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## PRESBYTERIANISM

R. Buick Knox

Forty years ago, Dr Barkley was asked by the Girls' Auxiliary to write a book on Presbyterianism. The Girls' Auxiliary was at that time a strong organisation in the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the book was intended for use in its study groups. In fact, the book, Presbyterianism, proved to be an authoritative handbook which was widely read in the Irish Church and by many in other Churches. The book presents Dr Barkley's understanding of the organisation, doctrine and worship of the Presbyterian Church and also his vision of how it could be an even better embodiment of the New Testament pattern and of the ideals of the Reformers who laid the foundations of the presbyterian system. It is a tribute to Dr Barkley's scholarship, balanced judgement and presbyterian convictions that most of what he set out in this book still stands as a sound account of what Presbyterianism is and ought to be.

### I The Organisation of the Church

Dr Barkley begins from the generally-accepted position that the young churches in New Testament times were guided by presbyters who exercised oversight (ἐπίσκοπή) and were therefore also bishops (ἐπίσκοποι). Paul summoned the presbyters of Ephesus to meet him and he addressed them as overseers or bishops of the flock (Acts 20: 17 & 28). The presbyters in Crete were the bishops in charge of the flock (Titus 1: 5 & 7). As time passed, local variations developed; it is probable that in churches with a Jewish background the leaders would usually be called presbyters, while in those with a Gentile background they would be called bishops. In both situations, one presbyter or bishop would tend to stand out as the presiding figure. (1) In time, he came to be regarded as the bishop. The next step was to give him precedence over the other presbyter-bishops. Thus, there developed the episcopal system where the government of all the churches in a particular area was

entrusted to the bishop. For example, by 110 A.D. Ignatius was well-known as the bishop of Antioch.

This episcopal system spread over Europe. Many bishops became rich and powerful; some of them became prince-bishops with great influence in the governments of Europe. In the later Middle Ages, the system became distorted by worldliness and corruption. Many people began to read the Bible afresh and to study the early records of the Church; they were struck by the glaring contrast between the Church as they knew it and the Church in New Testament times. The winds of Reform began to blow.

John Calvin, the Genevan Reformer, was a thorough student of the Bible and he discerned four permanent types of officers in the New Testament pattern of the Church; these were Pastors, Doctors, Elders or Seniors, and Deacons. The Pastors are the equivalent of the New Testament Presbyters and, in Calvin's view, the words, Pastor, Presbyter, Minister, and Bishop are synonymous terms. (2) The Doctors have duties as teachers of the people and especially as tutors of students for the ministry; they are grouped with the Pastors. The Elders or Seniors are responsible members of the Church and of society elected to assist in the administration of the Church and in the discipline of members. The Deacons are to be responsible for the daily affairs of the Church and especially for the care of needy members.

Calvin embodied this pattern in his writings and in his practical plans for reform in Geneva. Students from other lands came to study in Geneva and they took Calvin's ideas back to their own lands and used them in the work of reform. His teaching that there is one ministerial order with a parity of ministers has been and remains a basic principle of the presbyterian system.

Episcopalians hold that the trend to government by a distinct order of bishops had apostolic approval and therefore this episcopal strand needs to be retained in any Church which claims descent from the early Church. This claim has been and remains an

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obstacle in the way of bringing episcopalian and presbyterian Churches into union.

Some Reformed Churches have adopted a system of government which includes a measure of regional leadership by bishops or moderators; the Reformed Church in Hungary has a system of area bishops with considerable administrative power, and the United Reformed Church of Great Britain has twelve provincial moderators, but these officers are still basically presbyters and all their duties can, if need arises, be exercised by any presbyter.

Dr Barkley points out that this basic single order of ministry was acknowledged by the Church of Rome at the Council of Trent which defined the order of presbyters or priests to be the one essential order, though within it bishops have an administrative precedence. This was based on the belief that there could be no greater position in the Church than to preside at the celebration of the Mass; it was also a means of enhancing the sole Magisterium of the Pope as Peter's successor. This elevation was accentuated by the proclamation of the dogma of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council in 1870. At the Second Vatican Council, the bishops have been elevated to a collegiate responsibility with the Pope for the government of the Church, though it was also made clear that the bishops have no authority apart from the Pope. The Tridentine view of the one ministerial order has not been cancelled, but the papal primacy and the authority which has gathered around the bishops are not in accord with the presbyterian stress upon the basic ministerial parity in the Church.

This stress upon one order of ministry was an important feature of the plans for the reform of the Church of Scotland. John Knox had imbibed many of Calvin's ideas during his sojourn in Geneva and he and his fellow-reformers embodied many of these ideas in their First Book of Discipline. There have been several major studies of the Scottish Reformation since Dr Barkley wrote his book. These studies have largely reinforced his conclusions.

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Professor J.K. Cameron produced a fine edition of the First Book of Discipline in 1960 when the Church of Scotland was celebrating the fourhundredth anniversary of the Reformation. As Dr Cameron shows in his Introduction and Commentary, the main aim was to provide a lawful ministry in the parishes. The plan also envisaged the selection of ten superintendents to oversee the work of the Church. A full complement was never appointed. Much of the local government of the Church was carried out by ministers commissioned by the General Assembly and by groups of ministers and elders acting as embryo presbyteries.

Some scholars have held that the provision for superintendents and the readiness of the General Assembly to use three conforming bishops from the old system in advancing the work of reform indicated that there was no inherent objection to an episcopal system. In their view, a form of episcopacy might have developed if hotter spirits such as Andrew Melville had not come from Geneva and propagated a thorough presbyterian system with no trace of episcopacy. (3)

This more radical position was embodied in the Second Book of Discipline which was issued in 1578. Dr James Kirk has prepared a fine edition of this work. He has shown that even in the period when the plans in the First book were being applied the superintendents and the conforming bishops acted as agents of the General Assembly. They were given specific commissions to carry out certain duties. Similar commissions were given to other ministers who had not the rank of superintendent or bishop. Dr Kirk has further elaborated his arguments in his recent important work, Patterns of Reform. (4) He has shown that there was a continuity of ministry from the pre-Reformation Church. Within two years the Church of Scotland had staffed about one quarter of the parishes with reformed ministers and most of these had been involved in the ministry in the pre-Reformation Church. Kirk rightly regards this as a remarkable achievement. Moreover, he has shown that the Second Book only elucidated what was already in the First Book; the two surviving compilers

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of the First Book, John Row and John Winram, were among the compilers of the Second Book.

In 1592, the scheme of the Second Book began to be implemented in the Church of Scotland. Later attempts by the Stuart kings to reimpose an episcopal system provoked fierce opposition and drove the Scots to deeper attachment to the presbyterian system. By the time the Scots came to settle in Ulster, the principles of church government by presbytery, the parity of ministers, and the continuity of a regularly-ordained ministry were firmly implanted in their minds.

The new Scottish landowners in Ulster secured the appointment of Scottish ministers and licentiates to minister in parish churches in their areas. Some bishops were willing to accommodate them on the ground that any Protestant minister was better than none. The bishops were often unable to provide their own ministers. These Scottish ministers persisted in their presbyterian ways and they did not use the Prayer Book. The uneasy compromise came to an end as soon as the government and the bishops were able to enforce their system. Presbyterians had then to maintain their witness in congregations outside the parish churches. Thus began the growth of presbyterian congregations which eventually became part of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

The early and uneasy use of parish churches by the presbyterian settlers has often led to wistful hopes for a renewal of an accord with the Church of Ireland. Many conversations have been held. There has been wide agreement on many matters of doctrine and government, but the insistence by the Church of Ireland upon some form of integration into an episcopal system has so far proved an insurmountable obstacle. Dr Barkley has been involved in these conversations; he knows their frustrations but he has constantly supported perseverance in conversations with the Church of Ireland and also with the Methodist Church. The General Assembly brought these tripartite talks to an end in 1988 and none are now in progress. In the 1990

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Assembly Archbishop Robin Eames made a moving plea for his Church and the Presbyterian Church to consider if the time was not ripe for fresh conversations on their mutual relations. Dr Barkley's stress upon ministerial parity still remains a firm feature of Irish Presbyterianism.

Ruling elders have been and are a vital part of the presbyterian system. Calvin held that in the New Testament provision was made for elders or seniors to share in the government of the Church, the precise warrant being found in Romans XII, 6-8 and 1 Corinthians XII, 28; among the gifts given to the Church were 'helpers and administrators'. Calvin's plan was drawn up to cover all the citizens of Geneva. They were assumed to be members of the Church and therefore subject to discipline; the elders had to be respected and honourable citizens. (5) Magistrates were often chosen to be the elders. Annual elections took place and the elders were often changed when there were changes in the city councils. The ministers in Geneva met together as the Venerable Company of Pastors; they were joined by the elders in a consistory which dealt with matters of government and discipline.

When the Westminster Assembly of Divines considered the place of elders in The Form of Presbyterian Church Government it also found the biblical warrant in the two texts used by Calvin; the Form declared that Christ 'had furnished some, besides the ministers of the Word, with gifts of government, with commission to execute the same'; they were to 'join with the minister in the government of the church'.

Irish Presbyterians drew largely upon the Westminster Form in their plans for the government of the Church. However, some Presbyterians have found a warrant for the eldership in 1 Timothy 5,17: 'Let the elders (presbyters) who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching.' They have seen in 'the elders who rule' a prototype of the present-day ruling elders. This view has also been fostered by the fact that in

the Irish system ruling elders, like ministers, are ordained by the presbytery. However, for many years, the practice was, as it still is in Scotland, for elders to be ordained by their own minister. Ordination by presbytery was introduced in Ireland to ensure that elders are orthodox in their belief.

As Dr Barkley points out, the ruling presbyters referred to in 1 Timothy were part of the one ministerial order and are not to be confused with the ruling elder as defined in the teaching of Calvin and in the Westminster Form and as found in most Reformed Churches to-day. Moreover, in the Irish Church, if an elder believes he or she has received a call to the ministry, he or she is trained and ordained to the ministry of Word and Sacraments. Dr Barkley emphasises that the ministry and the eldership are two distinct orders in the Church and that the clear basis in the reformed Churches is the call of the elders or seniors to be administrators and helpers (I Cor. XII, 28). As such, they have been and are a central element in Sessions, Presbyteries, and the General Assembly. Their advice and help have been of inestimable benefit to the ministers of the Church.

## II The Faith of the Church

Dr Barkley emphasises that the character of a Church is seen in its Faith as much as in its organisation. Indeed, one reason for the organisation is that the Faith may be proclaimed and sustained. Dr Barkley affirms that the Presbyterian Church confesses the historic Faith of the Church of Christ as set forth in the Creeds of the early Church, notably the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. He sets forth six fundamental articles of Faith: Belief in God, Belief in Jesus Christ: Belief in the Holy Spirit; Belief in the Church; Belief in the Forgiveness of sins; Belief in the Resurrection of the dead.

These pillars of the Faith were wrought into shape in the councils of the early Church. As the late Bishop Richard Hanson showed in his recent great work, The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God, the



Creeds highlighted the main thrust of the teaching of the Bible and defined the Church's understanding of God, the God who is, the God who speaks, the God who acts, God the holy and undivided Trinity. These main doctrines were also the framework around which the various Reformation confessions of Faith were built. John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion is an exposition of these main doctrines. So also are the Scots Confession (1560) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (1643). In the past century there have been many challenges to this form of Faith from philosophers, scientists and theologians and from those who see signs of the work of God in other religions. Dr Barkley holds that in the face of such challenges there is always a need to write fresh statements of Faith to bring out the teaching of the Bible and to guide the Church in its thought, worship and service. He said in his book that this was the principal need of Christian thinking in the twentieth century.

It would be rash to claim that this has been a feature of Irish Presbyterianism in the forty years since Dr Barkley wrote his book. In a sense, every sermon is or ought to be a fresh statement of the Faith of the Church. However, the most enduring sermons have been those which restated the Faith as it had been handed on from generation to generation.

Some attempted restatements of the Faith have been more notable for their demolition of tradition than for constructive teaching. Some have held that the creedal formulae with words such as Substance, Person and Trinity are abstractions based on Greek philosophy and far removed from the New Testament.

However, when philosophers of religion take the tradition seriously and seek to bring together the Bible, the traditional Creeds and the Christian experience throughout the centuries and to expound that tradition and apply it to the present climate of thought and belief, the result is still remarkably close to the pattern of the Creeds. This was true of figures such as Barth and Brunner. A notable recent example is the volume, Christian Theism by H.P. Owen,

sometime professor or the Philosophy of Religion in London University and still a minister of the Presbyterian Church of Wales.

It is also worth noting that when unions of Churches have taken place the statements of Faith drawn up to be the basis of union have been close to the pattern in the Creeds.

The Presbyterian Church in the United States of America brought together several branches of the presbyterian family and it declared that 'all interpretations of Scripture are to be tested for their coherence with the classic statements of the Christian Faith held by the Holy Catholic Church, by our confessional standards, and by the Reformed tradition which was the context in which these confessional standards were formed'. New insights of individuals are also to be tested by these standards, since 'the Church's consensus is likely to be more accurate than the opinions of individual persons'.(6) This Church has thus firmly adopted the Trinitarian position and holds the six points listed by Dr Barkley.

The United Reformed Church of Great Britain was formed in 1972 by the union of the Presbyterian Church of England the Congregational Church of England and Wales. Its basis of union affirmed that the united Church 'confesses the Faith of the Church Catholic in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit' and it takes the firm Calvinist position that 'the Word of God in the Old and New Testaments, discerned under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is the supreme authority for the faith and conduct of all God's people'.(7) Scholars in the United Reformed Church, such as Professor Colin Gunton of London University, have produced works which are statements of their faith and have influenced the outlook of the Church. They are generally marked by loyalty to the framework of the Faith set out in the Creeds and the Reformed Confessions.

In Irish Presbyterianism, there have been numerous writings expounding the Scriptures and applying their teaching to the life of the Church, the country and the world. These have helped readers to

grasp what it means to keep the Faith in the present time, but they have not been manifestos which have been or could be adopted by the General Assembly as a Creed of the Church. Controversy with other Churches and tensions with the Church of Rome have moved the Assembly on various occasions to restate its position but this has been done in terms of the historic Creeds and of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Controversy within the Church has also led to even firmer adherence to the traditional position. There has been a reluctance to embark upon doctrinal ventures. (8)

While the Church may not have lived up to Dr Barkley's hopes for fresh statements of its teaching, it has held to the main doctrines of the Faith. The Assembly has often impressed upon ministers the need to ensure that young people are instructed in the Faith and that all members are helped to have a clear and informed understanding of that Faith and of its consequences in daily life and conduct.

### III The Worship of the Church

Dr Barkley devotes a large section of his book to describing and explaining what happens when presbyterian congregations meet to worship God. This is proper since the worship of God is one of the main reasons for the Church's existence. It also arises from Dr Barkley's own specialism as a student of the forms of worship used in all the branches of the Church across the centuries.

Ministers are ordained to be ministers of the Word and Sacraments. The Word of God which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the Church's standard and rule of Faith and Practice. Therefore, the reading and the preaching of the Word by the ministers and the hearing of the Word by the people are basic elements in worship. It is preached in the faith that since God has provided and preserved the Bible in the Church he will by his Holy Spirit bring it home to the hearers and draw out an answering response in understanding, faith

and new obedience. This is the high ideal which preachers try and often fail to achieve, but, wonderful to relate, preaching has proved to be a means of grace across the centuries.

The preaching takes place within the setting of services with praise and prayer. Dr Barkley is confident that in the course of centuries spanning the worship of the Jewish Temple and Synagogues, the early forms of worship in the Church, and the forms in the Churches of the East and the West and in the Churches of the Reformation there are to be discerned certain elements which ought to have a place in any Christian service.

Calvin held that the ideal practice should be the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper.<sup>(9)</sup> Such a service would include two sections; the first would be for all citizens and would include prayer, praise, scripture reading, and the sermon; the second would be for the members of the Church who had been approved by the ministers and elders as eligible to partake of the Sacrament; this section would include the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, the reading of the scripture warrant for the Sacrament, the blessing and distribution of the elements of bread and wine, and a prayer of thanksgiving. Circumstances in Geneva prevented the fulfilment of this plan in full. People who had been accustomed to attend the Mass but only to communicate once or twice in a year were not ready to become weekly communicants at the reformed Communion service. The magistrates were also reluctant to introduce such an innovation. Calvin had to be content with an abbreviated service without the actual communion but the form of this service had the shape of a communion service. Communion services were awesome occasions sometimes only twice in the year. This became a common practice in Irish Presbyterianism and is still the practice in many congregations.

Dr Barkley would like to see more frequent observances of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. He also holds that in the services where there is no such observance and which are the great majority of services

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in Irish Presbyterianism, ministers have a duty to be mindful of the heritage of worship and prayer which has come to us from the past. Calvin and the early reformers were not afraid to use and commend forms of prayer and to draw upon the prayers from the past.

It is not to the disadvantage of any ministry if the minister be well-acquainted with the ways in which Christians have worshipped in the past. There are treasures in the prayers of the New Testament, in the prayers of such figures as Augustine, Chrysostom, Bonaventure, Luther, Calvin and Jeremy Taylor. More recent writers such as Barth and Brunner, Eric Milner White and George Macleod provide guidance in the ways of prayer. Few ministers are such geniuses that they can ignore the guidance of those who have put into words the sense of awe, wonder, dependence, unworthiness and thanks felt by Christians as they bow before their Creator and their Saviour. A dependence upon the immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit is indeed a prescription for martyrs and a strong resource in the changing scenes of life, but for those charged with the regular leading of worship it can be a prescription for repetition and for a concentration upon the minister's own concerns and a neglect of other features of the Faith and of the needs of the world.

Dr Barkley rightly points to the place in worship of a prayer of thanks for the faithful departed, yet this is probably one of the most neglected strands of worship in Irish Presbyterianism. Is it not a great presumption to think that we can afford to forget the lives and influence of those from the Apostles to our own parents, friends, teachers and ministers who preserved, taught and handed on the faith which has come to us? Is it not strange that a Church, which so stresses Evangelism and makes great efforts to lead people to choose the way which leads to heaven, should not remember regularly those who responded to that call and whom we hope are now in glory, and with whom we are at one as we lift up our heart in praise and thanks?

Similarly, a regular use of the great festivals of the Christian Year is commended by Dr Barkley. This

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brings before the congregation the great facts of the Faith, the Incarnation, the visit of the Wise Men, the entry into Jerusalem, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and the Ascension, the coming of the Holy Spirit, and the glory of God, the Holy Trinity. Some ministers have told me they have never ventured to preach on the doctrine of the Trinity. If it is not worth preaching about, is it worth making it one of the basic doctrines of the Church, as it is in Irish Presbyterianism?

Dr Barkley emphasises that it is a presbyterian privilege not to be bound to the letter of a prayer-book but to be free to make prayers the means of presenting to God our thanks, perplexities and needs. It is also our privilege to link ourselves to the continuing chain of prayer and praise which has never ceased across the centuries and is still continued as saints on earth in concert sing with those whose work is done.

#### IV Presbyterianism in the world

Dr Barkley draws his book to a close with reflections upon the place of the Reformed Faith in the modern world. So much has happened in the forty years since the book was written that what was modern in 1950 often seems to belong to a past age. Nevertheless, it is salutary to apply his measuring rod to the world of 1990. He says that the key feature of Reformed teaching is the sovereignty of God, the Creator and the Redeemer; there is a realism in the grasp of the human predicament and of the wonder of the salvation accomplished in Christ. God demands a total commitment to acknowledging his rule over individual, social and global life. Only so can life be what it is meant to be.

Dr Barkley was confident that many in the Reformed heritage were making that commitment and he ventured to state that 'the faith of Presbyterianism may be only entering, in the providence of God, upon its era of supreme influence and power for the glory of God'. Presbyterians have been taught from generation to generation the great truth that our chief end is 'to

glorify God and enjoy him for ever'. We are called to live within the good and righteous purposes of God. We are stewards of the gifts and powers God has given us. There is in the Reformed tradition a stress upon work and self-respect and upon helping others. Self-gratification and the exploitation of others was in 1950, according to Dr Barkley, rampant in individual and national spheres, and he held that until the sovereignty of God was recognised the curse of strife between people and nations would continue to dog the earth. Similarly, he held that the prevailing outlook of human beings was far removed from the Reformed conviction that life to be true life must be guided by reference to its author to whom each life rightly belongs. There are still flaws and vices rampant in human society and there are threats of war and ecological disasters, but the world still exists and there are signs of hope. The witness of the Churches of Eastern Europe, many of them in the Reformed tradition, has been a light in a troubled world.

It is, of course, important to be clear about the character of the God in whom we are called to believe. The multitudes of Islamic people believe with great fervour in Allah and they can accept the death of thousands in natural disasters and in 'holy wars' as the decree of Allah to whose will they must submit. Their intense and regular devotions often put Christians to shame. The Reformed Churches call people to trust the God whom they believe to be the one true God, the God whose character and purpose have been revealed in Jesus Christ.

This great affirmation of the being and character of God is shared by the other branches of the Church of Christ. When Dr Barkley wrote his book, the World Council of Churches had just been formed and he looked forward with hope to its influence in bringing the Churches of the World to grasp the unity they already had in their possession of the Bible and the common faith in 'one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit'. The Council had and has no legislative power over its member Churches but through its work they could be

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brought ' to minister the better together for the evangelisation of mankind and the supplying of the needs of humanity'. It was by no means perfect in all its ways but it has been a forum in which the Churches of the world have been able to think together what it means to be Christians in the world to-day and also to plan for Christian Aid to the needy people of the world. It is a forum where the voice of Irish Presbyterianism with its evangelical emphasis and its experience of living alongside the Irish Roman Catholic Church needs to be heard. It was a great disappointment to Dr Barkley when the General Assembly decided to cease to be a member of the Council. He was the first of the many who rose to record their dissent from the decision.

Irish Presbyterianism may at times have disappointed Dr Barkley by what he sees as its reluctance to be the best that it might be in its organisation, doctrine and worship, but he has been a loyal son of the Irish Presbyterian Church, born, baptised and nurtured within it, serving it as minister and professor and as a notable figure in Presbytery and in the General Assembly and its committees. He has taught not only his students but the whole Church much about its history, its doctrine, its social witness, its education of the young, and about its ministry and the eldership. There is in the Church and in other Churches a respect for his leadership and his perseverance in teaching all the Churches what he believes they need to know if they are to be true branches of the One Holy Catholic Church.

R Buick Knox

#### NOTES

1. R.B. Knox, A Pedigree for Irish Presbyterianism (The Presbyterian Historical Society of England, 1970)
2. J. Calvin, Institutes IV, iii, 8
3. e.g. Gordon Donaldson, Reform by Bishops (Edinburgh 1987)



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4. J. Kirk, Patterns of Reform: Continuity and Change in the Reformation Kirk (Edinburgh, 1989)
5. J. Calvin, ibid.
6. Presbyterian Understanding and Use of the Holy Scripture (Presbyterian Church in the United States, 1982)
7. D.M. Thompson (ed.), Stating the Gospel (Edinburgh, 1990), p.246
8. R.B. Knox, 'The Bible in Irish Presbyterianism', Irish Biblical Studies, Vol. 11, 171-185 & Vol. 12, 41-47.
9. J. Calvin, op.cit., IV, xvii, 44.

Rev. Dr. R. Buick Knox is retired Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Westminster College, Cambridge and is a life-long friend and colleague of Professor Barkley.