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Seeds of Ambivalence Sown: Barth's Use of Calvin in *Der Römerbrief II* (1922)

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Key words: Bible; theology; Calvin; Barth; Romans

I. Introduction

After his break with Liberalism around 1915, Barth endeavored to retrieve the biblical insight of Reformation theology and to reapply it to the modern Christian theology. For this reason, he has been called a new Reformation theologian or a neo-orthodox theologian.¹ Nonetheless, it is critical to appreciate that, although Barth inherited the fundamental principles of Reformation theology, far from being a servile follower of the Reformers he stands out as a constructive critic of the Reformation tradition and a challenging innovator over against it. He did not receive the Reformation heritage without serious critiques and reservations, but rather he radically reformulated Reformed theology in terms of its methodology as well as its doctrinal substance through his christocentric and dialectical theological project.

Numerous scholars, primarily German and Scandinavian Lutherans, have concentrated their energy on examining the theological relationship of Martin Luther and Karl Barth. As a result, the character of their relationship seems to be widely understood. In stark contrast, however, there is no comprehensive work dealing with the theological relationship between Calvin and Barth other than a

1 Bruce L. McCormack has seriously challenged this traditional way of viewing Barth as a neo-orthodox and analogical theologian in his recent book *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

few monographs and articles on several specific topics and a special period.² Moreover, there has been no scholarly work that deals with Calvin's impact on the theological beginning of Barth and the origin of his break with Liberalism.

For example, in discussing the issue of Barth's theological beginnings,³ Eberhard Jüngel never mentions Calvin's role in Barth's determination to break with Liberal theology and his endeavor to establish a new model for Reformed theology. He writes as if Calvin's role was not worth mentioning.⁴ Furthermore, Bruce L. McCormack does not see Calvin's significance in Barth's theological beginnings and development in his otherwise considerably insightful work, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*. He attributes only a negligible and subsidiary role to Calvin in the genetic development of Barth's theology. Thomas F. Torrance is no exception. Although elsewhere he acknowledges Calvin's influence, in his book, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology 1910-1931*, he fails to examine the significance of Calvin's role in Barth's theological development. He simply mentions Calvin in several places along with other figures who made an impact upon Barth.⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar's book, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, shows the same tendency in taking no account of Calvin's critical role in the genesis and development of Barth's new theology.⁶

Barth's relationship to Calvin and Calvin's role in Barth's theology have been neglected for too long without any legitimate reason. Barth held Calvin and his theology in high regard, with Calvin being one of the most frequent dialogue partners of Barth in his theologi-

2 Eric Dean, 'Relation between Scripture and Tradition: Theoretical Statements by Calvin and Barth', *Encounter* 23 (1962) 277-91; Walter Kreck, 'Johannes Calvin und Karl Barth', in *Kirche Konfession Öcumene*. Fst. W. Niesel zum 70. Geburtstag (1973), 77-84; H. Scholl (ed.), *Karl Barth und Johannes Calvin: Karl Barths Göttinger Calvin-Vorlesung von 1922* (Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1995). Matthias Freudenberg has recently published a significant work on Barth's engagement with Reformed theology during his Göttingen period. See *Karl Barth und die reformierte Theologie: Die Auseinandersetzung mit Calvin, Zwingli und den reformierten Bekenntnisschriften während seiner Göttinger Lehrtätigkeit* (Neukirchener, 1997). See also my article, 'An Ambivalent Disciple: Karl Barth's Use of John Calvin in the Göttingen Dogmatics', *European Journal of Theology* 8:1 (1999), 61-78.

3 Eberhard Jüngel, 'Barth's Theological Beginnings', in *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, trans Garrett E. Paul (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 53-104.

4 In another article 'Barth's Life and Work', Jüngel mentions Calvin only once. *Ibid.*, 22-52.

5 Thomas F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology*, 1910-1931 (London, 1962).

6 H. U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth*, trans. E. T. Oakes (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992).

cal formulation and elaboration throughout his entire theological career from the early period of the 1910s — along with a deep feeling of frustration for what he saw as Calvin's failures and illegitimate arguments. Barth lived with Calvin's theology and paid close attention to Calvin for the entirety of his life. In particular, his 1922 Göttingen lectures on Calvin are an excellent and obvious example of the great importance of Calvin for him.⁷ Hence, for a correct and deep understanding of Barth's theology a comprehension of his relationship to Calvin and of Calvin's formative role in Barth's theological development is fundamental. Nevertheless, there has not yet been a comprehensive examination of the precise and full character of Calvin's influence and inspiration upon Barth and Barth's indebtedness to and interpretation of Calvin.

This paper attempts to fill the gap by exploring the character of the influence of Calvin on Barth by focusing on a theological analysis of Barth's use of Calvin's theological arguments for his own purposes in his second commentary on Romans. It will demonstrate that Barth made a careful and appreciative use of Calvin's exegetical and theological arguments for the construction of his own positions, although not without serious critiques and revolts. Hence, it will bring to light the fact that in *Der Römerbrief II* Barth already showed some seeds of his ambivalence toward and even revolt against Calvin, seeds that would be developed in a full-fledged manner in the later period of his theological work.

II. Background of Composition: Barth's Earlier Encounter with Calvin

Despite his earlier Liberal theological education, one of the most significant turning points in Barth's theological encounter with Calvin came when he began to work as an assistant pastor to the German Reformed congregation in Geneva from September 1909. The pastoral work required him to prepare sermons regularly and this led him to realise his unpreparedness and inadequacy as a preacher. Moreover, Barth had to preach sermons Sunday by Sunday in the very place where Calvin himself had preached in the sixteenth century. This reminded him of Calvin's preaching ministry and reforming work and made his sermon preparation more demanding. Eberhard Busch describes this situation dramatically as follows:

Barth's sermons were delivered in the most distinguished setting

7 Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, trans. G. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995; hereafter TC).

conceivable, 'in Calvin's very auditorium' and even 'in his pulpit,' 'next to St. Peter's cathedral'. Calvin had once delivered his lectures in the same room. However, 'I'm afraid that Calvin would hardly have been very pleased at the sermons which I preached in his pulpit then'.⁸

As Geoffrey Bromiley has stated, 'the pastorate in Geneva stirred Barth's interest in Calvin. It could hardly fail to do so when he found himself speaking from the very place where Calvin used to lecture.'⁹ In particular, the difficulties in his preparation of the regular sermons motivated him to gain considerable help from Calvin's *Institutes* and commentaries.

Hans Scholl agrees with Bromiley on the significance of this experience of Barth's:

'The idea of mounting the same rostrum as the reformer excited Barth, and during his Geneva years (up to 1911) he began to study the 1559 *Institutes* in depth. His letters¹⁰ from this period bear ample witness to this, as do his many margins in his copy of the *Institutes*, vol. II of the *Corpus Reformatorum* series. His lecture on the Christian faith and history (1910, published 1912) shows the impact of this reading.'¹¹

As Barth himself confessed looking back upon this period, 'it may have been the spirit of the place . . . which caused me to deepen the experience I had gained from reading Schleiermacher again and again by making considerable inroads into Calvin's *Institutes*'.¹² Eberhard Jüngel is of the same opinion that 'While Barth was in Geneva, his study of Calvin's *Institutes*, accompanied by another reading of Schleiermacher, issued in the 1910 lecture 'Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte' (The Christian Faith and History), in which he claimed to formulate the 'general problem of Christian theology'. In this essay, Barth called for further development of the Marburg theology'.¹³ Besides his pastoral experience, as Hans Scholl has noted, 'Barth became interested in Calvin on his own account in the fall of 1909 when the great commemoration of Calvin's birth in

8 *Ibid.*

9 *TC*, ix.

10 Barth, *Vorträge und kleinere Arbeiten 1909-1914*, vol. III of Gesamtausgabe (Zürich, 1993), 149-212.

11 *TC*, xiii. Commenting on Barth's theological thought and development manifested in Barth's article 'Der christliche Glaube und die Geschichte' (*Schweizerische Theologische Zeitschrift* 2, [1912], 1-18, 49-72), Hendrikus Berkhof states, 'The only new feature is the appeal to Calvin, who here appears explicitly alongside Luther as a herald of true religion. Obviously, during this period as assistant pastor in Geneva (in which he wrote the paper), Barth thoroughly studied the 'genius of the place' (*genius loci*)' in his *Two Hundred Years Theology: Report of a Personal Journey*, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 182.

12 Barth, 'Autobiographical sketch'.

13 Eberhard Jüngel, 'Barth's Life and Work' in *Karl Barth: A Theological Legacy*, 28.

1509 was held in Geneva.¹⁴

It is critical, however, to note here that although Barth began to be attracted to and study Calvin's theology by focusing on the *Institutes* and commentaries during this period, it did not lead him to convert to Calvinist theology and to abandon his advocacy of Herrmannian Liberalism but rather to appropriate and incorporate elements of Calvin's theology in order to reinforce his Liberal theological stance.

However, a more significant turning point came during his pastorate in Safenweil. As Thurneysen has demonstrated in his article on Barth's theological beginning, written for the celebration of Barth's 70th birthday, Barth frequently consulted Calvin's commentaries in the preparation for regular sermons:

Karl Barth as a country preacher took this office seriously and exercised it with a forcefulness and wholeness that was peculiar to him. He wrote his sermon Saturday by Saturday. . . . He had to recognize that this work cannot be done without making thorough use of the Bible commentaries, above all, those of the Reformers. . . . Karl Barth stands before us already in this early period as a reader and expositor of Scripture. . . . The books of the expositors from Calvin through biblicalists and all the way to the modern critical biblical interpretation lie open in his hands. Both then and now this has been the source from which his whole theology has come.¹⁵

This statement demonstrates that Calvin's commentaries took a central place in Barth's pastoral ministry as well as at the beginning of his serious theological engagement. It is plausible that Barth's study and reading of Calvin's *Institutes* and commentaries from his Geneva period onwards might make an impression and impact upon Barth's mind and his endeavor to incorporate Calvin's theological ideas in his sermons. In addition to his exegetical work for the preparation for sermons, his involvement in the socialist trade union movement markedly decreased Barth's interest in Liberal and academic theological study and led him to concentrate his energy on expounding Scripture for his ministry and personal theological engagement.¹⁶ And his sustained engagement with the biblical message through the meticulous work of exposition might have caused him to be awak-

14 TC, xiii.

15 Eduard Thurneysen, 'Die Anfänge Karl Barths Theologie der Frühzeit', *Antwort: Karl Barth Zum Siebzigsten Geburtstag am 10. Mai 1956* (Zürich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1956); ET *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914-25*, trans. J. D. Smart (London: Epworth Press, 1964), 12-13. In fact, Thurneysen's argument is firmly based on Barth's own testimony that the task of preaching stimulated him to abandon his teachers' theology and to seek a new theology. See Barth, 'Not und Verheissung der christlichen Verkündigung', in idem, *Das Wort Gottes und Die Theologie* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1925), 101-2.

16 *Ibid.*, 68-9.

ened from the deep slumber of Liberalism during this period.

After his break with Liberalism and discovering the 'strange new world within the Bible', Barth endeavored to re-read the Bible as the Word of God and this effort led him to write a commentary on the apostle Paul's epistle to the Romans from mid-July of 1916 onwards, which could be regarded as a product of his theological reflection and struggle for several years in Safenwil. It is crucial to note that in Barth's commentary on Romans one can discern that he repeatedly consulted and appealed to Calvin's theological thought for clear elucidation and cogent expression of his own ideas. For example, at the end of July of 1916 Barth wrote to Thurneysen:

Discovery of a gold mine: J. T. Beck!! As a biblical expositor he simply towers far above the rest of the company, also above Schlatter. . . . I came on the track of him through my work on Romans and will make use of him there along with the other commentators from Calvin to Tholuck and as far as Kutter's Righteousness, a whole cloud of witnesses!¹⁷

This passage provides a significant clue that Barth made use of Calvin's commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans in his work of exegesis during this period (1916-18). It is crucial to note here that Barth's interest in Calvin's theology had been increasingly intensified during this period of 1915-18 after his break with Liberal theology and along with his devotion to the preparation of sermons and the commentary on Romans.

Although the figure of Calvin did not occupy *the* most central place in Barth's theological thought in this period, it is the case that Calvin's theological and exegetical wisdom had a considerable influence upon Barth's theology. As Hans Scholl has argued, 'Barth began to use Calvin's commentaries regularly in sermon preparation. By 1919 he had certainly read Kampschulte¹⁸ and Stähelin,¹⁹ whom he quotes so often in these lectures, and in his 1919 and 1922 *Romans* he constantly consulted Calvin's 1539 commentary. Intensive preoccupation with Calvin thus helped to form his theology even before his switch to an academic career.'²⁰ In his Göttingen lectures on Calvin given later in summer 1922, Barth himself confessed his tremendous indebtedness to Calvin's commentaries for his theological work and biblical exegesis: 'Whenever I have myself consulted Calvin's commentaries for my own use, I have found pleasure in his distinctive

17 *Ibid.*, 38.

18 F. W. Kampschulte, *Johann Calvin*, vol. I (Leipzig, 1869), and vol. II, ed. W. Goetz (Leipzig, 1899).

19 E. Stähelin, *Johannes Calvins Leben und ausgewählte Schriften*, 2 vols. (Elberfeld, 1863).

20 TC, xiv.

combination of historical and pneumatic exegesis even when I have permitted myself to go my own way. His work not only provided an external model for my own special study of Romans but also laid a firm foundation for its content.²¹ This statement sheds crucial light upon the fact that Barth incorporated and adopted Calvin's exegetical wisdom for his own purpose in writing his commentary on Romans in terms of both its formal structure and substantial content. In fact, as one can discern clearly, Barth cites numerous passages from Calvin's commentary for more cogent explication of the meaning of biblical text. With the help of Calvin and others Barth himself became a historical and pneumatic exegete during this period.

III. Theological Analysis of Barth's Use of Calvin in *Der Römerbrief II* (1922)

While preparing the second commentary on Romans, Barth concentrated his energy on studying Calvin's commentary on Romans around 1920.²² For this reason, it is easy to notice Barth's indebtedness to Calvin from *Der Römerbrief II* (1922).²³ In particular, Barth repeatedly mentioned Calvin as a great model exegete of Scripture in the prefaces to the several editions of *Der Römerbrief II*. For example, in the preface to the second edition (*Romans II*) written in Safenwil in September 1921 Barth depicted Calvin as a systematic interpreter of Scripture. 'By genuine understanding and interpretation I mean that creative energy which Luther exercised with intuitive certainty in his exegesis; which underlies the systematic interpretation of Calvin.'²⁴ He went on comparing Calvin with other exegetes as follows:

Place the work of Jülicher side by side with that of Calvin: how energetically Calvin, having first established what stands in the text, sets himself to re-think the whole material and to wrestle with it, till the walls which separate the sixteenth century from the first become transparent! . . . The conversation between the original record and reader moves round the subject-matter, until a distinction between yesterday and today becomes impossible. If a man persuades himself that Calvin's method can be dismissed with the old-fashioned motto, 'The Compulsion of Inspiration', he betrays himself as one who has never worked upon the interpretation of Scripture.²⁵

21 *Ibid.*, 393-3.

22 Eberhard Busch, *op. cit.*, 114. Busch states, 'Barth spent a good deal of time studying Calvin'.

23 *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 12.

24 Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 7.

25 *Ibid.*

This is a significant statement demonstrating the fact that in writing the second commentary on Romans Barth was attempting to follow Calvin's manner of biblical interpretation as the most exemplary one — even though it still remains open whether Barth was faithful to what he intended to do. Considering that he was confirming his break with the Liberal school initiated by *Der Römerbrief I* and beginning a new start for his theological career in writing *Der Römerbrief II*, the fact that the figure of Calvin lay at the center of Barth's new starting-point for his theological work is remarkable.

Furthermore, in the preface to the third edition of *Der Römerbrief II*, written in Göttingen in July 1922, Barth reaffirmed his acceptance of Calvin's doctrine of inspiration of Scripture and its implications for exegesis:

But from the preface to the first edition onwards, I have never attempted to conceal the fact that my manner of interpretation has certain affinities with the old doctrine of Verbal Inspiration. As expounded by Calvin, the doctrine seems to me at least worthy of careful consideration as capable of leading to spiritual apprehension, and I have already made it clear how I have, in fact, made use of it.²⁶

It is clear from these remarks that Calvin's exegetical methodology made an indelible impact upon Barth's manner of scriptural exposition, in particular, upon his endeavor to penetrate into the real spiritual meaning of the biblical passage.

Responding to Bultmann's criticism of his mode of biblical interpretation as a reflection and product of a 'modern form of the dogma of Inspiration', Barth once again appealed to Calvin for validation of his methodology of biblical exegesis as follows:

Is there any way of penetrating the heart of a document — of any document! — except on the assumption that its spirit will speak to our spirit through the actual written words? . . . It is precisely a strict faithfulness which compels us to expand or to abbreviate the text, lest a too rigid attitude to the words should obscure that which is struggling to expression in them and which demands expression. This critical freedom of exegesis was used by Calvin in masterly fashion, without the slightest disregard for the discipline by which alone liberty is justified. The attentive reader will perceive that I have employed this method.²⁷

It is evident from the above passage that Calvin's method of biblical exposition described by Barth as 'critical and free exegesis' became the central principle of interpretation of the Bible that Barth used with full appreciation and without hesitation. However, Barth believed that such critical freedom should be constrained in a

26 *Ibid.*, 18.

27 *Ibid.*, 18-19.

responsible way:

I can only hope that I have not fallen into the snare of indiscipline which inevitably threatens those who employ it. I have resolutely determined not to make use of the method in order to criticize Paul; and it is my serious intention always to avoid this temptation.²⁸

Thus one may argue that Barth understood exegetical freedom to be exercised within the limitation of not destroying the independent integrity of biblical text and its demand to be treated as such by exegetes. And it is also noteworthy that Barth regards Calvin's method of free and critical interpretation as most exemplary in terms of its power to penetrate into the inner meaning of Scripture.

In terms of the central theme of *Der Römerbrief II*, the influence of several significant figures can be perceived. Among them were Dostoevsky, Franz Overbeck, Heinrich Barth, and Soren Kierkegaard. In particular, Barth connected his interpretation of the principal theme of Romans with Kierkegaard's dictum, the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity:

If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kirekegaard called the 'infinite qualitative distinction' between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as positive significance: 'God is in heaven, and thou art on earth.' The relation between such a God and such a man . . . is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy.²⁹

By saying this Barth was turning Liberal anthropocentrism upside down and confirming the relationship and distance between sovereign and holy God and sinful human creature as the first principle and 'the inner dialectic of the matter'³⁰ through which he endeavored to interpret the Epistle to the Romans. He also believed this relationship between God and humanity to be perceived only in and through the figure of Jesus Christ:

In the Epistle to the Romans Paul did speak of Jesus Christ, and not of some one else.³¹ Through Jesus Christ alone, Barth contended, one can know God as God: 'Paul knows of God what most of us do not know; and his Epistles enable us to know what he knew. It is this conviction that Paul 'knows' that my critics choose to name my 'system', or my 'dogmatic presupposition', or my 'Alexandrianism', and so on and so forth.'³²

Hence one can argue that in *Der Römerbrief II* Barth was concerned

28 *Ibid.*, 19.

29 Barth, *Epistle to the Romans*, 10.

30 *Ibid.* Barth discerned in Calvin a Kierkegaardian motif of the infinite qualitative distinction between God and humanity. See *TC*, 123.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*, 11.

with the knowledge of God, which he believed could be obtained only when humanity admits of the fact that 'God is God' but human is human. Further, it is noteworthy that Barth became increasingly more interested in and attracted to the theme of the knowledge of God³³ at this stage. And thus he wished to devote himself to addressing the theme in a more mature manner in the later period, especially when he began to reflect upon dogmatics on a full scale.³⁴

At first glance, it appears that Calvin's peculiar theological ideas and insights did not make a supreme impression upon Barth's mind in relation to his perception of the central theme of his commentary on Romans. Nonetheless, it must not be overlooked that Barth appealed to Calvin's interpretations of specific passages on many occasions for more lucid and persuasive presentation of his own exegetical argument. In terms of the simple number of citations, Calvin citations were not so many as Luther citations. Nevertheless they were as many as Overbeck's and Kierkegaard's.

Barth expounds Romans chapter by chapter, giving each chapter a specific thematic title. For example, while the second chapter is titled 'the Righteousness of Men', the third is headed 'the Righteousness of God'. Each chapter consists of several subsections, thematically titled as well. For example, chapter four, titled 'the Voice of History', is made up of four subsections — subtitled 'Faith is Miracle', 'Faith is Beginning', 'Faith is Creation' and 'Concerning the Value of History' respectively. These subtitles show that Barth focuses in the fourth chapter on expounding the idea of faith. Moreover, the seventh chapter, titled 'Freedom', is divided into three subsections — subtitled 'The Frontier of Religion', 'The Meaning of Religion', and 'The Reality of Religion' respectively. These subtitles show that in the seventh chapter Barth addresses the question of religion in relation to Christian faith, revealing the beginning of his peculiar critique of religion, which is to be continued throughout his mature theological career and consummated later in the *Church Dogmatics*.³⁵ In *Der Römerbrief II*, one can find numerous hints and seeds of the themes that Barth will deal with in more detail and in a more full-fledged manner at later stages as his theological and dogmatic reflection progresses further.

Barth divides his 'Introduction' into three subsections. Significantly he discovers the 'theme' of the epistle in verses sixteen

³³ Bruce L. McCormack, *op. cit.*, 245-62. Cf. Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis* (Munich: Christian Kaiser, 1985), 108-39. Spieckermann argues that knowledge of God was the central problem of Barth's new theology.

³⁴ Cf. *CD II/1*.

³⁵ Cf. *CD I/2*, 280-361.

and seventeen of chapter one, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is revealed the righteousness of God from faithfulness unto faith: as it is written, But the righteous shall live from my faithfulness.' Barth appears to be aware of the fact that during the sixteenth century Reformation Martin Luther (1483-1546) discovered the central core of the gospel of Jesus Christ in these verses, and John Calvin accepted Luther's foundational insights into the gospel. Although when expounding these verses Barth cites no explicit statement from Calvin's commentary, it is difficult to doubt that Barth had already read intensively Calvin's exposition of these verses, analyzing Calvin's exegetical arguments minutely, as he usually did in the process of his preparation of biblical interpretation for preaching. Instead of Calvin's statements, Barth employs citations from Luther, Kierkegaard, Bengel and Overbeck. In exposition of these verses, Barth's principal concern lay in proclaiming the gospel as *the truth 'setting a question-mark against all truths'* and thereby bringing to clear light the meaninglessness of 'anxiety concerning the victory of the gospel — that is, Christian apologetics.³⁶ One can argue that this objection to apologetics appears to reflect Barth's antagonism to the central concern and goal of Schleiermacherian Liberal theological project.

A further significant feature in Barth's exposition of these verses is his supreme stressing of the distinction between God and humanity:

The gospel of the resurrection is the — **power of God**, His virtus (Vulgata), the disclosing and apprehending of His meaning, His effective pre-eminence over all gods. The gospel of the resurrection is the action, the supreme miracle, by which God, the unknown God dwelling in light unapproachable, the Holy One, Creator, Redeemer, makes Himself Known.³⁷

Barth's endeavour to make clear the distinction between God as the Wholly Other and all creation including humanity is pervasive throughout the entire exposition of Romans. Hence, this can be regarded as one of the most salient features of *Der Römerbrief II*.

In the third chapter, titled 'the Righteousness of God', in commenting upon verse four, 'Yea, let God be found true, but every man a liar', he employs Calvin's peculiar phrase to elucidate his meaning:

Of what importance is the infidelity of those who have received the grace of God? It preserves and makes known the 'presupposition of the whole Christian philosophy' (Calvin). God is true: He is the Answer, the Helper,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

the Judge, and the Redeemer; not man — but God alone, and God Himself! If this be forgotten, we must again and again be reminded of the inadequacy of all who bear revelation, and of the gulf which separates them from what they bear, in order that we may be referred once again to the Beginning and the Origin. . . . Only when the all-embracing contrast between God and men is perceived can there emerge the knowledge of God, a new communion with Him, and a new worship.³⁸

This statement is of crucial significance in that it demonstrates that Barth connects his own idea of the infinite gulf between the holy and faithful God and a sinful and false humanity with Calvin's notion of the 'presupposition of the whole Christian philosophy'. It is undeniable that his employment of Calvin's peculiar notion, which is from Calvin's Commentary itself, reveals an aspect of the influence of Calvin's theological ideas upon Barth's mind as well as his positive appreciation of Calvin's thought. Furthermore, Barth's argument in the above is reminiscent of the beginning section of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which stresses both the close correlation between the knowledge of God and of ourselves and the fundamental contrast between God's holiness and power and human sinfulness and spiritual inability. Calvin likewise believed that the true knowledge of God can be found only when there is a recognition that God is God but man is man, and when we investigate ourselves against the mirror of God's righteousness and sovereignty. It is also worth noting that Calvin regarded this knowledge of God as the 'summation of the whole religious wisdom' (*Inst. I.1.1*). Moreover Barth never perceives the knowledge of God to be simply cognitive and cerebral, but rather to be personal and relational, which can be seen in Barth's close connecting of the notion of knowledge of God with 'a new communion with God and a new worship'. Since both communion and worship possess the characteristics of a relational and personal dimension, it is clear that Barth understood the knowledge of God to be experiential rather than simply intellectual. Considering that Calvin likewise stressed the personal character of the knowledge of God, it is arguable that here is found an aspect of Barth's theological similarity to Calvin.

Nevertheless, the question as to whether Barth correctly understood Calvin's central theological concern still remains. Furthermore, it remains disputable whether what Barth seeks to signify through Calvin's notion is the same thing as what Calvin meant by it. These are valid and legitimate questions, but it seems certain at

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 80. The quotation from Calvin comes from John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, trans. R. Mackenzie, ed. D. W. Torrance & T. F. Torrance (Eerdmans, 1973), 60.

least that Barth appreciatively utilizes Calvin's ideas for a more cogent elucidation of what he seeks to argue. In other words, he discerns and wishes to obtain some positive help from Calvin's theological thought for his own purposes.

Expounding the fourth chapter of Romans Barth is devoted to an explication of the true meaning of the believers' faith in God's faithfulness. In particular, he stresses the miraculous and paradoxical character of faith, which enabled Abraham to overcome and transcend all the barriers against his faith. As always, Barth cites a useful passage from Calvin's *Commentary on Romans* in order to explain what he intends to signify in exposition of verse twenty, 'He did not criticize the promise of God with unbelieving doubt, but waxed strong in faith, giving glory to God.' This verse talks about Abraham's invincible faith in God's faithful promise in spite of all the contradictory situations, which were formidable enough to totally undermine any ground of his faith. Barth apparently finds Calvin's following comment supremely pertinent for his purposes:

Everything by which we are surrounded conflicts with the promise of God. He promises us immortality, but we are encompassed with mortality and corruption. He pronounces that we are righteous in His sight, but we are engulfed in sin. He declares His favor and good will towards us, but we are threatened by the tokens of His wrath. What can we do? It is His will that we should shut our eyes to what we are and have, in order that nothing may impede or even check our faith in Him (Calvin).³⁹

By citing this passage from *Calvin's Commentary on Romans*, Barth could illuminate more lucidly the real meaning of the given verse. For Barth, Abraham kept his faith in God's promise and faithfulness, shutting his eyes to what he was and had. Abraham allowed nothing to impede or check his faith in God. Even though Abraham was so old and had no children, his faith was not weakened by the situation; he was convinced that the Almighty God would fulfill his promise faithfully. Calvin's statement makes Barth's exegetical argument more persuasive and cogent.

As Barth's 1922 Göttingen lectures on Calvin demonstrate, Calvin's idea and definition of faith is one of the crucial themes that Barth cherishes and seeks to incorporate for his theological reflection.⁴⁰ Serious consideration of this fact makes it easy to see why he appeals to Calvin's theological insight about faith in interpreting this specific verse. The Göttingen lectures on Calvin also show that Barth was

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143. The Calvin quotation is from Calvin's commentary on Romans, 99.

⁴⁰ TC, 168-70.

attracted strongly to Calvin's idea of hope.⁴¹ *Der Römerbrief II* demonstrates that Barth had been greatly impressed by Calvin's theology of hope. His exegesis of verse two in chapter five proves this point. The verse reads, 'By whom also we have had our access by faith into this grace wherein we stand; and we glory in hope of the glory of God.' Expounding specifically the latter part of this verse, Barth cited two passages from Calvin's commentary:

Paul knows well what he is doing when he says that, in proclaiming the Gospel, he brings men hope, a great hope, the hope of the glory of God. 'In the Gospel there shines forth upon us the hope that we may share in the divine nature. For when we shall see God face to face, we shall be like Him' (Calvin). The union of men with God is pure sight: it is life in the reality of God, it is salvation and final redemption. The union of 'here' and 'there' and of 'No' and 'Yes' of God in the resurrection, at the Parousia of Christ when He shall come again, is the heritage promised to Abráham. In this hope the righteous rejoice: 'Although they be now pilgrims upon earth yet they confidently hasten onwards towards the place which is beyond all heavens, guarding their future heritage peacefully in their hearts' (Calvin).⁴²

It is evident from the above passage that Barth seeks to emphasize the Gospel's character of hope for the future by citing Calvin's comments. Barth, in agreement with Calvin, stresses that the hope of believers lies in sharing the divine nature, that is, in the union of God with them which will be actualized in the future with the second coming of Jesus Christ. Similarly Barth appreciates positively Calvin's depiction of believers' life as a pilgrimage with the confident hope of their future heritage in their hearts. The believer's life is characterized not by actual sight and present possession of reality, but rather by invincible hope in God's final consummation of his promise.

One can see another aspect of Barth's appeal to Calvin's idea of hope in his exposition of verses 19-21 in chapter eight. The verse reads, 'For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who has subjected the same in hope because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God.' Barth expounds the former part of the given verses, citing a statement from Calvin:

'There is no fragment or particle of the world, which, in the grip of the knowledge of its present misery, does not hope for resurrection' (Calvin). The occasion of the dislocation and longing and vanity, presented to us in the whole creation, is not this or that particular pain or abomination or

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 168, 279.

⁴² *The Epistle to the Romans*, 153. The Calvin quotation is from Calvin's commentary, 105.

absence of beauty, not even the sum of observable disadvantages attaching to the world as we see it: the occasion is rather createdness itself, the manifest lack of direct life, the unsatisfied hope of resurrection.⁴³

By citing Calvin's insightful comment on the creation's hope for freedom from vanity and corruption, Barth endeavours to strengthen the validity of his interpretation of the given verse. He appropriates affirmatively Calvin's thought that the whole creation is hoping for the complete liberation from the bondage of corruption, which is characteristic of 'createdness itself.' Barth appears to find Calvin's theology of hope to be helpful for a more cogent elucidation of his meaning. Hence, it is arguable that Calvin's idea of hope provides Barth with an excellent theological tool to explicate his exegetical argument more effectively.

Despite his positive appreciation of Calvin's ideas of faith and hope, it is clear that Barth already held a reservation and critical attitude toward Calvin's idea of predestination. Interpreting verses 28-30 in chapter eight, which had been traditionally regarded as one of the most significant texts for the doctrine of predestination, Barth argues that the verses had been misinterpreted by Augustine and the Reformation:

Here it is that we encounter the secret of predestination to blessedness, which Augustine and the Reformers represented in mythological form as though it were a scheme of cause and effect, thereby robbing it of its significance. . . . Predestination means the recognition that love towards God is an occurrence, a being and having and doing of men, which takes place in no moment of time, which is beyond time, which has its origin at every moment in God Himself, and which must therefore be sought and found only in Him.⁴⁴

This passage reveals manifestly that Barth intends to interpret the doctrine of predestination in a significantly different way from the Augustinian and Reformation theological tradition. Even though Barth makes no explicit mention of the name of Calvin here, there can be no doubt that he includes Calvin when he refers to 'the Reformation'. Barth criticises their understanding of God's predestination as being grounded upon a worn-out metaphysics of causality, proposing that it should be interpreted in an actualistic way and from the perspective of a distinction between ordinary history (*Historie*) and eternal history (*Geschichte*). Hence God's predestination must not be comprehended as implying that a certain man's destiny was fixed from a point of eternity with all necessity to be fulfilled in time

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 308. The Calvin citation is from Calvin's commentary, 172.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 324.

and with no possibility of being changed at all. Rather it must be understood to allude that God determines every human decision of his attitude toward God to be made in a fresh way at every moment. Thus God's predestination is never a fixed and unchangeable decree but rather is a continuing happening and occurrence. In this sense there can never be any fixed distinction between the elected and the rejected. At every new moment a man can be elected and rejected simultaneously. This actualistic understanding of divine predestination leads Barth to raise a vigorous objection to both Augustine and the Reformers. Here Barth shows a sign of revolt against the time-honored interpretation of the doctrine of predestination, which will culminate in his *Church Dogmatics*.⁴⁵

It is helpful to consider a further example of Barth's earlier seeds of revolt against Calvin's doctrine of double predestination. Expounding verse 13 of chapter 9, 'Even as it is written concerning this decision, Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated', he affirms his own position against the Reformers' including Calvin's:

He makes Himself known in the parable and riddle of the beloved Jacob and the hated Esau, that is to say, in the secret of eternal, twofold predestination. Now, this secret concerns not this or that man, but all men.

... In its presence they all stand on one line — for Jacob is always Esau also, and in the eternal 'Moment' of revelation Esau is also Jacob. When the Reformers applied the doctrine of election and rejection (Predestination) to the psychological unity of this or that individual, and when they referred quantitatively to the 'elect' and the 'damned', they were, as we can now see, speaking mythologically.⁴⁶

It emerges from the above passage that at this early stage Barth already had objections to the Reformers' understanding of predestination based on a fixed and absolute decree of God. He depicted it as 'mythological' in the sense that the God of eternally fixed decision is not a Christian God of true reality but rather a god of unreal mythology. It is also arguable that at this very early stage of his interaction with Calvin's theology, Barth reveals a seed of his rejection of the traditional Reformed doctrine of predestination, which Calvin advocated most passionately. He now seeks to establish an actualistic interpretation of predestination, stressing the priority of grace, election, love and life over damnation, rejection, hatred and death in God's attitude toward humanity. Undeniably, this shows the incipient seeds of his later and mature revolt against Calvin and others in relation to the doctrine of election and predestination, culminating in

45 CD, II/2, 3-506.

46 *The Epistle to the Romans*, 347.

the *Church Dogmatics*.

Nevertheless, Barth continues to appeal approvingly to Calvin's theological insight when he is interpreting the corollaries of God's sovereign predestination and election. Expounding verses 14-21 of chapter nine, where Paul defends the mystery of God's sovereign freedom in having mercy on some people and having others' hearts hardened, Barth cites several passages from Calvin's commentary for a more persuasive elucidation of his point:

Is there unrighteousness with God? — *Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.* This is a terrible truth: and it is no less terrible because it is here set forth without a trace of any psychological explanation . . . Who is he, who . . . though eternally the God of Jacob, is yet, for than reason, always the God Esau; who is so completely the God of truth that no man can ever be 'assured' of Him? In pondering this, who can but shudder? Est enim predestinatio Dei labyrinthus, unde hominis ingenium nullo modo se explicare queat (Calvin). No church worthy of its name can refuse to think thus of God; and yet every church which does so think is pierced through to the heart.⁴⁷

This passage demonstrates clearly that Barth perceives God's activities of election and rejection to be the manifestations of his unfathomable and mysterious sovereignty that God possesses as God. By citing Calvin's statement, Barth seeks to emphasise that God's work of predestination confronts humanity as a sheer labyrinth, causing them to realise their incapacity to grasp God's unpredictable and ineffable lordship over them.

In this context, a difficult question may arise. Is God righteous in loving some people and hating others? If God is a loving God, should God not love all people? Barth's answer is negative, agreeing with Calvin:

Is God unrighteous? No; but He has His own standard! The righteousness of God is eternal . . . The will of God is not some good thing, operating independently, to which God is subject. His will is rather the source and sanction of all good, and it is good only because it is what He wills: — 'Deo satis superque est sua unius auctoritas, ut nullius patrocinio indigeat. Therefore — Faciam quod facturus sum. And: haec Deo libertas eripitur, ubi externis causis alligatur ejus electio' (Calvin).⁴⁸

It is clear from the passage that citations of Calvin strengthen

47 *Ibid.*, 348-9. The Calvin citation is from Calvin's commentary, 202. The translation of Calvin's Latin is: The predestination of God is truly a labyrinth from which the mind of man is wholly incapable of extricating itself.

48 *Ibid.*, 350. The Calvin citations are from Calvin's commentary, 204-5. The translations are: God regards his own authority alone as sufficient so that he needs the defence of no other. We deprive God of this freedom when we restrict God's election to external causes.

Barth's exegetical argument that God's will must be perceived as always righteous on the ground that it is the will of God, the Righteous One. Because God is all-good, all his doings are good.

Nonetheless, this raises another question, which we find in verse nineteen of chapter nine: 'Thou wilt say then unto me, 'Why does he find fault? For who has resisted his will?' To this question Paul responded, 'Nay but, O Man, who are you that replies against God?' (verse 20). Interpreting this verse, Barth appeals to the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man, stressing the freedom of God:

All that must be said about the objection is comprehended in the words — *O man*. The objector overlooks the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man. He proceeds as though they were God's partners, junior partners perhaps, but nevertheless competent to conduct an argument with Him. . . . But this is preposterous. . . . The freedom of God is the pure and primal Origin of men: the Light . . . the Infinite . . . the Decision.⁴⁹

For Barth, God and humanity are not on the same plane. There is an infinite gap between the divine and human dimensions. The above statement reveals clearly that Barth is revolting against the traditional metaphysical understanding of God and the creature, grounded upon a causal relationship between them. According to the traditional view, both God and humanity were on the same relative plane of causality: God as the first cause and the creature as the secondary cause.

However, for Barth the freedom of God should not be perceived simply as the first cause, but rather as 'the pure and primal Origin' of humanity, which allows room for the genuine freedom and responsibility of humanity.⁵⁰ On the basis of this argument Barth contends that 'neither moral uprightness nor immoral depravity provides humanity with an opportunity of arguing with God, of justifying themselves before him and so of escaping the tribulation'.⁵¹ Rather, humanity is responsible for their decisions and actions before God, who is the primal Origin and wholly Other.

In this context Barth cites a statement of Calvin's to make a conclusion of his own argument:

. . . men will discover that their relative sense of responsibility is thereby guaranteed — 'These things have not been said in order that we might by our lethargy checkmate the Holy Spirit, who hath given us a spark of His brightness, but in order that we might perceive that what we have comes from Him, and in order that we may learn to hope in Him, to surrender

49 *Ibid.*, 355.

50 *Ibid.*

51 *Ibid.*, 356.

ourselves to Him, and to pursue our salvation with fear and trembling' (Calvin).⁵²

By citing Calvin here Barth attempts to articulate more cogently what he wishes to contend, that is, the fact that God's sovereign freedom does not abrogate human relative freedom and responsibility to seek after God. Rather, for Barth, the knowledge of God's freedom leads humanity to pursue God passionately, who is the hope, power, salvation and origin of themselves. Barth's citation of Calvin within this context demonstrates that Barth perceives Calvin's theological insights to be valuable and useful for elucidating and strengthening his own contention. Of further significance is that Calvin's theological wisdom takes a crucial place in Barth's understanding of the relationship between God and humanity, that is, the relationship between God as the wholly Other and the sinful creature, which can be regarded as the central theme of this commentary on Romans. It is evident from this that Barth appreciates positively and agrees with Calvin's stress upon human responsibility together with God's absolute sovereignty. This also demonstrates that Barth's indebtedness to Calvin's theological thought is not only formal and structural but also substantial and formative. On the basis of this discussion it is arguable that one can find the reality of Calvin's significant influence upon Barth's theological thought even at this early stage of his second Romans commentary.

Further aspects of Barth's appeal to Calvin's expository wisdom can be seen from Barth's interpretation of several other verses. Interpreting verse twenty five of chapter eleven, 'I would not, brethren, have you ignorant of this mystery, lest you be wise in your conceits', Barth endeavours to emphasize that the Gospel has the character of mystery and paradox, and incorporates once again Calvin's exegetical insight to articulate what he intends to mean:

By *mystery* Paul means what we call 'paradox'. — The existence of the man of sin who restrains the dawning of the Day of Jesus Christ is a *mystery* (2 Thess. II. 7). . . . Above all, the Gospel itself, regarded as a human word from which the divine Word may break forth, is a *mystery*. Calvin writes — 'Quoties desperationem nobis iniicit longior mora, occurrit mysterii nomen.' It follows, therefore, that the whole relationship between God and man, as set forth in the Church, is a *mystery*.⁵³

By citing Calvin's statement here Barth is attempting to make his interpretation more relevant to the central theme of the commentary,

52 *Ibid.* The Calvin citation is from Calvin's commentary, 205.

53 *Ibid.*, 412-3. The Calvin citation is from Calvin's commentary, 254. The translation of Calvin's Latin is: Whenever a long delay casts us into despair, let us remember this word *mystery*.

that is, the relationship and distance between the sovereign and holy God and sinful humanity. His citation of Calvin demonstrates that in describing the Gospel and divine-human relationship as mystery, Barth accepts Calvin's insight into the mysterious nature of God's ways. It is of additional significance that within the context of appealing to Calvin for elucidation of his intended meaning, Barth mentions the central theme of the commentary: the divine-human relationship. Does this not reveal an aspect of Barth's formative indebtedness to Calvin in terms of the core subject of his commentary?

In answering the above question, it is helpful to pay attention to another section where Barth appeals to Calvin's exegetical insight in relation to the question as to who God is, the question intimately bound up with the central theme of the commentary. Expounding verse thirty two of chapter eleven, which reads, 'For God has shut up all unto disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all', Barth mentions Calvin again:

Pregnant with meaning is the divine *shutting up*; pregnant also is the divine *mercy*. Most significant is the first of all; most significant also is the second all — for even these last run the risk of being reckoned among those who, as Calvin says, *nimiris crasse delirant*. Here it is that we encounter the hidden, unknown, incomprehensible God, to whom nothing is impossible, the Lord, who is as such our Father in Jesus Christ. Here is the possibility of God pressing upon us, vastly nigh at hand, vastly rich, but also vastly beyond our understanding. Here is Beginning and End, the road and the goal of the thought of God. Here is the object of faith, which may never be depressed to an 'object'. Here is the inner meaning of Christianity, which defies analysis.⁵⁴

This passage provides one with a most dramatic description of God's wholly otherness: the hidden God is 'beyond our understanding.' For Barth, 'the inner meaning of Christianity' lies in the fact that there is an infinite gap and distinction between God and humanity. In this context, 'to know God means to stand in awe of Him and to be still in the presence of Him that "dwells in light" unapproachable.'⁵⁵ However, Barth contends that the hidden God became the revealed God in Jesus Christ: 'The Epistle moves round the theme that in Christ Jesus the *Deus absconditus* is as such the *Deus revelatus*. By implication, the theme of the Epistle to the Romans — Theology, the Word of God — can be uttered by human lips only when it is apprehended that the predicate, *Deus revelatus*, has as its subject *Deus*

54 *Ibid.*, 421.

55 *Ibid.*, 423.

*absconditus.*⁵⁶ It is plausible from this statement that Barth is attempting to overcome the problem of an implicit contradiction between the hidden God and the revealed God by stressing the centrality of Jesus Christ.

In the later stage of his theological development, Barth advances this incipient insight in a full-fledged manner by endeavouring to remove a dualistic understanding of the relationship between the hidden God and the revealed God. Consequently, he can state, ‘what is clearly seen in the works of God is His invisibility. What is searched out in the deep things of God is His unsearchability.’⁵⁷ This passage displays a further aspect of Barth’s appreciative use of Calvin’s exegetical arguments in order to confirm his argument.

IV. Conclusion

On the basis of the above discussion one can conclude that Barth is indebted to Calvin’s theological thought to a considerable extent in writing his commentary on Romans. With the help of Calvin and others, as Thurneysen has stated cogently, ‘Barth read out of the Scripture the message of the holy, gracious, righteous God, who stands in need of no defense, but who sends forth His Sovereign Word and who wills to be known and can be known through His Word alone. This Word of His is called and is Jesus Christ, the One around who the centuries stand still, for He is the Center of all time, the Bringer of the Kingdom which with him breaks into the midst of this time as the new Word of God.’⁵⁸ This theocentric and christocentric understanding of the gospel and the Word of the sovereign God provided him with a crucial resource against which to judge critically the validity of the Liberal theological project and with which to restart his theological work. It must not be overlooked that, accepting Calvin’s theocentric and christocentric theological insight into the gracious gospel, Barth used the idea of the transcendent and holy God as the ‘Wholly Other’ as one of the most important theological themes at this time. Hence, one can argue that Calvin made a considerable impact upon Barth’s doctrine of God’s sovereign freedom and majesty and his rediscovery of the gospel of divine grace. This provided him with a crucial stimulus to decide upon his material theological vision of a ‘theology of the Word of God’ which he was to pursue continuously and passionately in his future work including the *Church Dogmatics*.

56 *Ibid.*, 422.

57 *Ibid.*, 422-3.

58 *Revolutionary Theology in the Making*, 12.

Nevertheless, it must not be overlooked that in *Der Römerbrief II* Barth already showed some incipient but clear seeds of ambivalence toward and even revolt against Calvin's theological and exegetical arguments that would fully blossom in the later stage of his theological development. More than anything else, his acceptance of the legitimacy of the historico-critical methodology in relation to biblical interpretation was to lead Barth to take considerably different positions from Calvin's on many biblical passages. In addition, Barth's serious reservations about Calvin's doctrine of predestination, founded upon an interpretation of divine-human relationship by means of the concept of causality, eventually led him to revolt against Calvin's position and to reformulate innovatively his own doctrine of election from the perspective of a Christological and actualistic understanding of the divine work of predestination. Thus we can see that, in spite of Barth's appreciative endorsement of what he sees as Calvin's valid insights and arguments, the seeds of Barth's ambivalence toward his life-time theological mentor, Calvin, were already sown in *Der Römerbrief II*.

Abstract

Karl Barth's theological relationship with John Calvin has been ignored by scholars for too long without any legitimate reason. Since Barth repeatedly affirmed his strong indebtedness to Calvin's theology, it is essential to explicate his relationship to him in order to understand correctly the character of his theology. *Der Römerbrief II* (1922), which was written to replace *Der Römerbrief I* (1919), shows that Barth made a very careful use of Calvin's exegetical and theological arguments in constructing his own exegetical positions. Even though Barth appreciates positively Calvin's theological insight in many aspects, he is not totally approving in his reappropriation of Calvin's wisdom. In particular, one can find the incipient seeds of Barth's ambivalence toward and revolt against Calvin in the former's serious reservations about the latter's doctrine of predestination. Thus it is arguable that in spite of Barth's appreciative endorsement of what he sees as Calvin's valid insights and arguments, the seeds of Barth's serious challenge against his life-time mentor, Calvin, were already sown in *Der Römerbrief II*.