

KARL BARTH AND CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGY OF HISTORY

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“When Karl Barth decided to become a systematic theologian, Protestant historical scholarship lost a man who was potentially the greatest historian of doctrine since Adolf von Harnack.” With these words Jaroslav Pelikan, Roland Bainton’s successor as Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Yale, introduces the 1959 American edition of Barth’s *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl*.¹ Barth’s relevance to historical scholarship as well as to dogmatics is conceded by all who have even a nodding acquaintance with his writings. In the present essay an effort will be made to delineate the relationship (or lack of relationship) between theology and history in Barth’s thought, and to offer a critique which will sensitize readers to the danger zones in the Barthian approach to theology of history. No apologies will be made for the negatively critical tone of the paper: Barth is still very much alive, so Horace’s dictum, *De mortuis nihil nisi bonum*, does not apply; and, in my judgment at least, based upon attendance at the University of Chicago Barth Lectures in April, 1962, there is entirely too much uncritical laudation of Barth — laudation which is as much an embarrassment to him as to others. I have always believed, and still do believe, that out of the *rabies theologorum* truth will come if proper methodology is employed.

Christian theology has a twofold connection with history, as we see from the magnificent proclamation with which the Epistle to the Hebrews opens:

God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.

On the one hand, God works in general human history, for He “upholds all things by the word of His power”; on the other, He has become part of man’s story in a special way through prophetic revelation and through the atoning sacrifice of Himself in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Thus Christian theology of history must always speak both of total history and of *Heilsgeschichte*. We shall begin with an analysis of Barth’s approach to these two fundamental problem-areas, and on this basis we shall proceed to examine the implications of his position for evangelical theology in our day.

Barth and Total History

Pelikan, in his above-mentioned Introduction to Barth’s *Protestant Thought*, says of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*: “The many historical excursuses in *Barth’s Church Dogmatics*, dealing with the history of everything from the doctrine of the angels to the picture of Judas Iscariot, bear witness to the breadth of his erudition and to the depth of his understanding.” But in spite of these excursuses and in spite of its frequent references to the intimate connection between Christianity and history, Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* shows a remarkable indifference to man’s over-all temporal experience. The following passage well captures Barth’s attitude toward secular history:

The verdict that all have sinned certainly implies a verdict on that which is human history apart from the will and word and work of God . . . and a knowledge of the sin and guilt of man in the light of the word of grace of God implies a knowledge that this history is, in fact, grounded and determined by

the pride of man. . . . The history of the world which God made in Jesus Christ, and with a view to him, cannot cease to have its center and goal in him. But in the light of this goal and center God cannot say Yes but only No to its corruption. . . . What is the obviously outstanding feature of world history? . . . [It] is the all-conquering monotony — the monotony of the pride in which man has obviously always lived to his own detriment and that of his neighbor, from hoary antiquity and through the ebb and flow of his later progress and recession both as a whole and in detail, the pride in which he still lives . . . and will most certainly continue to do so till the end of time History . . . constantly re-enacts the little scene in the Garden of Eden.²

For Barth, “the obviously outstanding feature of world history” is its “all-conquering monotony.” But how obvious is obvious? My undergraduate professor of logic at Cornell, Max Black, whom we affectionately called “Black Max” — and for good reason — used to say that when the word “obvious” is employed, the point made is, nine times out of ten, not obvious at all. Certainly “all-conquering monotony” is not regarded at the “outstanding feature of world history” either by the biblical writers or by the Protestant Reformers. In the Scriptures and in the writings of the Reformers one finds, not a negative but a positive attitude to history, based upon the central conviction that total human history lies in the hands of God. Throughout the biblical revelation this conviction is writ large: “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.”³ History is eminently meaningful because God is the sovereign power in it and over it. Calvin well captures the spirit of the biblical approach to total history when he writes in the final chapter of the *Institutes*:

Here is displayed His wonderful goodness, and power, and providence; for sometimes He raises up some of His servants as public avengers, and arms them with His commission to punish unrighteous domination, and to deliver from their distressing calamities a people who have been unjustly oppressed: sometimes He accomplishes this end by the fury of men who meditate and attempt something altogether different. Thus He liberated the people of Israel from the tyranny of Pharaoh by Moses. . . . Thus He subdued the pride of Tyre by the Egyptians; the insolence of the Egyptians by the Assyrians; the haughtiness of the Assyrians by the Chaldeans; the confidence of Babylon by the Medes and Persians, after Cyrus had subjugated the Medes. The ingratitude of the kings of Israel and Judah, and their impious rebellion, notwithstanding His numerous favours, He repressed and punished, sometimes by the Assyrians, sometimes by the Babylonians. . . . Whatever opinion he formed of the acts of men, yet the Lord equally executed His work by them, when He broke the sanguinary sceptres of insolent kings.⁴

The contrast could hardly be greater between Barth’s characterization of history as “monotony” and Calvin’s scripturally-orientated view of history as the sphere in which the “wonderful goodness, and power, and providence” of God are dynamically displayed.

But how is such a contrast possible if, as it is commonly claimed, Barth has attempted above all to restore a biblical and Reformation theology to the Protestantism of the twentieth-century? The answer lies in the fact that Barth’s theology originated as an antithesis to the humanistic-liberal philosophical theologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; and, as is commonly the case with antitheses, the pendulum was allowed to swing too far in an opposite direction. The nineteenth century was a time of confident optimism in almost all spheres of life,

and particularly in philosophy of history. Hegel asserted that “world history is a rational process” moving through “world-historical” epochs towards the inevitable goal of Freedom.⁵ Marx and Engels set forth their extraordinary philosophy of history which claimed that progression in modes of production and exchange is basic to all of life, and will eventually usher in a millennial classless society.⁶ Except for Jakob Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian who predicted that “*Führers* and usurpers” would appear in the twentieth century,⁷ and Lord Acton, the editor of the original *Cambridge Modern History*, whose Catholicism led him to assert that in all human affairs “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely,”⁸ the last century manifested naive optimism with regard to man’s history. Theological liberalism grew from the seed-bed of this nineteenth-century optimism concerning human nature, and thus one finds a typical modernist such as Shailer Mathews of the University of Chicago asserting in his *Spiritual Interpretation of History* (1920) that “the conviction thrust upon us by history [is] that the Christian religion is in accord with the tendency of human progress.”⁹

Against these varieties of anthropocentric progressivism Barth reacted violently. His 1919 *Commentary on Romans* opposed with vehemence every attempt to center attention on man, his worth, or any alleged “progress” he could make toward a humanistic “kingdom of God on earth.” But in concentrating attention on the biblical affirmation of man’s radical need *coram Deo*, Barth lost interest in general history and in God’s creative and preserving work outside the sphere of *Heilsgeschichte*. The extent to which Barth reacted against any attempt to make general human history meaningful is nowhere better illustrated than in his conflict with Brunner over “natural revelation”¹⁰ and in his opposition to Werner Elert’s theology.¹¹ Brunner, on the basis of biblical statements such as Rom. 1:20, has trenchantly argued that there is a valid “natural theology,” in the sense that all created things objectively bear the divine stamp upon them. Barth, however, absolutely refuses to see an objective divine imprint; for him, revelatory faith, instead of making an existent imprint apparent, brings it about. Against Brunner¹² and Elert,¹³ Barth will have nothing to do with the Classical Protestant doctrine of the *Schöpfungsordnungen* (Orders of Creation), which sees all historical life — Christian and non-Christian — as governed by divinely-established structures (the family, the state, etc.). In opposing optimistic anthropologies and modernist theologies that disregarded the central Christian doctrine of redemption, Barth went to the other extreme of focusing virtually all of his attention on the Christ-event, thereby ignoring the creative action of God in general human history.

Thus Barth’s view of total history as “all-conquering monotony” relates to what critics have well called his “unitarianism of the Second Person” — his absorption of all theology into Christology. No one can deny that a christless modernism required a radical corrective, but two wrongs have never made a right. Particularly in our day, when the popularity of Toynbee’s *A Study of History* reveals the desire of non-Christian and Christian alike for a meaningful interpretation of general history, we must look beyond Barth for a full-orbed, biblically Trinitarian concept of man’s past.¹⁴

Barth and “Heilsgeschichte”

Barth’s concern is not with the alleged “monotony” of general history but with the significant events of salvation-history. Since God’s revelation of Himself in Jesus Christ is the focal point of Barth’s theological efforts, we must now see how he relates time and eternity in the drama of salvation.

In the *Commentary on Romans* one encounters a remarkable passage which serves as a key to Barth's theology of history as it applies to the plan of redemption:

The entrance of sin into the world through Adam is in no strict sense an historical or psychological happening. The doctrine of Original Sin, as it has been generally understood in the West, would not have been to Paul an "attractive hypothesis" (Lietzmann); it would have been just one of the many historical and psychological falsifications of his meaning. The sin which entered the world through Adam is, like the righteousness manifested to the world in Christ, timeless and transcendental.¹⁵

To Barth, the fall into sin and the redemption from sin must be regarded, not from the standpoint of *Historie* (i.e., not as facts capable of discovery by a neutral historical investigator) but from the viewpoint of *Geschichte* (i.e., as revelational events, which can never be identified with *Historie* as such). The events of salvation-history always have a hiddenness about them that eludes the "objective" historian. Thus Barth never tires of condemning the theologians of Protestant Orthodoxy for asserting that revelation took place directly in history — that Adam fell in history, that Christ's redemptive act was an historical event in the full sense of the term, that the historic Scriptures are literatim revelation. The Orthodox made the tragic error, according to Barth, of pointing to history and saying, "There is revelation" — an "es gibt" which is in the final analysis "profane."¹⁶ When we speak theologically, cautions Barth, "historical does not mean fixable as historical or fixed as historical. Historical does not therefore have its usual meaning of 'historical.'¹⁷

But what about Barth's opposition to Bultmann, as expressed in his 1952 critique of the latter? Is it not true that Barth strongly defends the facticity of the resurrection over against Bultmann's demythologizations?¹⁸ Cornelius Van Til, in his latest book, *Christianity and Barthianism*, correctly sees the fallacy in this line of argumentation:

What Barth considers to be the objective basis for the faith is found in *his* Christ, and in the resurrection of *his* Christ. And *this* resurrection of *this* Christ does not follow upon his death as one event in time follows another . . . On Barth's view, there would be no true objectivity for the gospel message if the resurrection were directly identified with a fact of history following upon the death of Christ as another fact of history, for then the revelation of God in the resurrection would no longer be divine revelation. Then revelation no longer would be *hidden* as well as revealed. Therewith all the evils of a natural theology and of a self-enclosed anthropology would have returned. If Barth's idea of the objectivity of the gospel is to be maintained, then, on his own view, that of the Reformation must be rejected. Barth answers Bultmann, as he answered Romanism and all others, in terms of his Christ-Event, and this answer is based on a purely subjective foundation. We cannot walk down this incline of subjectivism for some distance and then arbitrarily stop. Bultmann and Barth stand together in their common opposition to the gospel of grace as founded on the Christ of the Scriptures. We dare not follow Barth any more than we dare follow Bultmann.¹⁹

These are exceedingly strong words, and Van Til's evaluation of Barth has deeply troubled many evangelicals of our day. A prime example is Edward John Carnell, who wrote following the Barth Lectures at Chicago: "I felt actual physical pain when I read in *Time* magazine that Cornelius Van Til, one of my former professors, had said that Barthianism is more hostile to the Reformers than is Roman

Catholicism. I propose that Van Til ask God to forgive him for such an irresponsible judgment."²⁰ But how "irresponsible" is Van Til's judgment, in fact? The essence of the Christian message is that ο λογος σαρ εγενετο (Jn. 1:14) — *historical* flesh is meant — and that He actually died and factually rose on the third day. The New Testament writers seem to go out of their way to assert the full facticity of the gospel events: John says that the Apostolic church heard, saw with its eyes, and handled with its hands the Word of life (I Jn. 1:1), and he climaxes his Gospel with the "doubting Thomas" incident in which Thomas affirms the Deity of Christ after factually encountering Him risen from the dead. Luke claims that his record of Christ is based upon the accounts of eyewitnesses (Lk. 1:2), and he goes to the trouble of noting that Jesus demonstrated the corporeality of His resurrection by eating before the eyes of His disciples, who had mistakenly taken Him for a ghost (Lk. 24:36-43). And Paul rested the entire truth of Christianity on the facticity of the resurrection, affirming that over five hundred people had seen the risen Christ (I Cor. 15:4-6). The Pauline assertion that Christ "was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4:25) must mean, if it means anything, that apart from a truly historical, historisch (not merely *geschichtlich*) death and resurrection, we would still be in our sins, subject to God's wrath. Moreover, in light of the Adam-Christ parallel in Rom. 5 the factual historicity of Adam's fall is likewise essential to the Christian message.²¹ Barth's denial of the objective existence of evil²² certainly connects with his unhistorical view of the fall; and where the human disease is not objectively identifiable, neither can the divine remedy have objective reality.²³

Thus we should perhaps not be too quick to condemn Van Til's evaluation of Barth; perhaps he has seen more clearly than others the implications of Barth's separation of history and theology. The great Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield has said: "It would be a dangerous error to imagine that the characteristics of an historical religion would be maintained if the Christ of the theologians were divorced from the Jesus of history."²⁴ In Barth's theology of history just such a divorce has taken place.

Depth Analysis

We have found Barth's theology of history wanting both in the realm of general historical interpretation and in the sphere of *Heilsgeschichte*. But how can this be, when Barth again and again states his desire to repristiniate both the biblical writers and the Reformers? A motivational factor is evidently at work which we have not yet considered.

This factor is suggested in Barth's exceedingly strange and complex book, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum*, which purports to rescue Anselm's so-called "ontological" proof of the existence of God from the misinterpretations put upon it by critics through the centuries. In fact, the resultant commentary gives the reader far more Barth than Anselm; but this need not concern us here. What does concern us is the conception of theology that Barth sets forth by way of Anselm. At the end of this book, Barth summarizes as follows:

The Proof as Anselm wanted to conduct it and had to conduct it is finished. He himself reminds us again of what he understands by proof. Not a science that can be unravelled by the Church's faith and that establishes the Church's faith in a source outside of itself. It is a question of theology. It is a question of the proof of faith by faith which was already established in itself without proof.²⁵

Here we have a statement of one of the most central principles of Barth's theology: that theology is an autonomous realm in the sense that no bridge exists between it and other realms of human knowledge or experience. Christianity can have no apologetic, for an apologetic would remove the "hiddenness" of revelation. Thus theology must be distinguished from history, for history is not hidden, but open to investigation. In Bultmann's "circularity" principle we see this same approach made even more explicit;²⁶ and when Bultmann relativizes and existentializes both general history (by saying that "always in your present lies the meaning in history"²⁷ and *Heilsgeschichte* (by saying that "Jesus rose in the kerygma"²⁸), he is simply carrying Barth's position to its appropriate conclusion. A dualism between earth and heaven — between history and theology — between Jesus and the Christ — between the Bible and Revelation — becomes essential; and with it, inevitably, comes a denial of Incarnation, the Word actually made flesh.

But why this preoccupation with an alleged "hiddenness" of revelation? We have seen that the biblical writers go to the greatest length to declare the *openness* of the revelation given by God through the prophets and His Son. Indeed, the declaration of Paul before Agrippa could be taken as the theme of the Apostolic preaching: "This thing was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26). The Barthian concentration on "hiddenness," with its resultant dualism, stems, I believe, from fear — fear of intellectual attack from the steadily growing "post-Christian" forces of our day. Barth is intensely aware of the victories of science over traditional theology in the last two centuries,²⁹ and he is unable to reject the higher-critical revisionism which has conditioned virtually all of contemporary biblical scholarship. He regards the Reformation identification of *Historie* with *Geschichte* as hopelessly pre-Kantian; to maintain this identification today, he feels, is to invite the decimation of the Christian faith by its critics.

How then does Barth deal with the unbeliever? In *No!* he says that experience has led him to treat "unbelievers" (the quotation marks around "unbelievers" are his) "as if their rejection of 'Christianity' was not to be taken seriously."³⁰ Barth makes the same point in his work on Anselm: "Perhaps Anselm did not know any other way of speaking of the Christian *Credo* except by addressing the sinner as one who had not sinned, the non-Christian as a Christian, the unbeliever as believer, on the basis of the great 'as if' which is really not an 'as if' at all, but which at all times has been the final and decisive means whereby the believer could speak to the unbeliever."³¹ Barth's fear of being unable to defend the Christian revelation historically has thus led him to the point where, ostrich-like, he ignores the existence of unbelief and denies the ontological existence of evil; he merely proclaims a "transhistorical" gospel to those who — even though they vehemently deny it — are "believers" already. To be sure, Barth has removed the Christian faith from criticism and from the necessity of apologia — but at a frightful cost — at the cost of the Incarnation which lies at its very center, at the cost of the realistic, biblical doctrine of sin, and at the cost of any meaningful attempt to relate the gospel to general human history. He has turned the historic Christian faith into a timeless, unsupported religion of the order of Buddhism, Hinduism, and their theosophical counterparts.

And, ironically, the reaction of the unbeliever has been exactly the opposite of what Barthianism claims it should be. Let us hear the recent evaluation by the Jewish scholar Samuel Sandmel, in his article, "The Evasions of Modern Theology," in the Phi Beta Kappa journal, *The American Scholar*:

In the Bible there is set forth on many, many pages the conviction that God is revealed in history. The Bible knows nothing of trans-history, and, indeed,

the very idea is one hundred and eighty degrees removed from what the Bible says. It is the shabbiest kind of learning that dares to call trans-history biblical. And since the word is mongrel, for *trans* is Latin and *history* is Greek, a supposedly better term, *metahistory*, is offered. It too is not biblical. Is trans-history or metahistory an explanation, or is it an evasion? . . . Does the modern theologian enter the arena of the intellectual combat with the secular historian? Is he grappling with a genuine issue, and setting it into a convincing array of ideas and propositions? Or does he simply abandon the field to his adversary? In my judgment the modern theologian is guilty of evasion. And, I would add, the theologian is at this point throwing away even the bare possibility of communicating with the layman, for to most of us the word history has had a particular import; the word trans-history seems to me to be more a barrier to, than a vehicle of, communication.³²

Clearly the Barthian theology has sold its birthright for a mess of pottage when it has lost both the historical center of the Christian faith and the ability to convey a meaningful gospel to the unbeliever of our day. History can be removed from Christian theology only by the total destruction of theology itself.

The Problem in Evangelical Circles

At this point those of us who regard ourselves as "evangelicals" no doubt breathe a sigh of relief, and thank God that we are "not as other men are, dualists, metahistoricizers, opponents of the biblical apologetic — or even as this Karl Barth." But is this really the case? Has Barth's influence passed us by? I do not believe so, and I shall present some brief but sobering examples of the ease with which we uncautiously slip into the Barthian methodology.

First, we have found that Barth refuses to see meaning in general human history — that he tends to ignore the creative activity of God throughout the history of mankind. This hesitancy to apply the biblical message to total history is due, we have suggested, not only to the Barthian reaction to the progressivistic-optimistic philosophies of history characteristic of modernism, but also to a fear of subjecting the Christian faith to secular criticism. But what about contemporary evangelicals? Have we produced a twentieth-century equivalent of Augustine's *City of God*? or an interpretation of general history comparable to Toynbee's? The bibliography to the chapter on "Philosophy of History" by Earl E. Cairns in *Contemporary Evangelical Thought* lists five authors: John Baillie, Herbert Butterfield, Otto Piper, Eric C. Rust, and Toynbee, and a note informs us: "In lieu of a satisfactory Evangelical bibliography in Philosophy of History, the above volumes, representative of diverse viewpoints, are included to suggest important contemporary literature in this field."³³

Moreover, one finds in such contemporary evangelical writers as Bernard Ramm careful strictures of the following kind: "Concerning the moral interpretation of secular history (or even church history) the Christian walks the same tightrope of probability that the secular historian does."³⁴ This statement has an element of truth in it, surely, since no Christian historian is God, but are we not too quick in acknowledging our fallibility and too slow in affirming the absolute relevance of biblical truth to the understanding of history? I think Ramm totally in error when he says that "the reality of historical revelation does not put the Christian in a superior position to write the philosophy of history";³⁵ the Christian historian is in fact the *only* historian who *can* write the philosophy of history, because only he has a revelational perspective which is not conditioned by his own finite stance in history. In my book, *The Shape of the Past*, I have pointed out that secular his-

toriography in our day has reached a philosophical impasse in at least four respects: (1) it is unable to arrive at a satisfactory and defensible conception of human nature; (2) it is unable, for want of an absolute axiology, to determine levels of significance among historical events; (3) it is unable to set out patterns of total history, since neither the origin nor the goal of history is known; and (4) it is unable, having no doctrine of regeneration, to tell the historian how to put into practice Croce and Collingwood's paramount dictum that the historian must re-experience the past, for re-experiencing requires a radical change in the egocentric personality of the historian, who tends to read his own personality back into the past instead of "losing himself" in order to "find" the people of past ages. Only the Christian faith provides a way out of this fourfold historiographical graveyard, for only Christianity offers the historian (1) a reliable, absolute conception of human nature, (2) a criterion of historical importance (the Cross), (3) a knowledge of the origin and goal of history, and (4) a means of regeneration for the historian himself. Thus evangelicals have a holy responsibility to lead present-day historiography out of its naturalistic blind alley; and if they neglect this task they are like the unheeding priest and Levite who "passed by on the other side" when radical need cried out to them on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho.

In reviewing the Jesuit M. C. D'Arcy's *Meaning and Matter of History: A Christian View*, E. Harris Harbison of Princeton has noted that D'Arcy's cautious willingness merely to use Christian insights in "enlarging our vision of human efforts and human achievements" is a far cry from Augustine's forthright vindication of God's action in bringing about Rome's collapse.³⁶ Perhaps we deserve this same criticism; and I suggest that the Barthian fear of becoming vulnerable to the world's attacks lies at the root. Whenever we hesitate to interpret general history by the revelational insights of Scripture — for fear of subjecting the faith to attack — we travel along the Barthian road.

"Yet certainly there is no metahistoricizing of divine revelation among evangelicals," we say with confidence. This confidence may waver a bit, however, in contact with Ramm's above-quoted book, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, where the author again and again lashes out against a type he calls "the rationalistic fundamentalist"; this is the person who "wants a Bible that is better than the famous Cambridge historical series" — who "wants the kind of rational religious certainty which can emerge from solid, hard, historical factuality."³⁷ For Ramm, "only if there were no presence of the Holy Spirit or of God or of the community of the covenant could we think of historical revelation in terms of documented court evidence."³⁸ In effect, Ramm is here arguing a "circularity" principle which has more than a little in common with Barth and Bultmann, for he is saying that the Scripture does not have demonstrable reality as historical revelation apart from the covenantal community and the *testimonium* (internal witness) of the Spirit. In actuality, however, the reality of historical revelation in Scripture is fully objective — and the Spirit and the community *bear witness* to this fact; they do not in any sense bring it about.

Even more disturbing is the approach to the resurrection of Christ taken by George Eldon Ladd in a recent issue of the new theological journal *Dialog*.³⁹ Professor Ladd was requested by the editor of *Dialog* to provide an "evangelical" comment on the previous issue of the magazine, which was devoted to the general subject of "Death and Resurrection." Articles in that issue of *Dialog* (e.g., Robert Scharlemann's "Shadow on the Tomb" and Roy A. Harrisville's "Resurrection and Historical Method") parroted the Barthian metahistorical approach to the resur-

rection — refusing to accept the resurrection as objective *Historie*. I am myself personally acquainted with the editor of *Dialog*, and I know him to be fully committed to the metahistorical approach. He told me that he had been surprised to find Professor Ladd's contribution in full accord with the thrust of the resurrection issue of *Dialog*. I too was surprised — and pained. Ladd writes:

The New Testament does not share the modern idea of history, and it does not represent the resurrection of Jesus as an "historical" event in the modern critical sense of this word. It was an event without historical cause. . . . The resurrection is also without historical analogy. . . . The basic problem for the modern theologian is this. Shall we insist upon a definition of history broad enough to include such supra-historical events as the resurrection; or shall we accept the modern view of history as a working method but insist that there is a dimension within history which transcends historical control? The latter is the method of Karl Barth; and . . . it appears to be the only adequate explanation which satisfies the data of redemptive history.

Here Dr. Ladd makes Barth's very mistake: He creates a metahistorical category of interpretation for the resurrection in order to preserve its theological truth from historical criticism. What he should do is to distinguish between truly empirical historical method (which simply collects and analyzes the data of the past — and never excludes phenomena because causal linkages cannot be established or because of the uniqueness which is, after all, characteristic of all historical events), and the Historicism which grew out of nineteenth-century historical Positivism and which passes for "objective, critical history" in Barthian circles today.⁴⁰ Historicism refuses to regard the resurrection as history because of the absence of human causation and because of its uniqueness; but this is no more than the result of rationalistic presuppositionalism concerning the nature of the universe (all events must have natural causes; all events must be analogously related to other events). Ladd accomplishes nothing by appealing, à la Barth, to a "supra-history," for, as we have seen, this inevitably weakens the central Christian truth of Incarnation, and, in any case, metahistory has no meaning to the non-Christian since it is beyond the possibility of investigation.

The weakness in the "mediating evangelical" approach here described is particularly evident in Ramm's summary assertion that "a fanatical 'objectivizing' of Scripture can be as detrimental to its proper understanding as a frightful 'subjectivizing'."⁴¹ In point of fact, *there are no degrees of objectivity*; either Scripture and the events of salvation-history recorded in it are objective or they are not. If they are not, then we must move beyond Barth's ambiguous, intermediate position to Bultmann's mythical approach (since Barthian "metahistory" is not amenable to any adequate epistemological test); but if the events of *Heilsgeschichte* are objective (as Ramm and Ladd of course believe), then we must cease to speak in terms of metahistory and courageously use the language of objective facticity. What are we afraid of? The events of *Heilsgeschichte* will not dissolve under the searchlight of proper historical investigation. Our responsibility is to make sure that in the use of historical method scientific, historicistic presuppositions (e.g., Bultmann's *a priori* — completely inappropriate in an age of Einsteinian relativity — that historical explanation must always take place within the unbroken nexus of "natural" causes) are not surreptitiously smuggled into the picture disguised as objective historical method and allowed to determine the results of the investigation.

Conclusion

We must face the issue squarely: there is no *tertium quid*; either the events of *Heilsgeschichte*, such as the resurrection, are in the full sense *Historie* or they are

not. If they are not, then of course they are not subject to attack (as is likewise the case with the timeless doctrines of Eastern mysticism, such as *karma*), but then the affirmation that "the Word became flesh" has only mythical significance, and we are still in our sins. But if the gospel events are *Historie*, then we must acknowledge the unpleasant fact that they must be defended as such against the barbs of a hostile world. Doubtless, when, like Paul, we proclaim the historical facticity of the resurrection and other saving-events, some will mock, and others will say, "We will hear thee again of this matter" (Acts 17:31-32), but God help us if in our darkling age we do not proclaim the incarnational truths of the faith once delivered — historically — to the saints.

And if I am right that it is fear of criticism which leads to the Barthian divorce between theology and history and to all its attendant evils? Then perhaps even a pagan can give us needed advice. Pericles, in his magnificent Oration on the Athenian Dead, told his countrymen that their political freedom depended squarely upon their courage: "We rely, not on secret weapons, but on our own real courage Make up your minds that . . . freedom depends on being courageous."⁴² Not only political freedom rests on courage; so also does spiritual freedom. If we would introduce a sin-enslaved post-Christian age to freedom in Christ, we must not rely upon the "secret weapons" of metahistory, but on the courage to reiterate and defend in our day the Apostolic (and Reformation) proclamation:

Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles. And as he thus spake for himself, Festus said with a loud voice, Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad. But he said, I am not mad, most noble Festus; but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner.

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FOOTNOTES

1. A translation of eleven chapters of *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*.
2. *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, pp. 505-508. Page references to the *Church Dogmatics* apply to the authorized English translation.
3. Ps. 24:1; also: Ex. 9:29, Deut. 10:14; I Cor. 10:26.
4. *Institutes*, IV xx, 30-31.
5. See Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, and cf. Jean Hyppolite, *Introduction a la philosophie de l'histoire de Hegel* (Paris: Marcel Riviere, 1948).
6. Cf. Donald C. Masters, *The Christian Idea of History*, intro. John Warwick Montgomery (Waterloo, Ont.: Waterloo Lutheran University, 1962), pp. 19-21.
7. Burckhardt, *Briefe*, ed. F. Kaphahn (Leipzig, 1935), correspondence with F. von Preen.
8. Cf. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Lord Acton: A Study in Conscience and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press Phoenix Books, 1962), pp. 161 ff.
9. Shailer Mathews, *The Spiritual Interpretation of History* (4th ed.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920), p. 216.
10. See *Natural Theology: Comprising "Nature and Grace" by Professor Dr. Emil Brunner and the Reply "No!" by Dr. Karl Barth*, trans. Peter Fraenkel (London: Bles, 1946).
11. See Elert's *The Structure of Lutheranism*, Vol. I, trans. W. A. Hansen (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia, 1962), p. xxiii and *passim*.
12. Emil Brunner, *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1947).
13. Werner Elert, *The Christian Ethos*, trans. C. J. Schindler (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957).
14. I am attempting such an interpretation in my series, "History in Christian Perspective," the first volume of which has already appeared under the title, *The Shape of the Past: An Introduction to Philosophical Historiography* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Edwards Bros., 1962).

15. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 171.
16. *Church Dogmatics*, I/1, p. 44.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 373.
18. Cf. Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in Conflict: Nygren — Barth — Bultmann*, trans. E. H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), pp. 137 ff.
19. Cornelius Van Til, *Christianity and Barthianism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1962), pp. 444-45.
20. Edward John Carnell, "Barth As Inconsistent Evangelical," *Christian Century*, LXXIX (June 6, 1962), 714.
21. See my article, "Some Comments on Paul's Use of Genesis in his Epistle to the Romans," *Evangelical Theological Society Bulletin*, IV (April, 1961), 4-11.
22. Wingren, *op. cit.*, pp. 117 ff. Cf. my report, "Barth in Chicago: Kerygmatic Strength and Epistemological Weakness," *Dialog: A Journal of Theology*, I (Autumn, 1962), 56-57.
23. See further on Barth's anti-and meta-historical tendencies, Walter Kohler's *Historie und Metahistorie in der Kirchengeschichte* (1930), and Robert P. Lightner, *Neo-evangelicalism* (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1961), p. 117.
24. Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: Collins Fontana Books, 1957), p. 168.
25. Barth, *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum; Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme*, trans. I. W. Robertson (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1960), p. 170.
26. On Bultmann's "circularity" principle, see Armin Henry Limper, "Hermeneutics and Eschatology: Rudolf Bultmann's Interpretation of John, Chapters 13-17" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1960).
27. Rudolf Bultmann, *The Presence of Eternity: History and Eschatology; the Gifford Lectures 1955* (New York: Harper, 1957), p. 155.
28. Rudolf Bultmann, *Das Verhaltnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus* (2nd ed.; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1961), p. 27.
29. Cf. Andrew Dickson White's *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom*.
30. *Natural Theology* (*op. cit.*), p. 127.
31. Barth, *Anselm*, p. 71.
32. *The American Scholar*, XXX (Summer, 1961), 377.
33. *Contemporary Evangelical Thought*, ed. Carl F. H. Henry (Great Neck, N.Y.: Channel Press, 1957), p. 315.
34. Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 98.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
36. E. Harris Harbison, Review of *The Meaning and Matter of History: A Christian View* by M. C. D'Arcy, *History and Theory*, I (1960), 86-89.
37. Ramm, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
38. *Ibid.* See also Ramm's *The Witness of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1960), *passim*.
39. George Eldon Ladd, "The Resurrection and History," *Dialog*, I (Autumn, 1962), 55-56.
40. Cf. the parallel distinction between true scientific method and scientific Positivism or Scientism (see my *Shape of the Past*, pp. 141, 265-68).
41. Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, *loc. cit.*
42. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1954), pp. 118, 121.