows himself a sinner who believes and no other than he. When, as we saw before, Luther scarcely feels what for Barth is a typical nervousness and apprehension that man should begin to use God as he wished, when Luther, without thinking that God's rule could thereby cease, allowed the Gospel of God's grace to manifest itself in the Man Jesus, all this carefree attitude may be said to be bound up with the conviction that only a *sinner* can *believe*. He who will *use* God as he wishes can do much, can practise a mass of rites and ceremonies and fasts, but *one* thing he cannot do—he cannot in his conscience be a sinner, that lies outside his field of vision. And that means : he who will *use* God as he wishes goes round in circles but never receives a share in God's majesty, never succeeds in being master over God, because Majesty is in the depths, among the weary and the doubting,

¹ After the Papists had emerged at the end of Luther's thought as the representatives of those who have no fear, a new situation was created and so to those who fear something new had to be said, viz., your fear is a sign of *faith*. If the old text had been allowed to stand in the new context it would have meant : your fear is a sign of *sin*, become Papists ! But in the old context, before Luther had named the doubt-free Papists, the original text had a very good and plain meaning, viz. fear not but believe.

in the Manger and on the Cross, down there where no user can see or go, where man can only be cast by God's speech with him in the Law.¹ Here no "Height" is needed as with Barth, nothing above the depths, above the majesty of Jesus charged with humility. Such worldly ways of looking at things lead us away from the outward word of the Scriptures. All that is needed is the Word directed outwards which we can hear in its plain speech to us and in its indissoluble doubleness of Law and Gospel.

Barth and those Dialectical theologians on the Continent who have been influenced by him have consciously made the theologian stand where the preacher stands—there must he stand with a theology of the *Word* as his tool. Nowhere do we notice Barth's strength as much as when he is hammering in this thesis, e.g. in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, which probably is and will remain his most important book, however more voluminous and learned many others of his books are.² Compared with this thesis, the thesis of Swedish Systematic Theology that the theologian has only a *descriptive* task, that he has only to provide a picture "of the way faith sees", is shown to be very colourless. But when Barth conceived "the Word" as he does, his theology comes to be in fact elevated above the Word, to abandon the situation of the preached and external Word and to be governed by speculation. Since the Word and faith are correlated conceptions the same thing can be put like this: faith is the starting point; the objective is to make a system of the content of faith, a movement from faith to understanding which is well captured by the title of Barth's book on Anselm, *Fides quaerens intellectum* ("Faith seeking understanding"). A true Lutheran theology must abide by faith alone, that is to say, must always be *subordinate* to the Word, never *superior* to it. The question must be seriously asked if for us Lutherans the Bible is not in effect a message, whereas, by inner necessity, for Barth the Bible must cease to be a message and instead becomes a source from which material is drawn for a theology. But that implies that it should be we Lutherans who, as theologians, from beginning to end *should stand where the preacher stands*. A theology of the Word is, from one point of view, more natural

¹ Prof. Regin Prenter has orally pointed out to me how this trait specially characterises the Lutheran *doctrine of the Lord's Supper* in contrast to the Reformed.

² See, e.g. the most striking passage in *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, 7 & 8 Imp. (1928), pp. 101f.

for Luther than for Barth. And in the measure in which theology is a theology of the Word, in that measure it gives expression to “ faith ”, not a faith seeking understanding, but just faith, faith which listens to the Gospel and can never raise itself above the position of a listener. After being confronted at close quarters with Barth’s theology one sees in a new way that there is a right method of approach in the Swedish dictum that the theologian has only to give expression to “ faith’s vision ”. But on the other side we Swedes need to remind ourselves that faith and the Word belong together, as Luther said. A theology which is not a theology of the *Word* does not give expression to “ faith’s vision ” but is in continual danger of providing instead an ideology which is built upon the Word.¹ A tendency this way has not been absent in Sweden, and a very marked practical consequence of this tendency is that almost no connection obtains between theology and preaching in our country. One must not think that it is only preaching which suffers from this ; theology suffers too from its isolation. We have earlier remarked that the general theological atmosphere has been in a certain manner created by Barth in the last few decades. The dangers which are present in his conception of “ The Word ” constitute, at the same time, dangers in *our own* modes of thought. If one will make clear to oneself what the danger is in which theology stands to-day, one can briefly summarise it thus : danger of *Docetism*. Docetism taught that Jesus’ humanity was just appearance. Almost with necessity must we be driven towards the same dangerous doctrine when we make the fight against Liberal theology the main task in our theological work, for the Liberals depended most upon the human. The great temptation

¹ In *Festskrift til Jens Nørregaard* (1947), Prenter, from a standpoint which is allied to that outlined above, directed a certain criticism against the understanding of the task of systematic theology which obtains in the Lund circle (p. 252). The article is not quite clear, e.g. the term *historisk* (historical) is used with two different meanings. Still, the criticism is worthy of serious consideration. So far as the question under consideration is concerned—work on the history of dogma or the history of ideas as part of systematic theology—we may say that such work is certainly compatible with the view that theology is basically theology of the Word. One can look on the history of dogma as the history of exegesis. Good biblical exegesis is good theology, bad biblical exegesis is bad theology—that should be allowed to pass anywhere. One can write purely historical researches, e.g. on Luther, the Confessions of Faith, or Augustine, and see them all as expositors of the *kerygma*, strong or weak as the case may be. It is not necessary, nor even helpful, that the theologian should continually preach ; one often sees the primacy of the Word much more clearly when, using the usual historical methods, and in relative terms, he sets forth an exposition of Scripture which he finds in history and which was provided for its own time. When one compares Swedish and Dialectical theology one must note as the greatest achievement of the former the mass of accurate historical investigations which it possesses. Of that the Barthians can show very little, but, on the other hand, they have more unbroken contact with the preaching of the present day.

for Barth is the propensity to go backwards and forwards over the Liberal system ; in his work on the history of theology in the nineteenth century which was published last year he was not only tempted but also fell.¹ But if one looks in modern theology generally for the dangers which are in the direction of Docetism one sees a disturbing number of them. The Church is often conceived as a holy cloister which God has put in the world without its being clear that the Church consists of human beings. The priesthood comes from on high by ordination but it is very difficult to find place in such a scheme for the call of the congregation about which the Reformers spoke almost without exception—one fancies that this is too surprisingly “ liberal ” to come from Luther ! The Scriptures remain the holy, locked chest which, once upon a time, was placed by God on earth, with His revelation in it and is looked upon as a very serious upsetting of the authority of the Word of the Bible if anyone suggests that the Bible is the result of a long historic process and that the happenings and persons in this book are human and earthly. The preacher speaks forth the objective doctrine and he hesitates to deal with an ordinary human problem in the pulpit since man is no longer “ central ” in his preaching. One thing is common in all these : we are disturbed that we have to do with the human. Herein lies exactly the same poison as in the ancient Docetism of the early days of the Church. If one sees the docetic element in our modern anti-Liberal theology one cannot avoid the question : How did this happen when we began to react against Liberal theology ? Was there not a negative influence from it ? Such a testing and examining of the struggle against Liberal theological ideology is something for which we are fully ripe.

If the testing is to succeed, if man is to find anew the place which is his in the Christian message, then the speculative opposition between God and man must be wholly eliminated. And we shall never fully get rid of that as long as we refuse to admit the contrast of which the New Testament, the Early

¹ The same trait is found also in Barth's earlier works. Cf. John Cullberg, *Das Problem der Ethik in der dialektischen Theologie I* (Uppsala univ. arsskr. 1938, 4), pp. 152f. “ Indeed, through this opposition a meaning is introduced into the conception of theocentricity which is quite foreign to Luther. The theocentricity which he stood for in opposition to the Romanists had its opposite not in an antropocentric, but in an egocentric, conception of religion. The barb was directed, not against man as a creature of time but against the self-righteous man, who as such is *incurvatus in se* (turned in on himself) and just thereby is a sinner.

Church and the Reformers all together speak, the battle between God and Satan. It is indeed the case that this latter opposition is not accepted at all except as a primitive, half-superstitious curiosity. One does not think of things in that way to-day, one thinks of the opposition between God and man. So along the whole line in present-day anti-Liberal theology the human element is the same disturbing problem as Christ's divinity was in the Liberal period. We cannot, unfortunately, come to the right by a simple inversion of the wrong. The wrong is wrong on both sides. The right is seldom anything which is the opposite, but is only something which is different. For that reason a true theology demands orderly, sober historical investigations before it can come to anything. The prophetic and, for the hour, most highly rated opposite-reactionaries nearly always lead astray.¹

GUSTAF WINGREN.

*University of Lund,
Sweden.*

¹ Benkt-Erik Benktson's doctorate thesis *Den naturliga teologiens problem hos Karl Barth* (1948), which had not, unfortunately, been published before the above article was already in proof, contains, besides much else, detailed investigations of the opposition of God and man in many aspects of Barth's theology. Reference may be made here to what Benktson says about "The Word" in Barth on pages 193-200 and also 268f.