

# CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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The Ecumenical Movement  
HERMANN SASSE

The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth  
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Preaching for the Church  
ARTHUR C. REPP—GEORGE W. HOYER

Homiletics

Theological Observer

Book Review

VOL. XXXI

*February 1960*

No. 2

# The Word of God in the Theology of Karl Barth<sup>1</sup>

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THE purpose of this series of articles is to acquaint the reader with the theology of the leading Protestant theologian of our day, Karl Barth.<sup>2</sup> It is often more rewarding to examine one theologian of real stature rather than dissipate our limited space upon a more sketchy overview of the ideas of two or three well-known theologians. And Barth is the man whom we must still choose today. Certainly Bultmann and Tillich, whose theologies are philosophically oriented and structured, will have far less to offer the Christian Church. Brunner, who really never left the ground of liberalism, is no longer taken seriously by many today.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Barth's writings, unless otherwise designated, are to his *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936—). Vol. I, 1 was translated by Prof. G. T. Thomson in 1936. Beginning in 1956, under the editorship of T. F. Torrance, all the other volumes except the latest, IV, 3, and part of III have been translated. I have refrained from quoting from Barth's earlier works because in his *Church Dogmatics* he has departed from much that he said previously. In 1927 Barth began a dogmatics entitled *Christliche Dogmatik* which never got beyond the first volume. He became dissatisfied with what he wrote there and, rather than revise the material, began anew, putting out in 1932 the first half of Vol. I of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik*. It is this *Church Dogmatics* of Barth's which offers his mature views on prolegomena, the Word, reconciliation, and most theological issues.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Mackintosh. *Types of Modern Theology* (London: Nisbet and Co., 1937), p. 263: Karl Barth is the "greatest figure in Christian theology that has appeared for decades." Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Wm. H. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1956), Ch. 1.

Barth, however, whose works are now coming out rapidly in translation, is still a theologian to be reckoned with. Only lately a rash of books has appeared, commenting on his theology.

Not Barth's entire theology can come within our purview. Therefore, I have chosen to represent and evaluate his position in three articles on the following important themes: "The Word," "Prolegomena," "Justification and Reconciliation." On the first theme Barth has made his greatest impact. On the other two he has much to offer; he is at his best.

## THE WORD

A word must be said on how we propose to assess Barth. We can really judge his theological contribution only by two standards. First, we must judge him according to his background—what he came out of and what he is speaking against—and this is not historic Christianity and orthodoxy but Modernism and liberalism. And we must judge him in comparison with his contemporaries. Here we shall often find reason to be thankful to him and for him. For he speaks out against humanism for a living God and a God who has spoken, and he speaks out against liberalism for a doctrine of sin, of God's wrath, and God's reconciliation through Christ. Listen to the eulogy which Mackintosh offers (p. 317):

With a volcanic vehemence—feeling that passion alone is suited to the occasion—he is endeavouring to draw the Christian mind of his generation back to the truth

in which all other truth that counts is embraced, viz., that in the Bible God has uttered His absolute and ineffably gracious will. There is an objective revelation, which puts every religious idea of man at its bar. . . . He exposes all attempts to think of God simply in terms of man, to climb to a knowledge of God by the resolute exercise of reason or the technique of mysticism, to conceive God as a compound of the best things in our own nature, or to say genially that the presence of God in Jesus and in ourselves is of much the same kind. It is plain that one who has learned from Scripture the illimitable difference between God and man will have much that is overwhelming to say concerning fashionable modern ideas of immanence, of evolution as an all-embracing category of reflection, of inevitable progress—above all, of Pelagian notions of sin.

Yes, in Barth's theology is much we can be thankful for. But in addition to his verbosity and abstruseness there is much that is most insidious. And here is where our second standard of judgment must be applied: we must assess him by what we already know, by our understanding of theology (acquired through our own study of Scripture), by Luther, the Symbols and classical Lutheranism. And we really cannot do otherwise. Only when we assess him in just such a way do we really know where we are with him. And it is both our duty and our right to do just this as Lutherans. The very nature of dogmatics as it was first worked out by Melancthon and Chemnitz was to formulate, on the basis of clear Scripture passages and sound exegesis, a certain *summa doctrinae coelestis* (Chemnitz) or *praecipui loci* (Melancthon, Leyser) which were then to be helpful and normative in judging all theology. Barth himself agrees with this practice.

The task of a dogmatician consists in combining the disciplines of exegesis and church history, in the interest of pure doctrine and clear testimony in the church. Barth says that dogmatics stands between exegesis and practical theology (I, 2, 769, 771). In a sense dogmatics has no essence of its own but correlates the results of exegesis with the experience of the church for the purpose of a coherent, systematic, and timely presentation of Christian doctrine. If this is true, Barth qualifies today as a theologian. Brunner does not, for he uses history only for his own immediate needs, and he does not do serious exegesis. Aulén does not, for he operates with a motif methodology which cannot show that his theology is drawn from Scripture. Prenter has such a weak position on Scripture as the *principium cognoscendi* that exegesis rarely shows up as the basis of his assertions. Of all modern theologians (with the exception of Elert and conservative Lutheran and Reformed theologians) only Barth qualifies as a dogmatician in this sense. He is instructive because he actually engages in exegesis [cf. his study of John 3:16 and 2 Cor. 5 (IV, 1, 70 ff.) and his discussion of the *pro nobis* (IV, 1, 273)] and because he has seriously acquainted himself with the theology not only of Luther and Calvin but also of the older church fathers and of orthodoxy. And if he disagrees with orthodoxy he at least offers a tolerably complete and sympathetic account of orthodoxy's position on various *loci*, something that Brunner and Prenter have not seen fit to do. Barth appreciates the fact that the old orthodox dogmaticians were first-rate dogmaticians, which is seen by the fact that he quotes them almost as often as Pieper does. Barth's historical

surveys which run through his dogmatics are real gems, always showing a vast knowledge and keen insight.

One further introductory remark at the outset: to assess Barth's theology accurately is a chore, for his work has been done over a long period of time, and he often contradicts himself. Moreover, his style is difficult. It has been called spiral. This means that he introduces a point and approaches it from many different angles until he has finally exhausted the subject and oftentimes the reader as well. A statement of T. F. Torrance in his introduction to Vol. I, 2 may be instructive here.

By directing relentless questions to the subject of inquiry Barth seeks to let the truth declare itself clearly and positively, and then he seeks to express the truth in its own wholeness without breaking it up into parts and thus dissolving its essential nature by unreal distinctions. It is this disciplined purpose which governs his style throughout and greatly lengthens the exposition. At every point he probes ruthlessly into the subject from all angles to make it declare itself, and then in long balanced sentences he sets the truth forth surrounded with careful clarifications and exact delimitations in subordinate clauses, and yet in such a way that by means of these *Abgrenzungen*, as he calls them, the whole truth is made to appear in its own manifoldness and in its native force.

These words tell us that we must read Barth thoroughly to understand him, and if we read him in the right spirit we shall be rewarded. With these brief propaedeutics to Barth I now pass over to the consideration of the doctrine of the Word in Barth's theology.

#### A. "THE THEOLOGY OF THE WORD"

We begin with a treatment of Barth's theology of the Word rather than his prolegomena because his doctrine of the

Word is found within the framework of his prolegomena. Inasmuch as his prolegomena consider primarily how the church should listen to the Word and then declare that Word — for Barth like older orthodoxy insists that Scripture is the *principium cognoscendi* — we must know what he means by the Word of God and what he means by Scripture before we can consider what he means by theology and dogmatics.

"The Theology of the Word" is probably the best description of Barth's theology.<sup>3</sup> The great question is this: Has God spoken? Barth says yes. Therefore we seek and find God only in His Word. Modernism has by-passed the entire conception of the Word of God. And the trouble with most modern theology for Barth is that it has made it the test of religion to understand rather than listen, obey, and set forth the Word of God. The concentration in Modernism as in Rome has been on the church rather than on the Word. But the church stands under the authority and judgment of the Word.

#### B. REVELATION

To Barth God's revelation is one, and we must be content with this revelation. God must teach us of God. Apart from revelation we cannot even know ourselves. Revelation paradoxically makes known to us that God is hidden and man is blind. As Barth puts it, "Revelation and it alone really and finally separates God and man by bringing them together" (I, 2, 29). God's revelation is in Christ. Thus we know God only through Christ. This is how the Triune God operates to make Himself known to us. This revelation, al-

<sup>3</sup> Mackintosh, p. 268.

though it involves the *kenosis* of the eternal Word, is actually God's triumph. Here we have a rather common theme for Barth, that the revelation of God is in the incarnation of the Son, in whom Deity is hidden and revealed at the same time. In this veiled form God meets man. Here Barth's emphasis is quite fine, I believe, and he often sounds much like Luther—except for this, that he speaks commonly about the *kenosis* of the Logos, or of God, which is an unorthodox way to speak and most misleading, inasmuch as it was not the Logos (the divine nature) who emptied himself, but Christ according to His human nature. The following quote will express the dialectical nature of this revelation:

God wills to veil Himself by becoming a man, in order by breaking out of the veiling to unveil Himself as a man. He wills to be silent and yet also to speak. His humanity must be a barrier, yet also a door that opens. It must be a problem to us, yet also the solution of problems. (I, 2, 41)

In view of the foregoing, then, it is not strange that Mackintosh summarizes Barth's entire position with the following words, "Revelation in the true sense is just the Incarnation" (p. 278). For Barth himself has said, "God's revelation is Jesus Christ, God's Son." (I, 1, 155)

However, revelation has a second aspect in that it includes making man aware of what God has done. The Christ event is not only for us but in us.

The Spirit guarantees man, what the latter cannot guarantee himself, his personal participation in revelation. The act of the Holy Spirit in revelation is Yea to God's Word, spoken through God Himself on our behalf, yet not only to us but in us. This yea spoken by God is the ground of

the confidence with which a man may regard the revelation as meant for him. This yea is the mystery of faith. . . . (I, 1, 518)

In other words, revelation authenticates itself. Barth says that there is really no other way to attest revelation than by the revelation itself, viz., Jesus Christ. So far we would agree. But Barth is seeming to say that a part of revelation consists in this, that I become aware of it, that I be caught up by it. If this is so, is the revelation in Christ complete? We would have to reply that God's revelation in Christ is quite complete whether I believe it or not.

There is a second difficulty connected with this aspect of Barth's doctrine. If God's revelation authenticates itself—and here, as I have said, we Lutherans would want to concur—how does it do this if the objective revelation is restricted to the Christ event? In other words, How does Christ authenticate Himself to us today? Immediately or through means of grace? And if through "means"—Barth will use the word too—are these means a δύναμις ἐνεργητικὴ and *instrumentum cooperativum*, as our Lutheran teachers have always said and as Scripture so abundantly testifies? (2 Cor. 10:4; Rom. 1:16; 2 Cor. 3:6; John 6:63; Eph. 3:7; 1 Thess. 2:13) Or are they mere occasions whereby God in His absolute freedom works in man? There is no doubt how Barth answers this question. As we shall see later, he repudiates the idea that there is power inherent in the Word of the Gospel. But we have a right to pursue the question. If the revelation is Christ and authenticates itself by the power of the Spirit, what authentication is there then for that Word about Christ which alone tells us of the revelation (the formal principle of theology)?

There is none, except where and when it points to Christ, and this depends on a free act of God. Barth says, "It is not in the power of the Bible and proclamation to make it true that the *Deus dixit* of the Church is present in any given one of her times or situations." It is *ubi et quando*, he says (I, 1, 135). Barth here is playing with our Augsburg Confession, which says that God works faith *ubi et quando* in those who hear the Word. Barth says that the Word testifies to Christ *ubi et quando*. This is a problem to which we shall have to return again. Suffice it to say now that Barth here leaves us quite bewildered as to what rôle the preached and written Word plays in God's revelation. It testifies to Christ, yes. This he says again and again, as we shall see. But not always. And since the Word in no way conveys Christ to us, we still want to know how the revelation which is Christ authenticates itself. Barth would no doubt answer that this is a vain question. But it is a valid question, for it is answered in Scripture. The Word not only proclaims Christ, it brings Christ; it authenticates the revelation. Barth in true Calvinistic fashion comes perilously close to making God arbitrary and capricious in this whole transaction.

One of the most dangerous elements in neo-orthodoxy's doctrine of revelation is the denial of the dianoetic nature and purpose of revelation,<sup>4</sup> that revelation is addressed among other things to man's intellectual capacity and is received also by the intellect. Does Barth fall into this

<sup>4</sup> The strongest denial is in a recent book by Anders Nygren, *En Bok om Biblen*, trans. C. C. Rasmussen, mimeographed at Luther Seminary, St. Paul.

modern pattern or not? Wingren implies that Barth does not and finds fault with Barth for this.<sup>5</sup> He says,

The knowledge of God which man lacks he receives from Scripture, i.e., from Christ. This is the simplest formula in which Barth's theology can be expressed. And about this formula we must say that it is entirely unbiblical.

However, when Barth speaks of knowledge he is not speaking of knowledge in the sense that knowledge comes by the comprehending of meaningful language. Revelation in such a sense he would never admit to be dianoetic. True, he maintains that revelation is verbal, but not in the sense of formal statements. This would relativize revelation and give man control over it—a view which, I think, is the classic *non sequitur* of modern theology. Barth says that revelation is action.

To say revelation is to say, "The Word became flesh." Of course we may also claim to say by the word "revelation" something different, something purely formal, and in that case relative as such. But then we are not asserting what the Bible means by this word, and therefore not the thing with which Church proclamation is concerned. . . . (I, 1, 134)

Here we see that Barth denies that words (in the sense of coherent statements or propositions) can be revelation, and that in the very nature of the case. Revelation cannot be the presence of impersonal truth in a proposition. Doctrines are not revealed.<sup>6</sup> Revealed truth is only God

<sup>5</sup> *Theology in Conflict*, trans. Eric Wahlstrom (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1958), p. 42.

<sup>6</sup> *Revelation*, ed. J. Baillie and H. Martin (New York: Macmillan Co., 1937), p. 74: "The truth revealed to us in revelation is not a doctrine about reconciliation but *is* the reconciliation itself. . . ."

in His reconciling Word. Barth refuses, then, to identify doctrinal statements (and this includes the doctrinal statements of the prophets and apostles) with revealed truth (I, 1, 310, 311). Does this mean that he denies the old concept of revealed theology? It would seem so, for to him language, discourse about God, is not revealed.<sup>7</sup>

Another question must be asked before we can leave Barth's doctrine of revelation. Does revelation take place in our history? Barth is equivocal on this point. He speaks of God's time, our time, and a third time in which God has time for us (I, 2, 47). Thus revelation, although it took place in "our" time, has its own time which is God's time and "therefore real time" (I, 2, 49). Thus far we perhaps do not know just where Barth stands. However, when he sums up his section on "Jesus Christ the Objective Reality of Revelation" he makes the following statement (I, 2, 23):

To sum up: that God's Son or Word is the man Jesus of Nazareth is the one Christological thesis of the New Testament; that the man Jesus of Nazareth is God's Son or Word is the other. Is there a synthesis of the two? To this question we must roundly answer, No.

Here is the point where Van Til sees Barth as refusing to identify God's revelation directly with the man Jesus of Nazareth and insists that the question must be answered with a resounding yes.<sup>8</sup> And it surely appears that Barth is here dividing

<sup>7</sup> "Its [the Word's] form is not a suitable but an unsuitable means for the self-presentation of God" (I, 1, 189). Cf. the entire context.

<sup>8</sup> *Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?* (Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, 1954), pp. 138 ff.

the person of Christ and denying utterly the third genus of the *communicatio idiomatum*, to which even Reformed theology gives lip service. Jesus the man is in our time, our history, but the Logos reveals Himself only in His own time. This is Barth's contention. Van Til is not the only one who has found fault with Barth for taking the revelation of the Son of God out of history. Olav Valen-Sendstad, who wrote long before Van Til, came to the same conclusion, studying Barth from a different angle, namely, from the point of view of Barth's incarnation doctrine.<sup>9</sup> He points to the fact that there are, according to Barth (I, 2, 183), no biological factors connected with the incarnation or virgin birth, that the virgin birth "is to be understood as a spiritual and not a psychophysical act" (I, 2, 201),<sup>10</sup> that the virgin birth is a prototype of the Spirit coming upon us and making us God's children (I, 1, 554 ff.). Barth says that Jesus' Baptism in the Jordan is a parallel to the virgin birth wherein the man Jesus of Nazareth *becomes* the Son of God by the descent of the Spirit (I, 1, 556).<sup>11</sup> From all this evidence Valen-Sendstad comes to the following conclusion:

The entire Barthian neo-orthodoxy and incarnation teaching opens out in the idealistic and mystic banality that God's self-disclosure takes place in the hidden, un-

<sup>9</sup> *Ordet Som Aldri Kan Dø*. (Bergen: A. S. Tunde & Co. Forlag, 1949), pp. 92 ff.

<sup>10</sup> But the conception, if it is a human conception, is surely physical.

<sup>11</sup> Here are Barth's words in the *KD*, I, 1, 509: "Dieser Mensch Jesus von Nazareth, nicht der Sohn Gottes, wird durch das Herabkommen des Geistes zum Sohne Gottes." Such a way of speaking is always improper, because it is the language of Ebionism.

knowable sphere of the "I," *not* in history, not in the psychophysical world which now at this time is our world.

And this, says Barth's critic, is docetism. Berkouwer charges that Van Til has no appreciation for Barth's defense of the virgin birth and the open grave against Brunner, but in the light of the foregoing Berkouwer perhaps has not seen clearly the purpose and interest in Barth's apologetics.<sup>12</sup> If Valen-Sendstad has misunderstood Barth in making his judgment of him — and his judgment is most severe — this is Barth's fault and not his; for Barth has made no efforts to obviate the possibility of such a judgment.

### C. SCRIPTURE

Scripture is the witness to divine revelation, according to Karl Barth. This being the case, we must give obedience to this witness, and must acknowledge it as being self-authenticating (I, 2, 458—9). By calling Scripture "witness" and "sign" no attempt is being made to subordinate Scripture and detract from its dignity and validity. That the Bible is witness means basically that it brings before us the lordship of the Triune God (I, 2, 462). But there is a limitation in the concept: a witness must not be identical with what it witnesses. We must distinguish between the Bible and revelation. "In the Bible we meet with human words written in human speech, and in these words, and therefore by means of them, we hear of the lordship of the triune God. Therefore when we have to do with the Bible, we have to do primarily with this means, with these words, with the witness which as such is

not itself revelation, but only — and this is the limitation — the witness to it." But there is a positive element too: the Bible must not be distinguished from revelation inasmuch as it brings the revelation. Scripture is the possibility of revelation.

When we hear this witness of Scripture, that is, *when it makes its impact upon us*, we hear more than witness. We hear revelation; we hear the Word of God. How can this be and how does it happen? Barth wrestles with these questions in a long section entitled "Scripture as the Word of God." We must try to understand what he means when he calls Scripture the Word of God.

That Scripture is the Word of God means that it points to Christ. Scripture is the indispensable form of the content, revelation (I, 2, 492). It is both human and divine. Historically it is a purely human document which does not violate the majesty of God in His distinctness from all that is not Himself, but it is also divine in that it testifies to the uniqueness of divine majesty (I, 2, 501). Like so many modern theologians Barth employs Christological terms in describing the nature of the Bible, a practice which is fraught with great difficulties. For instance, he says,

It is also that if we are serious about the true humanity of the Bible, we obviously cannot attribute to the Bible as such the capacity — and in this it is distinguished, as we have seen, from the exalted and glorified humanity of Jesus Christ — in such a way to reveal God to us that by its very presence, by the fact that we can read it, it gives us a hearty faith in the Word of God spoken in it. (Ibid.)

This means that the Bible is a dead book, a mere "sign," a "human and temporal

<sup>12</sup> *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, p. 386.



word," "conditioned" and "limited." "It witnesses to God's revelation, but that does not mean that God's revelation is now before us in any kind of divine revealedness" (I, 2, 507). "The Bible is not an instrument of direct impartation."

Now if all that Barth said above were true—and he says much more in this vein—it is certainly quite misleading for him to call Scripture the Word of God, and St. Paul is simply playing with words when he says that the Holy Scriptures are able [δυνάμενα] to make us wise unto salvation [σοφίσαι εἰς σωτηρίαν] through faith in Christ Jesus (2 Tim. 3:15). That Scriptures are the Word of God means not merely that they were breathed forth from God but that they carry the very power of God. This is what we Lutherans have always meant by what has been called the causative authority of Scriptures: that Scripture (or the Word of God in whatever form it may take) has the power to convert us and make us God's new creatures. Lutheran theology—taking seriously what Scripture tells us about the Word of God—has always insisted that there are two factors which enter into man's conversion, the Spirit *and* the Word.

Thus we see that when Barth calls Scripture the Word of God he does *not* mean that Scripture is the power of God, that it brings Christ, that the Spirit of God is always present and operative when Scripture is read or preached or used. But we must go on to see what else Barth does not mean when he calls Scripture the Word of God.

To Barth the Scriptures were written by men who were fallible and erring like ourselves, also in their writing of Scripture (I, 2, 507). Their word may be assessed

"as a purely human word." "It can be subjected to all kinds of immanent criticism, not only in respect of its philosophical, historical and ethical content, but even of its religious and theological. We can establish *lacunae*, inconsistencies, and overemphases." We "may quarrel with James or Paul." We may make little or nothing of much of the Bible. All the Bible is "vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology" (I, 2, 510). Anyone who does not take seriously this "humanity" of the Bible is *eo ipso* guilty of "docetism." We must face up to the errors and discrepancies in the Bible. This is the offense. Herein is the great mystery, that God can speak through the Bible witness which is "at fault in every word."

To the bold postulate, that if their [the Biblical writers] word is to be the Word of God they must be inerrant in every word, we oppose the even bolder assertion, that according to the scriptural witness about man [notice how he brings in this particular point at this time], which applies to them too [sic], they can be at fault in every word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word. (I, 2, 529-30)

What can we make out of this statement? Does it make sense? First, we must note that it does not imply that Barth rejects the divine origin of Scripture. He speaks strongly about "verbal inspiration" (I, 2, 518). Second, it does not imply that he rejects the normative authority of Scripture as the only source of doctrine. At the risk of caricaturing Barth I would say this much: It means that God somehow gets

the truth across to man by means of discrepancies, errors, and misconceptions. And it seems to mean that God inspired these discrepancies, errors, and misconceptions. What has happened is this: Barth is operating with the bland, neo-orthodox a priori that human words in the nature of the case are errant and fallible. To be human is to err. It is interesting that he flatly denies the *genus maiestaticum* when he gets to his Christology. To this we can only say that the grand a priori is totally opposed to the evidence of Scripture which in no way implies that its testimony is errant and fallible, but rather the very opposite (John 10:35; Matt. 5:17, 18; 1 John 1:1-5; John 5:46, 47; 2 Thess. 2:15; 2 Tim. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:15). And if Barth wishes to call us docetists for not admitting that the so-called human side of Scripture is errant (to him our Christology is also docetic), we can only reply that his view appears to be a form of the old Flacian error that fallibility and sinfulness is of the essence of humanity. *Finitum non est capax infiniti*. Barth and neo-orthodoxy are still unable to emancipate themselves from that old saw.

There is of course a very great danger connected with Barth's doctrine — aside from the point that it undermines our high view of Scripture. If the "form of doctrine" which Paul speaks of in Rom. 6:16 and which we can equate with what we call "derived theology" is fallible and "at fault in every word," by what right does the apostle without qualification presume to thank God that Christians obeyed from the heart this and no other form? By what right does he tell his disciples to labor in the Word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 2:1, etc.)? This word and doctrine

surely includes the New Testament writings. Is theology — and this would include these writings — always and necessarily mere approximations, attempts which in the nature of the case are bound to be errant? Must we still, like Sisyphus, go on and on pushing the boulder up the hill only to see it crash down again? Is theology only a quest? Is *Lebrgewissheit* a presumption — and is it impossible? If we must accept Barth's theology we must answer yes to such questions. But then Barth comes under Paul's condemnation in 2 Tim. 3:7. And if Barth would answer that "truth" in that passage is not a set of statements, but God's act or perhaps God Himself, and hence something we can have but cannot communicate or describe with any assurance of accuracy, would he not be compelled by Paul's own words to keep still since what he has experienced is "unlawful to utter" (2 Cor. 12:4)?

So when Barth calls Scripture the Word of God he does not mean that *Scripture* carries with it the power and authority of very God, nor does he mean that Scripture is true and unfailing like God. What then does he mean?

Barth means that the Bible *becomes* the Word of God. In itself the Bible is not the Word of God. There is really "only one Word of God, and that is the eternal Word," Christ. "That the Bible is the Word of God cannot mean that with other attributes the Bible has the attribute of being the Word of God." That would violate "the freedom and the sovereignty of God" (I, 2, 513). No, a miracle has to take place in which the Bible rises up and speaks to us as the Word of God (I, 2, 512). And so the Bible is the Word of

God *for faith*. In an event which God Himself brings about the Bible becomes the Word of God *for us*. Barth says, "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it" (I, 1, 123). Hear him again, "The Bible therefore becomes God's Word in this event, and it is to its being in this becoming that the tiny word 'is' relates, in the statement that the Bible is God's Word" (I, 1, 124).<sup>13</sup> We must not misunderstand Barth here. Our faith does not make it God's Word. "It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith, but, of course, because it becomes revelation for us" (ibid.).<sup>14</sup> This then is what Karl Barth means when he calls Scripture the Word of God. Mackintosh remarks here that this is quite in keeping with Barth's constant stress on the dynamic rather than the static (p.314). But as Mackintosh points out, it is surely Scriptural and proper to speak of a "state." We speak of a state of grace, a state of creation. As believers we *have* peace with God (Rom. 5:1), we *have* eternal life (John 3:36). In like manner we must say that Scripture *is* the Word of God and mean precisely what we say.

If Barth is quite unsatisfactory in what he says of Scripture as the Word of God, he is, on the other hand, quite refreshing and helpful in his discussion of the authority of Scripture.

To Barth Scripture is a purely *formal*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Barth's discussion of Lutheran orthodoxy here.

<sup>14</sup> J. K. S. Reid, *The Authority of Scripture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 196, sums it up well: "Holy Scripture is distinguishable from the Word of God and subserves it. It . . . is the occasion on which the event-of-the-Word-of-God occurs."

authority. It is only witness and therefore points to a higher authority, viz., God (I, 2, 541), who is the direct and absolute and material authority. But the church cannot thereby evade the Scriptures. Scriptures are the source of our knowledge of revelation. Scriptures confront the church in an encounter as concrete as that which originally took place between the Lord and His witnesses (I, 2, 544). Here Barth blasts the neo-Protestants who, like the papists, refuse to take Biblical authority seriously by failing to recognize that revelation is confined to the Biblical attestation. By relativizing Scripture to the totality of Christian history, by including it in that history, and then equating church history with revelation, neo-Protestantism has essentially come over to the Roman doctrine, viz., that Scripture is not the only source of our knowledge of revelation, viz., the identifying of Scripture, church, and revelation. This generalizing had its start with Grotius with his "ancient and universal consensus of the early church" and Calixtus with his *consensus quinque saecularis* as a secondary source of doctrine. Barth insists that there never was such a *consensus*. Here Barth is at his very best (cf. I, 2, 581). Barth is saying, Back to the Reformation and its understanding of the place of Scripture in the church.

Again, in his section on authority under the Word, Barth is equally instructive. He insists that the church is always under the Scripture and warns against the temptation of substituting the authority of church teachers for the Scripture itself.

The real masters who are honoured as they ought to be are those by whose person and system the pupils are educated and fashioned to be only scholars of Holy Scripture. (618)

Therefore in cases of doubt we do not have to understand and assess Scripture and the confession by the standard of this or that teacher, but we have to understand and assess every teacher by the standard of Scripture and the confession; we have not to put Socrates above the truth, but the truth above Socrates—and that in order to give Socrates the honour due him." (Ibid.)

The church may also be said to have freedom under the Word, but it is always a freedom grounded in Scripture.

We must make one final comment on Barth's idea of church proclamation as the Word of God. He does not hesitate to say that the preaching of the church is God's own proclamation (I, 2, 746). And he quotes Luther with approval when the latter refused to pray the Fifth Petition after preaching (I, 2, 747), but with qualified approval. Barth rightly points out that with all our faltering proclamation God can often bring divine victory out of our human failure. But ultimately church proclamation falls into the same class with the Scriptures. The words of the church *become* the words of God where and when it pleases God (I, 2, 763). In and through the preached Word God speaks—but only in an event of God's choosing does the proclamation become real proclamation. (I, 1, 104)

Again we must say that Barth's theology at this point, too, is unsatisfactory. A preacher addressing a timely message drawn from the Scriptures does not need to wonder whether he preaches God's Word, does not have to wait and wonder whether God will make this His Word by an event. When Paul tells him, "Preach the Word" (2 Tim. 4:1), he goes ahead

and preaches the Word of reconciliation, and he knows that it is the Word of God that he preaches. We need to be encouraged in just this, and here Luther's words apply.<sup>15</sup>

In order that we might thank God and glorify the ministry of the Word we must often repeat and contend that we are more excellent prophets than the fathers and prophets of the Old Testament. For today any boy or girl can say, Cheer up, I announce to you the forgiveness of sins, I absolve you, etc. Isn't it true that the person who hears and believes this has forgiveness of sins and life eternal? And isn't it true that it is madness and insanity to teach that we should doubt concerning this and deny all these things which are set forth in Holy Scriptures, nay, even to contend against this doctrine and to fight it? O what horrible and dangerous times we live in, and what misery we fall into!

Is there any explanation for Barth handling the doctrine of the Word as he does? I offer only two tentative suggestions. 1. He has "solved" many problems here. For instance, there is no longer a problem connected with higher criticism of the Bible, "errors" in the Bible. Barth can grant all this, and still say that the Bible is also divine, inspired, God's Word in an event, and that therefore exegesis must be taken very seriously. 2. Barth denies any relation or contact between nature and grace. He denies natural theology and natural revelation. This would make it quite easy for him to say what he does about the Bible, inasmuch as he sees it only as a creature of God, something within the natural, cosmic realm.

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<sup>15</sup> E op ex 11, 295.