

# Karl Barth's View of Scripture

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## THE NEEDS OF THE PREACHER

Barth has always been deeply interested in the problem of Scripture. Often he has been called «the theologian of the Word». It may, of course, be debated whether this is really true, but it cannot be denied that from the beginning of his theological career this has been his great aim.

His interest in this doctrine was never merely theological or academic. It was born out of the need of his ministry, particularly out of the central task of the Christian ministry, preaching the Word of God. In 1911, after the completion of his theological study, he became a minister in Safenwill, a small mountain village in one of the cantons of Switzerland. This meant that he had to preach twice every Sunday. But how to do this? What was the message of God for the people entrusted to his care? In one of his papers, a lecture given to a meeting of Reformed Ministers, he later made the following biographical comment:

*«Our theology did not come into being as the result of any desire*

of ours to form a school or to devise a system: it arose simply out of what we felt to be the «need and promise of Christian preaching» ... For twelve years I was a minister as all of you are. I had my theology. It was not really mine, to be sure, but that of my unforgotten teacher Wilhelm Herrmann, grafted upon the principles which I had learned, less consciously, in my native home — the principles of those Reformed Churches which today I represent ... Once in the ministry, I found myself growing away from these theological habits of thought and being forced back at every point more and more upon the specific minister's problem, the sermon». <sup>1</sup>

The liberal theology of his teachers could not really help him. The tragedy was that they no longer knew of revelation. All they had was man's ideas about God. Revelation of God by God Himself had been exchanged for discovery of God by man. But what about orthodoxy? As the above quotation indicates, Barth was reared in an orthodox Reformed home. His father was professor of New Testament in the university of Berne. Barth discovered that orthodoxy could not help him either. To be sure, it still knew something of revelation, but in orthodoxy revelation was frozen into a system of truths about

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton, 1957, 100. Original: *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie*, Munich, 1929.

God. In orthodoxy man has the revelation, for God is identified with the authority of a book.

The great task therefore was to rethink the whole biblical concept of revelation. Barth has devoted almost twenty years to this task. In 1919 the first edition of his *Commentary on Romans* appeared. In 1932 and 1938 he published the final edition of the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, in which he treats the doctrine of Scripture at great length.

#### BEGINNING WITH FAITH

Barth takes his starting point in faith. We have to begin with accepting the Bible in faith. We have to listen obediently and submit ourselves to its message, which has authority over us. Barth emphatically maintains that this is the only possibility, for there is no authority outside the Bible to which we can appeal in order to «prove» the authority of the Bible. «The Lordship of the Triune God proves itself to be a fact in our obedient listening to the Bible». <sup>2</sup>

If at this point Roman Catholic theology would say: «But this is reasoning in a circle; you need the authority of the Church to support your claim for the Bible», Barth is not at all impressed. He rightly answers: If the Bible is the Word of God, then there is no higher authority which can prove the Bible, then the Bible itself is the highest authority and it will prove it-

<sup>2</sup> C.D., I, 2, 458.

self. <sup>3</sup> And so in fact it does. Constantly it proves itself as the Word of God to its countless readers and listeners.

There can be no doubt that this starting point is fully scriptural. Indeed, the Bible never tries to «prove» itself on a merely intellectual basis. It simply comes with its claim and the only attitude possible is that of submission, obedience, faith.

#### SCRIPTURE AS WITNESS

Coming to Barth's actual doctrine of Scripture we find that he divides it into two sections: (a) Scripture as the witness to divine revelation; and (b) Scripture as the Word of God. We shall first discuss the former of the two: Scripture as the witness to revelation.

The word *witness* has been selected intentionally and very carefully. According to Barth it contains two valuable elements. First, it contains an element of *limitation*.

«A witness is not absolutely identical with that to which it witnesses. This is also true of the Bible. In the Bible we meet with human words, written in human speech. Through these words we hear of the Lordship of the Triune God, i.e., of revelation. But the witness itself is not revelation. It is only — and that is the limitation — witness to it». <sup>4</sup>

But the limitation-aspect is not all. There is also a second, a *positive element*.

«In this limitation the Bible is not distinguished from revelation. It is

simply revelation as it comes to us, mediating and therefore accommodating itself — to us who are not ourselves prophets and apostles and therefore not the immediate and direct recipients of the one revelation, witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ ... A real witness is not identical with that to which it witnesses, but it sets it before us ... (This is again true of the Bible.) If we have really listened to the biblical words in all their humanity, if we have accepted them as witness, we have obviously not only heard of the lordship of the Triune God, but by this means it has become for us an actual presence and event». <sup>5</sup>

So the word «witness» has a double function. On the one hand, it indicates distinctiveness. On the other, it denotes unity.

#### CONCEPT OF REVELATION

But why does Barth emphasize this so strongly? The answer is to be found in his concept of *revelation*. Within the compass of this article I cannot deal with it at great length. It must suffice to mention some of the main aspects. In Barth's opin-

<sup>3</sup> In fact, of course, the R.C. view is no real improvement on the Protestant «logical circle». The only thing that happens is that Rome replaces the circle (with its one centre: the testimony of the Bible itself) by an ellipse (with two foci: Bible and Church). The circular reasoning as such remains. It is only more intricate, because there is a constant oscillating between the two foci!

<sup>4</sup> C.D. I, 2, 463.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

ion revelation is always an *event*. Revelation is never static, but always dynamic. It is always God's own act. God always is the subject: He reveals Himself. For this reason it is not possible for the Bible writers to reveal God. They can only point to the divine act of revelation. More than once Barth has compared their task with that of John the Baptist, who had to do only one thing: point to Jesus, «Behold the lamb of God, that takes away the sin of the world». But when and where it pleases God to use the witness, the witness and the event become one. There real revelation by God Himself, through the human witness, takes place. In other words, in itself there is no direct identity between the witness and revelation. We can speak only of an *indirect identity*. We always have to distinguish between the «Deus dixit» and, for instance, the «Paulus dixit». Yet, in the event of revelation, the two become one.

#### BIBLICAL IDEA OF WITNESS

When we try to evaluate this view, we must begin with the observation that the word «witness» is a genuinely scriptural term. We often meet with it in the New Testament. Jesus Himself calls his apostles His witnesses. The apostles themselves again and again appeal to the witness-character of their office. They also include the Old Testament prophets, for these men too were witnesses of Christ, pointing forward to his coming. But does this word, as used in the

New Testament, also have the aspect of limitation? Again we cannot discuss the whole setting of the word in the New Testament,<sup>6</sup> but as far as we can see, there is no ground in the New Testament for introducing this element of limitation in Barth's fashion. On the contrary, in the New Testament the emphasis is always on the fact that these men speak the truth, God's truth; they are reliable, for they speak what they have heard and seen: what they say is the Word of God. Dr. R. Schippers, professor of New Testament in the Free University at Amsterdam, who wrote his doctoral thesis on the term «Witnesses» in the New Testament, comes to the following conclusion:

*«In Scripture the witness is the rendering of the facts, under the pressure of the consciousness that the course of justice shall be dominated by the rendering. Therefore the witness is eyewitness and ear-witness. The witnesses do not bring their faults, their follies, their views, their ideas, but the record of what they heard and saw. The witness fully disappears behind the history he records. Over against the witness all reservation falls away. To violate the legitimate witness is to violate the history. There is a historical necessity for the believers to live with this witness, but there is nothing in it which has to be seen as «limitation».*

<sup>6</sup> See for a fuller discussion my book, Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture, Eerdmans, 1962, 33f.

In this connection I would like to point to three important texts, which all have a bearing on our subject: Luke 10:16, «He who hears you, hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me»; Matt. 10:40, «He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me»; John 20:20, «As the Father has sent me, even so I send you». In these words, there is no trace whatever of limitation. On the contrary, Jesus identifies Himself completely with his apostles, his witnesses, and unequivocally declares that their witness, their message, is *his* message.

#### WITNESS OF THE SPIRIT

We should also note the close connection between the witness of the apostles and the witness of the Holy Spirit. Very important is what we read in Acts 5:32, «And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him». Cf. also what we read in the report on the Jerusalem Conference in Acts 15:28, «For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .». Again there is no trace of limitation. Rightly F. F. Bruce comments on the first passage as follows: «Here we mark again the apostolic community's consciousness of being possessed and indwelt by the Spirit to such a degree that they were his organs of expression» (ad. loc.).

We believe that the word «identification» is not too strong here. And it should not be taken merely

in the sense of an «indirect identity», as Barth wants us to do, but it is a «direct» identification. Naturally, this does not at all mean that the Holy Spirit is «locked up» in human words. We fully maintain that He is the living Spirit of God, the living God Himself. In the identification the initiative is fully His. We can never possess God's Word in the sense of controlling it. It is and remains *God's* Word. But at the same time we want to maintain: it *is* God's Word!

#### HUMAN AND FALLIBLE

What are the implications of Barth's emphasis on the witness-character of the Bible? As we saw before, Barth distinguishes between the «Deus dixit» and the «Paulus dixit».

(a) The Bible is *fully human*. In itself it is no more than an historical document for the history of Israel and the later Jewish-Christian community that evolved from Israel. In itself it is not divine at all. Precisely here do we find the great, essential difference from the person of Jesus Christ. In Him there is a personal union between the divine and the human nature. But in the case of the Bible writers there is not such a unity. They were fully human and their product is fully human too.

(b) Barth, however, goes yet a step further. The Bible is not only human, but also *fallible*.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also H. N. Ridderbos, The Authority of the N.T. Scriptures, 1963, ch. 14, «Marturia» (Witness).

«The prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were real, historical men as we are, and therefore sinful in their action, and capable and actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word».<sup>8</sup>

As evidence Barth mentions the following points: (1) the biblical world-view and view of man, which are definitely not correct; (2) the writers' understanding of history, which is often faulty; (3) the overlappings and contradictions, even in the religious or theological content.

From all this it becomes quite obvious that Barth has no objections against higher criticism. In fact, more than once he has openly and explicitly defended it.<sup>9</sup>

#### HUMAN LIMITATION

What shall we say of these implications? It will be evident that we cannot and do not have any objection against his emphasis on the full humanity of Scripture. As a matter of fact, this has always been recognized by the great majority of conservative scholars. The Holy Spirit definitely did not use the Bible writers as a kind of flute, or to use modern terminology, as a typewriter. In other words, we fully reject any mechanical conception of inspiration. Most conservative scholars would even go

<sup>8</sup> C.D. I, 2, 529.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. my book, 61ff.

further and be willing to admit that this full humanity of the Bible also implies a kind of limitation. In his Homily on John 1:1, St. Augustine already said:

«For to speak of the matter as it is, who is able? I venture to say, my brethren, perhaps not John himself spoke of the matter as it is, but even he only, as he was able; for it was man that spoke of God; inspired indeed by God, but still man. Because he was inspired, he said something; if he had not been inspired, he would have said nothing; but because a man inspired, he spoke not the whole, but what a man could, he spoke (quod potuit homo, dixit)».

In this same connection John Calvin used to speak of the «accommodatio Dei». Conservative theologians always saw a parallel here with the Christology. As the Logos became «sarx», real flesh, in the sense of Adam's weakened nature after the Fall (but without sin), so also the Bible is really and fully human.

But does this also imply *fallibility*? Conservative theology has always rejected this and in my opinion rightly so. Such a rejection is already implied in the parallel with the Christology, a parallel which is also accepted by Barth. Dr. Herman Bavinck, for instance, writes in his *Reformed Dogmatics*: «Also in Holy Scripture we have to acknowledge the weak and humble, the form of a servant. But — like the human nature in Christ, however weak and humble, was free from all sin,

so also Holy Scripture is conceived without any stain (sine labe concepta)».<sup>10</sup>

#### ALLEGED EVIDENCE FOR FALLIBILITY

Personally I do not find Barth's proofs for the fallibility of Scripture very strong or convincing.

(1) *The biblical view of world and man*. It is an undeniable fact that in the Bible we do find the old, ancient world-view (tripartition of the universe, etc.). But does this mean fallibility? Does this not depend on the question whether the Bible wants to *teach* us such a tripartition as the divine truth? It is quite evident, however, that this is not at all the intention of the Bible. This world-view (and the same is true of the primitive anthropology) is only the form in which the message is conveyed to the people of those days. Even the Lord Himself makes use of it in the second commandment! But in no instance is it part of the message itself.

(2) *The writers' understanding of history*. Again we must admit that in many respects their understanding of history is quite different from modern historiography. To bring this out Barth introduces the concept of *saga*. This is definitely not an easy concept to define. It can easily be misunderstood and confused with another concept that is quite popular in modern theology: *myth*. Barth, however, rejects the idea of *myth*. A *myth* has nothing to do with an historical event. It is nothing else than a certain

truth, philosophical or theological, which is clothed in the garment of an historical event which in reality never took place. (Cf., for instance, present-day existential interpretations of the story of the Fall). *Saga*, in Barth's theology, is quite different. It deals with history. It refers us to a real historical event. But — and this is the reason why the form of *saga* is used — there are some events which cannot adequately be expressed in human words and pictures. This is especially true of many events narrated in the Bible. In many of these biblical events we have to do with *God's acts*, which naturally cannot be expressed in ordinary human words. Some events are even purely divine, such as the creation of the world and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Summarizing his own view Barth says: «To put it cautiously, the Bible contains little pure «history» and little pure *saga*, and little of both that can be unequivocally recognized as the one or the other. The two elements are usually mixed. In the Bible we usually have to reckon with both history and *saga*».<sup>11</sup>

There is no doubt that this concept of *saga* is much better and, for conservative scholars, much more acceptable than Bultmann's conception of *myth*. In Barth's *saga* we see a clear awareness of the historical nature of the Christian faith

<sup>10</sup> H. Bavinck *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, Vol. I, 406.*

<sup>11</sup> C.D. III, 1, 82.

and a serious attempt is made to safeguard the reality of the history of salvation. One could apply it, for example, to the story of the Fall, explain its individual features as «sagenhaft» and yet maintain the full historicity of the Fall (which, by the way, Barth himself does not seem to do.<sup>12</sup>) Yet there are some important aspects, which seem to exclude the application of the term «saga» to the biblical history. First, the Bible itself nowhere gives the impression of speaking in the form of saga or legend.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly, it often describes matters in a way different from what we in our day are used to, but this fact does not yet give us the right to speak of saga. Further, the word «saga» is too tainted. It always carries the connotation of being poetical and therefore not «real». Finally, even when it is used *in bonam partem*, it seems to derogate from the truly historical nature of biblical history. One may ask here: What is left of the fact itself when its description is a matter of poetry? Is it not like a skeleton without flesh? Who would ever recognize the person to whom the skeleton belonged? In other words, does a fact not cease to be this particular fact when its *accidentia* are taken away? Is such a fact not a pure abstraction?

We do admit, of course, that in the Bible we find a special kind of

<sup>12</sup> Cf. my book, 101f.

<sup>13</sup> The latter term is used by Barth when historical persons are involved.

historiography. The Bible is never interested in «bare» facts, but always gives us fact plus interpretation. It always sets the facts in a framework of interpretation. This explains, for instance, many of the differences between Samuel and Kings, on the one hand, and Chronicles, on the other. The author of Chronicles approaches the material from a different point of view, namely, that of the priest. But all this has nothing to do with saga. Both authors give us the real facts with their *accidentia*. All that happens is that they place the facts in a special context and thus give them a special emphasis. One could speak here of «prophetic» historiography.

(3) *The overlappings and contradiction*, also in the religious and theological contents. At this point Barth does not give specific examples. He only mentions in a very general way the relation between the Synoptics and John, between Paul and James. Personally we do not believe that it is correct here to speak of contradictions and overlappings. I would prefer to speak of different emphases, different approaches, different contexts, which, of course, is quite different from speaking of contradictions.

#### BIBLE AS WORD OF GOD

Does the above mean that Barth accepts *dualism* as the solution for the problem of Scripture? By no means. In fact, he utterly rejects all dualism. He knows too well that

it always leads to subjectivism. It is not surprising, therefore, to hear him declare emphatically that we have no right to make any selection. If we want to hear God's word, he says, we have to go to *these texts*. Here we hear the witnesses speak. We who come after them are bound to their words. In this connection Barth even speaks of the «relative» rightness of the verbal inspiration theory. Yet this theory went too far when it assumed a *direct identity* between the texts and the Word of God. It simply identified the Word of God with the texts. As we saw before, Barth does not want to go further than an «indirect» identity. Yet, even so, it is our task to knock at the door of the texts and wait. We have to listen to the witnesses and pray the Lord to speak to us through their witness. We have to rely on His promise that He will do so at His time. Then, and only then, there is a direct identity. Then, and only then, the Bible is the Word of God. Yes, Barth too wants to maintain the word «is».

«We believe in and with the Church that Holy Scripture has . . . priority over all other writings and authorities, even those of the Church. We believe in and with the Church that Holy Scripture as the original and legitimate witness of divine revelation is itself the Word of God».<sup>14</sup>

But this «has» and «is» does not mean that man under any circum-

<sup>14</sup> C.D. I, 2, 502.

stances has God's revelation at his disposal. These words point to *God's* disposing, His action and control. The Bible is the word of God, so far as God lets it be His Word. It is the Word of God in the act of God making it His Word, or in the fact of *becoming* the Word of God. More than once Barth has used the illustration of the Pool of Bethesda. The water did not possess the healing power as an inherent quality, but it became effectively healing when it pleased God to send His angel to stir the water. In a word, the whole thing is a *miracle*.

#### INSPIRATION

Connected with all this is the fact that Barth has a different conception of *inspiration*. To him inspiration is one action of the Holy Spirit, taking place in two phases. (a) There is His action upon the Bible writers: He inspired them in the writing down of their witness. (b) There is His action in the listeners or readers, who now hear the witness as the Word of God for them. «The theopneustia is the act of revelation in which the prophets and apostles in their humanity became what they were and in which alone in their humanity they can become to us what they are».<sup>15</sup> «The circle which led from the divine benefits to the Apostle instructed by the Spirit and authorized to speak by the Spirit now closes at the hearer of the Apostle, who again by the Spirit is enabled to receive as is

<sup>15</sup> *Op. cit.*, 508.

necessary. The hearer, too, in his existence as such is part of the miracle which takes place at this point».<sup>16</sup>

In our opinion there is some confusion in Barth's thinking on this point. We also believe that the Bible speaks of a twofold action of the Spirit, but — it calls only the first one «inspiration». The term is reserved for the operation of the Spirit upon the writers, who had to pass on to others the revelation they had received from God. Only through this operation of the Spirit their human word can at the same time be the Word of God, and not simply a pious word of man about God. But according to the Bible itself this operation of the Spirit upon the original writers is a *completed action*. The second action, namely, that upon the later readers and listeners, which is equally necessary and which is also an action of the Spirit Himself, is never called «inspiration». The Bible uses a different term: *illumination (pho-tismos)*. This is the action of the same Spirit in the subject of the reader or listener, opening his blind eyes, quickening his cold, dead heart. Only through this action does the Word of God come «home» to the sinner.

The fact that Barth combines the two actions into one is, of course, linked up with his conception of revelation. Revelation must always be an event. Therefore there cannot be a revelation that is com-

pleted with the inspiration of the original authors. Therefore the second phase must be part of the whole action. Without it there cannot be a revelation at all, but only a human, fallible witness.

#### GOD'S SOVEREIGN FREEDOM

What is the *background* of this whole conception? As far as we can see, it is Barth's conception of *divine freedom*. Time and again Barth emphatically states that God is the free and sovereign One, who is free and sovereign in all His actions, particularly in the action of revelation. To say that one of the attributes of the Bible is its being the Word of God, is to violate the Word of God, which is God Himself — to violate the freedom and sovereignty of God.<sup>17</sup>

God is free and sovereign. That means: man has in no way power or control over His Word. Barth's great objection to Liberalism is that it has no idea of this freedom and sovereignty of God. It had no idea even of revelation at all. But Orthodoxy did not have the proper view either. It believed that it «had» God's Word in the Bible and therefore had power over the Word of God. Only the Reformers really recognized God's freedom. They knew that revelation always remains God's own prerogative and that we can only receive His Word as a miracle of grace. It was the great tragedy of the following centuries that Protestant Orthodoxy

forgot this great discovery of the Reformers and returned to the wrong views of the Early Church with its mechanical conception of inspiration.

We have no quarrel with Barth as to his statement that God is free and sovereign. This is a genuinely scriptural idea. One only needs to read the story of I Sam. 4. Israel, having been defeated by the Philistines, bring the ark of the Lord into the camp. They believe that through the ark they can force God to help them. He will have to defend and protect His own ark and in this way He will have to give them victory. But God can never be coerced by man, not even by His own chosen people. God gives both Israel and the ark into the hands of the Philistines. Does this mean, however, that the ark is not really God's ark? Read chapter 5 and you see how the same God forces the Philistines, who believe that they have captured Israel's God, to let His ark go and send it back to Israel. When we apply this to the Bible, we can say that God does not allow us to misuse his Word by thinking that we *have* his revelation and can do with it whatever we like. Then the Bible becomes dead and powerless in our hands. And yet it is and remains His Word that never returns to Him empty (Is. 55:11).

Perhaps we could summarize it as follows. Barth's error is not that he overemphasizes God's sovereignty, but it is rather the opposite. He does not emphasize it enough! God

is so great that even when He gives his Word to us, it still is His Word. He remains sovereign also in His gifts.

#### THE BIBLE'S AUTHORITY

Let me finally add a few words about Barth's view of the *authority of the Bible*. Here we have a point on which we can wholeheartedly agree with him. He defends the absolute authority of the Bible against two attacks. On one hand, there is the church of Rome, which by its view of the church derogates from the authority of the Bible. On the other hand, there is Neo-Protestantism, which places man's authority (either through reason or experience or existential analysis) over against that of the Bible. Barth rightly maintains that, if the Bible is God's Word, there is but one correct attitude for man; one of complete submission, God speaks to us. We can only hear and obey.

Let us remember that this is also true of theologians and theological students. Perhaps it is more difficult for us than for any other category of believers. For us the Bible is also a tool, a kind of textbook, which becomes so familiar because we use it so often. There is the constant danger of forgetting that it is *God's Word*. For us, too, there is only one right attitude: «Speak, Lord, for thy servant hears». It is not we who have to speak first and put our ideas into and upon the Bible, but He has to speak and we can only listen, reverently, obediently, believingly.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, 516.

<sup>17</sup> *Cf. op. cit.*, 513.