

The Vice-Principal of the Reformed Theological College, Geelong, Australia, continues to introduce to readers of *Theolios* the most influential theologian of our day.

Karl Barth and his Theology

an introduction

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II. BARTH'S THEOLOGY

What kind of theology does Barth offer the church of today? It is not easy to summarize it in a few pages. It has been said – and we do not believe it to be an overstatement – that Barth's theological approach meant nothing less than a Copernican revolution in the prevailing theology of the first quarter of this century. The prevailing theology of those days

was the *liberal theology*. Its main characteristic was that it was thoroughly *anthropocentric*: man with his needs and desires, his search for truth and capacity for finding it, was the starting point of all theological thinking. Liberalism did, of course, also speak about God, sometimes even in glowing terms, but it was, essentially, a 'god created after man's image.' The transcendent God of the Bible was exchanged for the immanent 'god' of 19th century philosophy. Man himself was the decisive authority, either by his reason (speculative or positivistic theology) or by his experience (Schleiermacher and his followers). In both cases it was man himself who basically and ultimately decided what is true and what is not true. The Bible, though still being the object of much painstaking study, was accepted only in as far as it agreed with man's ideas and desires.

Critique of liberalism . . .

This whole liberal scheme, in all its varying but essentially identical forms, was utterly rejected by Barth. In his study of the Bible in general and of Paul in particular Barth found an altogether different starting point, viz., that God is the highest and only true authority. The only attitude left for man is one of complete submission to this authority. In the preface to the second edition of his commentary on Romans Barth expresses this fundamental thought in the well-known words of Kierkegaard: there is an 'infinitely qualitative difference' between God and man.¹ Man is not on the same level as God, but as Ecclesiastes says: 'God is in

heaven, and you upon earth' (5: 2).² This is one of Barth's favourite texts in his early period. God is in heaven, we are on earth. We cannot ascend to Him. We cannot discover Him by our own capacities and efforts. He is the great transcendent One, who surpasses all our understanding and all our attempts to understand Him. There is but one possibility: He must come down to us. And this He has done in Jesus Christ. God in Jesus Christ is our only possibility, for God in Jesus Christ means: grace, unmerited, forfeited grace. It is the only way of redemption or, as Paul says, the justification of the godless.

...and of orthodoxy

It is clear that such a theology dealt a blow at the very heart of the older liberalism with its immanentism and idealism. It is also understandable that all the grand masters of the older liberal school (Adolf Harnack, who had been one of Barth's teachers, in particular³) repudiated this new theology of the young revolutionary from Safenwil. But orthodoxy was not too happy with this young revolutionary either! For he was just as critical of its position. In fact, the main criticism he levelled against the orthodox theologians of his day was that it had made the same basic error as liberalism. Although it had preserved many valuable doctrines, it was in essence, equally wrong. For orthodox theology too thought that it 'had' God and could dispose of His truth. Did they not *have* His Word in the Bible? Did they not *have* His truth in the creeds and confessions of the Church? Because of this 'theologia gloriae' orthodoxy was just as much

in the 'crisis', i.e., the fire of God's judgment, as liberalism.

Throughout these early years Barth constantly hammered on the same anvil: God is the free and sovereign One, who does what pleases Him. And man can never, under any circumstances, dispose of Him and His revelation.

THE DOCTRINE OF SCRIPTURE

All this becomes very clear in Barth's view of Scripture. In fact, it is dominated by this dual criticism. Barth rejected, and still rejects, both the liberal and the orthodox view.

For the *liberal* the Bible was just a religious book, fundamentally on the same level with other religious books. Admittedly, most of them recognized that it was the highest of its kind. Yet it belonged to the 'kind'! And the great task for the believer was to discover the truth in this human, religious book.

The *orthodox* view, of course, was quite different. It recognized the Bible as a unique book, the book of God Himself and as such 'sui generis'. But it made the great mistake of identifying the Word of God, i.e., the speaking God Himself, with the text of the book. The final result of such an identification is again that man rules over the Word of God and man himself has the last word.

Barth's view

Barth rejects both views as unscriptural. There is only one direct revelation, God's revelation in His Son Jesus Christ. The Bible is only

indirect revelation, being the human witness to the original revelation in Jesus Christ. The O.T. is the witness that points forward to the coming Christ. The N.T. is the witness that points backwards to the Christ who has come. In itself, however, this witness is human and therefore fallible. Only in the miracle of God's speaking through this witness does real revelation take place. When this happens, the Bible, that human fallible witness, *becomes* the Word of God. But this happens only when it pleases God. We cannot force Him, we can only wait, just as the sick near the pool of Bethesda had to wait for the stirring of the water by the angel. Revelation is always the act of God revealing Himself, for He is the free and sovereign One. He is in heaven and we are upon earth. Only when He comes down to us, the miracle of revelation takes place.

THE DOCTRINE OF PREDESTINATION

As we saw, *the* revelation is God's revelation *in Jesus Christ*. The last three words have to be strongly emphasized, for in these words we meet with the deepest secret of Barth's theology. God-in-Christ is the centre of his whole thinking and with the utmost consistency he carries it through in all the chapters of his *Dogmatics*. In this article we can only give a few examples. The first is the doctrine of predestination. Barth's main objection to the old Reformation doctrine is that here God's predestinating decree is seen apart from Jesus Christ. Barth gives the following picture of this doctrine:

The starting point is that God in all eternity sovereignly decides to elect some and reject others. In itself this 'decision' has nothing to do yet with Christ. He comes in only afterwards, as the executor of this decision, for the elect will be saved by Him and His atoning death. All this means, of course, that the decree of election and reprobation becomes a dark abyss of divine arbitrariness, casting people into a state of terrifying uncertainty. The gospel of Jesus Christ is still beautiful, but it is always threatened by the unknown contents of the decree.

Barth himself wants to approach this doctrine purely Christologically. We must take our starting point in Jesus Christ, who is the electing God and the elected man at the same time.⁴ Or, in other words, Jesus Christ is both the subject and the object of the decree of predestination. With regard to the latter aspect we must say: He is the *real* object, and that in the sense of 'double' predestination. He is *the* rejected One, taking our rejection upon Himself and He is *the* elected One, in whom we are elected by God. This rejection and election of Jesus Christ, and of us in Him, should not be limited in any way; *all* men are rejected and elected in Him. For some this is only an objective state of affairs. They do not know it themselves; perhaps they even do not want to know it. And yet it is true for them too, for nobody can ever undo the decision which God has taken about him in Jesus Christ. For others, however, it is also subjectively true, because they believe the gospel. In faith they personally know that they have been rejected and elected in Jesus Christ.

Universalism?

All this naturally raises the question: does Barth in this way not end up in a new universalism? At this point we meet with one of the most difficult points in his doctrine of predestination. Any unbiased reader would indeed draw this conclusion. And yet Barth himself denies this. Why? The answer is found in the same fundamental idea, which we found in his doctrine of Scripture. God is the free and sovereign One. We are never allowed to bind God in any way. Therefore we may not say: all people will be saved. But we may not say either: some are definitely rejected. The only thing we have to do is to believe God's message of grace in Jesus Christ and to speak to others about Him. We have to tell them of the new objective state of affairs that came into being in the cross and resurrection of Christ, a state of affairs which is also true of them: they are rejected *and* elected in Jesus Christ.

THE DOCTRINE OF CREATION

The same Christological approach is characteristic of Barth's doctrine of creation. Here, too, the 'in Christ' formula is the all-decisive starting point. We cannot speak about creation apart from Jesus Christ. Barth does not mean this in a noetical sense only i.e., that we *know* about the creation of this world only through the special revelation in Jesus Christ. If this were all that Barth meant, every orthodox theologian would agree with him. But Barth goes much further. He means this 'in Christ' in an *ontological* sense. The world was created because of Jesus Christ and

through Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did not enter upon the scene of history only after the fall, but He was the very beginning of all God's ways and works. The whole creation stands in the light of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Creation is not a 'pre-Christian' stage, but from the very first beginning the word of reconciliation sounds forth over the creation.

Genesis

This view, of course, is determinative for the exegesis of the early chapters of Genesis.⁵ These chapters do not give us a 'neutral' report of the creation, but they are full of the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ. For example, the words 'very good' in Gen. 1:31 do not mean that the creation is good in itself. They do not speak of a natural, inherent goodness, pointing to the fact that the creation is not yet affected by sin. They do not mean to evoke a nostalgic memory of a golden age at the beginning of history. No, this 'valde bonum' indicates a Christological appraisal of the creation. It tells us that in God's sight the creation is good because He looks upon it in Jesus Christ, the man of Calvary. Barth himself sums it up in these words: 'By the Word the world exists. A marvellous reversal of our whole thinking! Don't let yourselves be led astray by the difficulty of the time-concept, which might well result from this. The world came into being, it was created and sustained by the little child that was born in Bethlehem, by the man who died on the Cross of Calvary, and the third day rose again. *That* is the Word of creation'.⁶

THE DOCTRINE OF SIN

This consistently Christological approach has far-reaching consequences also for Barth's doctrine of sin. Because Jesus Christ is the beginning of all God's way and works, sin is, from the very first, sin against God's grace in Jesus Christ.

Sin is not, primarily and essentially, the transgression of a more or less abstract and neutral divine law founded in the Creator-creature relationship, a transgression which had to be made undone by a subsequent act of grace on God's side. The order law-gospel, which underlies this view, is in Barth's opinion not the original one. It has to be reversed: the gospel is first, the law is second.⁷ Here, too, God's grace in Jesus Christ precedes everything else and must be the starting point of our thinking. For the doctrine of sin this has two very important consequences. (a) Sin becomes much more heinous in character, for it is now seen as sin against God's grace in Jesus Christ. By his sin man does not merely transgress an impersonal divine law, but rejects God's love in Jesus Christ, His Son. (b) At the same time, this Christological interpretation tells us that sin is not a hopeless matter. However heinous man's sin may be, from the very beginning the light of God's grace shines over him and his sin. And man can never make this grace null and void, for God can never stop looking at him in Jesus Christ.

THE DOCTRINE OF MAN

Finally, this new approach involves a great shift in anthropology. We must not, as the Reformers did, start with

Adam, but with Christ. Not Adam but Christ is the original man. Adam and we all are man, because we participate in the original human nature of Jesus Christ.⁸

How important this is for Barth appears from the fact that he reverses the order in the Pauline parallel between Adam and Christ in Rom. 5 and I Cor. 15 where Paul calls Adam 'the first man Adam' and Jesus Christ 'the last Adam' (I Cor. 15:45) or 'the second man' (I Cor. 15:47). Barth, of course, does not deny the truth of this sequence. From the purely historical point of view it is fully true. And yet, really and essentially, the situation is quite different. In essential reality, Jesus Christ is the first Adam. He is the man God had in mind, when He created Adam. The (historically) first man Adam was made after the image of the (really and essentially) first man Jesus Christ.⁹

All this again means a definite change in our whole anthropology. We can no longer speak about man in the abstract apart from Jesus Christ. Such a man does not exist and never has existed. This is not man as pictured in the Bible, but the man of human philosophy. Man, every man, is man in the light of Jesus Christ. Adam and every other human being stands, from his first beginning, in the light of God's grace in Jesus Christ. His whole being and nature is qualified by this relationship. And all his sin cannot undo it. He is and remains a being created in and for Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately we have to stop here with our summary of Barth's theology. We realize that to do justice to

Barth's profound thinking much more should be said about all these doctrines. Many other doctrines, in particular his Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology and eschatology should have been mentioned. We have only touched the surface. But at least one thing has become clear: Barth is a highly original thinker, who is not afraid of breaking new ground and going new ways.

BRIEF EVALUATION

What should be our attitude to this great theologian and to this new theology? We begin with some *points of appreciation*.

(1) We are thankful for Barth's trenchant *criticism of the older liberalism*. Although in many respects not new at all, his criticism carried a weight far beyond what many conservatives had said before him. I think there are two main reasons for this impact. The first is that, coming from the liberal school of thought and still accepting some of its basic ideas (e.g., in Biblical criticism), Barth criticized the liberal theology from within. And secondly, his criticism was directed at the very heart of liberalism, its immanentism and anthropocentrism.

(2) We are also thankful for his *criticism of orthodoxy*. Although we do not agree with many aspects of this criticism, yet we feel it is helpful to listen carefully. In fact, we believe that on many points Barth is fully right. As an example we mention the attitude to the Bible as found among many conservative Christians. Too often the Bible is a sacred book that is carefully read, but that is not really seen as a personal message. Too

often it is a possession rather than a gift of grace. There is also substance in Barth's criticism of orthodox traditionalism. This is indeed a permanent danger for orthodoxy. We like to listen to the fathers. We faithfully adhere to their confessions. We appeal to their writings as the final court of appeal. But is this a truly scriptural attitude? Of course, we have to honour the fathers and it is our duty to listen to them (Barth himself would be the first to acknowledge this), but we should always realize that it is not Augustine or Luther or Calvin or Hooker or Wesley who has the last word, but God Himself. Traditionalism always means a standstill, a stagnation of the flow of living thought. It means repristination; we simply repeat the words and thoughts of the fathers and forget to study the problem of our modern situation afresh in the light of the ever living Word of God. (3) We are also thankful for Barth's emphasis on *revelation as the act of God*. Although we believe that Barth is onesided in his emphasis by rejecting every idea of revealed-ness (as he calls it), yet we should always be aware of the fact that indeed we can never control God in His revelation. The Bible undoubtedly *is* the Word of God, but this does not mean that now I *have* God's Word and can dispose of it. It always remains His, and without the free and sovereign operation of His Spirit it remains a closed book for me, however 'high' my view of it may be.

(4) We further gratefully notice Barth's recognition of the *importance of preaching*. Owing to Barth's influence many ministers in many churches have rediscovered the true

nature of preaching. They have realized again that preaching is not a topical lecture or an outpouring of personal experiences, but the proclamation of God's Word. Of course, it is not on the same level with the Word of God as witnessed to in the Bible. The preacher of today is not eye- and earwitness as the original apostle. But he may witness to the same truth, God's grace in Jesus Christ, and his witness too is God's Word.

(5) We can also be very thankful for Barth's *Christological approach*. Although at this point too – or even better: precisely at this point – we have very grave objections to Barth's theology, yet we do agree that the formula 'in Christ' is of paramount importance for our understanding of God's revelation. Take, for example, what the N.T. says about our election: 'He chose us in Him' (Eph. 1: 4). We cannot possibly speak of election apart from Jesus Christ. If we do this, we are no longer dealing with the Biblical concept of predestination, a concept full of light and joy, but we have exchanged it for an arbitrary decree, which very much resembles the Islamic concept of predestination and is nothing else than a dark abyss of terror.

In general we would say: we can learn much from Barth. It is always worthwhile to listen to him. Even if you disagree, you still receive a stimulus for your own thinking.

No justice to Scriptures

Our deep appreciation, however, does not alter the fact that we cannot follow Barth in all his ways. In our opinion there are very serious defects

in his theology, and they touch the very heart of it. Barth's theology has often been called neo-orthodoxy. I believe this is a very apt description. In many aspects it is orthodox, e.g. in the doctrine of the Trinity and the Person of Christ. Barth has no difficulty in accepting both the Nicean and the Chalcedonian definitions. And yet his theology is 'neo'. The whole approach is so different that it can in no way be equated with what we understand by orthodoxy. Of course, the mere fact of disagreement with the traditional Lutheran or Reformed position does not automatically condemn Barth. Such a conclusion would only prove that we ourselves are traditionalists. Much more serious is the fact that, as far as we can see, Barth does no justice to Scripture in some essential aspects of his theology. We mention two of them.

(a) Barth's Doctrine of Scripture
Although we gratefully note that Barth has broken with the liberal view of the Bible and once again understands the true nature of revelation (God coming to man), yet we believe that he still seriously derogates from the revelational character of the Bible by declaring that it is only *indirectly* the Word of God. In our opinion this is not what the Bible itself claims to be. The Bible nowhere makes a distinction, let alone a contrast, between the human witness (which is fallible) and the Word of God (which is *per definitionem* infallible). The Bible nowhere suggests that it *becomes* the Word only where and whenever it pleases God, but it comes to us with the direct claim: 'Thus saith the

Lord'. Or as Jesus Himself said to His disciples: 'He who hears you, hears me' (Luke 10: 16).¹⁰

(b) Barth's Christological Approach Fully maintaining what we have said in appreciation of this Christological emphasis, we yet believe that the way Barth operates with the formula 'in Christ' is often nothing else than a Barthian construction imposed upon the Bible. We also believe that on many points it results in a deformation of the Biblical message. For instance, we cannot but see his Christological approach to the doctrine of creation or his reversal of the Pauline order Adam-Christ as an *a priori* scheme which is forced upon the Biblical message of creation. Although it is fully true that the creation did not take place apart from Christ (cf. John 1: 1-3; Col. 1: 15-17; Heb. 1: 1-3) and also that Adam was created with a view to Christ (cf. Rom. 5: 14 'Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come'), yet this does not give us the right to reverse the order and ignore the significance of the creation as an independent act of God, with its own inherent meaning. With a reference to Barth's own words, cited earlier in this article, we can certainly affirm that he does violence to the Biblical time-sequence. The incarnation exchanges places with the creation (contrary to John 1, where the historical order is fully recognized and honoured), the result being that the creation becomes a mere means to an end instead of being an end in itself. It is therefore no wonder that Barth cannot see life on the new earth as a continuation of this life. Indeed, there is no place for such a continuation, as this would imply

an independent purpose of the creation. All that is to be expected, according to Barth, is the eternalization of this life, which will eternally stand before God, with the light of God's grace in Jesus Christ shining upon it.¹¹

Predestination and preaching

Especially objectionable is Barth's doctrine of predestination. Quite apart from the question whether Barth's picture of the Reformation doctrine is not in many respects a caricature (we believe this is so), it is undeniable that Barth's own doctrine goes beyond Scripture and results in a form of preaching which is definitely unscriptural. Emil Brunner has severely criticized Barth at this point, and we believe that to a large extent his criticism is correct. In particular he takes issue with the idea that Jesus Christ is the only man who is rejected. In Brunner's opinion this virtually means that 'we cannot speak at all about a being lost; there is no possibility of damnation and therefore no divine final judgment.'¹² All men are elect in Jesus Christ, whether they know it or not. The only task for the preacher is to inform them of this grand fact. But is this indeed the Biblical idea of proclamation? Where in this new preaching is a place for the Biblical warning against unbelief? Where is there a place for the Biblical threat of everlasting damnation? Brunner illustrates the point very sharply, when he speaks of men who are threatened with shipwreck at sea. 'In reality, however, they are not at all on a sea where they can founder, but in shallow water in which they cannot drown. They just do not know it.'¹³

Illegitimate triumph

In his valuable and penetrating analysis of Barth's theology G. C. Berkouwer characterizes it as a theology of 'The Triumph of Grace'. Barth himself has discussed this analysis and characterization in one of the latest volumes of his Dogmatics¹⁴ and declared that his theology would be better characterized by the well known words of Blumhardt Sr.: 'Jesus ist Sieger' (Jesus is Victor). However this may be, we believe that Berkouwer's formulation touches the heart of the Barthian theology. Indeed, this is a theology of triumph, a *theologia gloriae*, but then not of human glory, but of the glory of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Throughout every aspect of Barth's theology this triumph of grace can be traced.

The all-important question, however, is: Is this triumph legitimate? We are afraid that the answer is No. For this reason we would have preferred a slight change in the title of Berkouwer's book. The word 'Triumph' should have been put between inverted commas!

We wish to emphasize that in our opinion Barth's triumph is not legitimate. We do not claim that Barth emphasizes God's grace too much. As Berkouwer rightly remarks, one can never do that. God's grace in Jesus Christ is the greatest miracle in the world! Every criticism of Barth along this line would completely miss the mark. The real choice is not between more grace or less grace, but between the legitimacy or illegitimacy of our speaking of grace. Is the triumph of which Barth speaks in accordance with Scripture? We

for ourselves believe that Barth says more than the Bible allows him to say. When Barth, e.g., says that every human being is objectively redeemed in Christ, though he may not know it subjectively, he definitely goes beyond Scripture. Personally we would here speak of an *objectivism of grace* rather than of a triumph of grace. And as we have seen, it has far-reaching consequences for Barth's method of preaching.

God all in all

Of course, we on our side should never, in reaction, minimize the riches and greatness of God's grace. To put it very plainly: it is not scriptural at all to fill hell to the full. Yet, on the other hand, it is not scriptural either to juggle hell away and rob the proclamation of the gospel of its accompanying warning. The Bible knows about both light and shadow, salvation and condemnation, eternal life and everlasting death. But at the same time we must immediately say that the two aspects are not in a symmetrical harmony. The light is the more important. The real message of the Bible is God's love in Christ and the end of all things will indeed be the triumph of God's grace. The end will be God all in all. How this shall be, we do not know, but we do know that it is true. How typical and comforting is the end of the book of Revelation. Chapter 20 ends with the fact that Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire, and all those whose name was not found written in the book of life, were also thrown into the lake of fire. But that is also the

last word about it in the Bible. After that we read of the new heaven and the new earth only, and of God's dwelling with men. That is the final end – the triumph of God's grace.

NOTES

¹ *Römerbrief*, 1923, Vorwort p. XIV.

² *Ibid.*

³ Cf. Barth, *Theologische Fragen und Antworten* (*Gesammelte Vorträge*, 3. Band), 1957, 'Ein Briefwechsel mit Adolf von Harnack', pp. 7-31.

⁴ *Church Dogmatics* (*C.D.*), II, 2, pp. 95ff., 116ff.

⁵ *C.D.*, III, 1, *passim*.

⁶ *Dogmatics in Outline*, 1958, pp. 57-8.

⁷ 'Gospel and Law' (1956) in *God, Grace and Gospel* (*Scott. Journal of Theol.*, Occasional Papers, No. 8) 1959.

⁸ *C.D.* III, 2, *passim*. Cf. my doctoral thesis: *De theologische tijd bij Karl Barth*, (The theological time-aspect in Barth's theology), 1955.

⁹ *Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5* (1952) (*Scott. Journal of Theol.*, Occasional Papers, No. 5) 1956.

¹⁰ Cf. my book, *Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture*, Eerdmans, 1962.

¹¹ Cf. *C.D.*, III, 2, paragr. 47.

¹² E. Brunner, *Dogmatik*, I, p. 377. Cf. also G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 1956, Ch. X 'The Universality of the Triumph'.

¹³ *Op. cit.*, p. 379.

¹⁴ *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, 3, pp. 198f.