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KARL BARTH AND EVANGELICALISM

A study of the relationship between Karl Barth and the evangelical tradition with particular reference to the concept of 'nothingness'.

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Submitted for the degree of

Master of Theology

in the

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.

No-one can study theology in the twentieth century and not encounter Karl Barth. For many, because of the forbidding mass of his writings, Barth is understood only as he is mediated through the concerns of other theologians. In the course of my own theological education, the ambiguity with which Barth has been received by those in the evangelical tradition has long intrigued and interested me. This thesis has grown out of that particular interest and is an attempt to clarify the issues by examining Barth and the evangelical response to him. The concept of 'nothingness' suggested itself as an area for closer study by virtue of the comparative lack of attention it has received in Barth studies and of a particular, pastoral interest in how the very real power of evil is to be thought of and expressed in the contemporary situation.

It is with gratitude that I acknowledge the help and support of a number of people in making possible this year of research at Glasgow University and in the production of the thesis. Pride of place must go to the Trustees of the Dr Williams's Trust, 14 Gordon Square, London without whose particularly generous financial support the project would not even have been conceived. I am privileged to be amongst a long line of 'Dissenting ministers' who have been enabled by the Trust to devote time in the midst of a demanding pastoral existence to a more tranquil and most valuable period of theological reflection. Professor George M. Newlands has supervised the progress of this work and imparted valuable guidance and insights at many points for which I am exceedingly grateful. With reference to Barth's dictum that a theologian without a sense of humour is not to be trusted, I am able to report that Professor Newlands has proven to be eminently trustworthy and that supervisory sessions have shown yet again that theology is 'the happy science'. To Desmond and Betty Wright of Milngavie I owe profound thanks for their gracious and unstinting hospitality which exceeded all my expectations. Memories of their kindness and of Tannoch Loch will long remain in my mind. Finally I record with gratitude the

Herculean labours of Phyllis Cathrow and Winifred Hughes in deciphering my handwritten script and transferring it to the typewriter and especially to Andrea Coates for the final draft and presentation of the work. Without the aid of these friends this work would have been much the poorer.

Nigel G. Wright

Ansdell,
Lytham St Annes.

Abbreviations

The use of abbreviations has been kept to a minimum and the majority of references in the text are cited in full with the exception of the standard and recognised abbreviations and the following.

C.D. Church Dogmatics by Karl Barth Trans. Eds. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh 1956-1975) Volumes I-IV

RGG Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart (Tübingen 1961)

SJT Scottish Journal of Theology

<u>TABLE OF CONTENTS</u>	Page
TITLE PAGE	(i)
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	(ii)
ABBREVIATIONS	(iii)
TABLE OF CONTENTS	(iv)
ABSTRACT OF THESIS	(vii)
I <u>The Theology of Karl Barth</u>	1
Introduction	1
(a) <u>The background to Barth's theology</u>	2
(b) <u>Leading themes in Barth's theology</u>	12
(1) The Word of God as the source and criterion of theology	12
(2) Jesus Christ as the centre of theology	15
(3) Grace as the theme of theology	17
(4) Barth's 'objectivism' and actualism'	18
(c) <u>The creative contribution of Barth's theology</u>	20
(1) Revelation and Trinity	21
(2) Election	23
(3) Creation and Creature	25
(4) Christology and Reconciliation	27
(5) Politics, Ethics and Church	29
(d) <u>Some theological response to Barth</u>	32
(e) <u>Karl Barth as an evangelical theologian</u>	36
II <u>Evangelicalism and Karl Barth</u>	42
(a) <u>Definitions: Broad and Narrow</u>	42
(b) <u>Obstacles to Interpretation</u>	46
(c) <u>Evangelical Responses to Barth</u>	49
(1) Reformed Hostility	51
(i) Cornelius van Til	51
(ii) Fred H. Klooster	56
(iii) Gordon H. Clark	58
(2) Critical sympathy	61
(i) G.C. Berkouwer	61
(ii) Colin Brown	64
(iii) Klaas Runia	68
(3) Cautious assimilation	71
(i) Bernard Ramm	71
(ii) G.G. Bolich	73
(iii) Donald G. Bloesch	74

	Page
(d) <u>The Frontier with Evangelicalism</u>	77
(1) Barth as modernist	77
(2) Revelation and epistemology	81
(3) Fallibility and infallibility	86
(4) Universalism	98
(5) Dominant motifs	107
(e) <u>Summary</u>	111
<u>Addendum</u> Karl Barth and Anabaptism	112
 III <u>Karl Barth and Pietism</u>	 132
(a) <u>The significance of the subject</u>	132
(b) <u>Pietism</u>	132
(1) History and development	132
(2) Characteristics	134
(i) The inner life	134
(ii) The relativity of doctrine	135
(iii) Ecumenism	135
(iv) Social action and mission	136
(v) Individualism	136
(3) Influence	137
(c) <u>The Blumhardts</u>	138
(1) History	139
(2) Revisionist Pietism	140
(3) Influence	142
(d) <u>Barth's critique of Pietism</u>	146
(1) Historical overview	146
(2) The points at issue	148
(i) Subjectivity	148
(ii) Individualism	150
(iii) <u>Theorie and Praxis</u>	154
(iv) Narrowness	154
(e) <u>Pietism, Karl Barth and evangelicalism</u>	156
<u>Addendum</u> Karl Barth and the charismatic movement	163
 IV <u>The Concept of Nothingness</u>	 169
Introduction	
(a) <u>The Blumhardt Inheritance</u>	170
(b) <u>Nothingness</u>	172
(1) The term 'nothingness' and our knowledge of the subject	172
(2) The origin and nature of nothingness	172
(3) The reality of nothingness	179

	Page
(4) The Shadow	184
(5) The victory over nothingness	186
(6) The continuing power of nothingness	188
(c) <u>Critique</u>	189
(1) <u>Strengths</u>	190
(i) Originality	190
(ii) The objectivity of evil	190
(iii) The negativity of evil	192
(iv) The Shadow	193
(v) Theodicy	197
(2) <u>Weaknesses</u>	198
(i) The exegetical base	198
(ii) Theological inadequacy	201
[a] Barth's use of terms	203
[b] Nothingness and God's will	205
[c] Has Barth explained evil?	207
[d] The continuing existence of nothingness	207
(3) <u>The dogmatic consequences of Barth's view</u>	208
(4) <u>Summary</u>	212
(d) <u>Towards an alternative position</u>	212
V <u>Conclusions and Programmatic Reflections</u>	228
(a) <u>Conclusions: In Retrospect</u>	228
(b) <u>Reflections: In Prospect</u>	235
(1) The humanity of Scripture	235
(2) A new approach to hermeneutics	236
(3) Affirmation of the world and humanity	236
(4) A fuller doctrine of the Holy Spirit	237
(5) A heightened awareness of the spiritual conflict	238
 BIBLIOGRAPHY	 239

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

In pursuing its object the thesis commences with a brief sketch of Karl Barth's theological development and some leading and controlling themes in his theology. Aspects of his theological contribution are examined before an assessment is made of Barth as an evangelical theologian. In the second chapter an attempt is made to chart some theological responses to Barth using a selection of nine evangelical theologians. A pattern of initial hostility leading into gradual assimilation is discerned before attention is given to particular loci of the debate between Barth and evangelicalism, the most considerable of which is deemed to be Barth's reputed Universalism. The attempt is made to ^srepond to Barth's concerns in a positive way.

Chapter three focuses on the relationship between Barth and Pietism and seeks to illuminate the extent to which he was both indebted to and critical of this phenomenon which has clear parallels with evangelicalism. From this study emerge particular concerns to do with the difference between Christians and non-Christians and the place of individualism and subjectivity in the Christian scheme. Suggestions are made concerning a fuller doctrine of the Holy Spirit.

In chapter four a specific examination of Barth's doctrine of nothingness is made as a way of anchoring the general approach of preceding chapters. Barth's distinctive contribution is listened to and an evaluation made which leads to an alternative statement

deemed to be more consistent with Barth's fundamental theological approach.

In conclusion the argument of the thesis, that Barth is an evangelical theologian who needs to be taken with the utmost seriousness although not followed at every point, is summarised. The thesis concludes with some programmatic reflections for the future of evangelical theology which takes into account the findings of the thesis, including the addenda to chapters two and three on 'Barth and Anabaptism' and 'Barth and the charismatic movement'.

I THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH

However ultimately we may choose to evaluate Karl Barth, there can be no doubt about the magnitude of his theological contribution in the twentieth century. By those sympathetic to him, Barth is seen as one of the greatest theologians in the history of the church⁽¹⁾ and as the initiator of a new Reformation, a theological Copernican Revolution in which theology was recalled to its true position of revolving around God, rather than requiring God to revolve around man.⁽²⁾ Coming to grips with Barth is, however, no easy matter. With an estimated written output of some twelve million words⁽³⁾ and with something like ten months solid work required to read (let alone understand) the Church Dogmatics⁽⁴⁾, the student is faced with a forbidding task. Add to this Barth's own understandable strictures on those who comment on him without adequately reading him⁽⁵⁾ and the recognition that there is 'a tradition of amateurish comment on Barth',⁽⁶⁾ and it can be understood if there is some hesitation about offering any summary of Barth's theology. However, since for

(1) H. R. MacKintosh: Types of Modern Theology (London, 1964) p.252

(2) Herbert Hartwell: The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction (London, 1964) p.179

(3) David F. Ford in S.W. Sykes: Karl Barth: Studies in his Theological Method (Oxford, 1979) p.200

(4) A.B. Come: An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers (London, 1963) p.9

(5) In the preface to Otto Weber: Karl Barth's Church Dogmatics (London, 1953) p.8

(6) S. W. Sykes: Karl Barth: Studies of his Theological Method (Oxford, 1979) p.12

the purposes of this work it is necessary to identify the leading concepts around which there is agreement or disagreement and to highlight certain issues which are integral to this thesis, the task, impossible possibility though it might be, to borrow a well-worn phrase from Barth, must be attempted.

What here follows begins with a sketch of Barth's background and the main outlines of his theological progress. It continues with an attempt to understand a number of the basic and controlling themes of his thought which decisively influence his whole approach to the theological task before outlining some of the particularly creative aspects of his contribution. These sections will involve attempts to chart some of the criticisms of Barth which have been made and the progress of some 'theology after Barth', before concluding with an assessment of him as an evangelical theologian

(a) The background to Barth's theology.

Eberhard Busch has given students of Barth an invaluable tool for understanding the course of his life and the context for his work.⁽⁷⁾ When Barth began his long and extraordinary full life in Basel on May 10 1886 he was already the product of generations of ^Spators and theologians on both sides of his family. His father, Johann Friedrich Barth, was himself a theological professor and

(7) Eberhard Busch Karl Barth: His life from letters and autobiographical texts. (London, 1976)

would in time occupy a chair in Bern, financed by a theologically positive (or conservative) group.⁽⁸⁾ The earliest theological influences on Barth were thus conservative ones in both family and school and it was only with his university education that against the wishes of his father, he moved into the tradition of liberal protestantism.⁽⁹⁾ After an initial period of study in Bern, he chose to continue his education first in Berlin under Adolf von Harnack, the liberal historian of church and dogma, and then under the systematic theologian Wilhelm Herrmann in Marburg. Herrmann he described as 'the theological teacher of my student years' and claimed that his influence was an abiding one.⁽¹⁰⁾ 'I soaked Herrmann in through all my pores'.⁽¹¹⁾ On completing his theological examination in 1908 he was able to say:

In the end it proved that in contrast to the tendencies of my grandfather and my father, I had made myself a committed disciple of the "modern" school, which was still dominant up to the time of the First World War, and was regarded as the only school worth belonging to. In it, according to the teaching of Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Christianity was interpreted on the one hand as a historical phenomenon to be subjected to critical examination, and on the other hand as a matter of inner experience, of a predominantly moral nature⁽¹²⁾

Barth was to continue in this theological line ('religious

(8) *ibid.* p.9

(9) *ibid.* p.40

(10) Karl Barth Theology and Church (London 1962) pp.238-9

(11) Busch op cit p.45

(12) *ibid.* p.46

individualism and historical relativism⁽¹³⁾ during one year as assistant to Martin Rade, editor of Christliche Welt, and then, having been ordained in November 1908 by his father, for two years as assistant pastor in Geneva, 1909-1911.

It was during Barth's major pastorate in Safenwil, 1911-1921 that he was to undergo a theological revolution. During this period Barth identified himself with the socialist struggle of the workers in his parish and came under the influence of religious socialism through the teaching of Hermann Kutter (1863-1931) and Leonhard Ragaz (1868-1945).⁽¹⁴⁾ Other events and influences were to have decisive and life-long impact upon him and the theological pilgrimage Barth underwent at this time was shared with his friend Eduard Thurneysen, pastor of the nearby village of Leutwil.

A major blow to Barth's confidence in liberal theology was struck on August 1 1914, the day the first World War broke out. On that day, 'ninety-three German intellectuals issued a terrible manifesto identifying themselves before all the world with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II... among the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers (with the honourable exception of Martin Rade)'.⁽¹⁵⁾ For Barth the discovery that the religion and scholarship of his revered teachers could so easily be

(13) *ibid.* p.51

(14) *ibid.* p.75-76

(15) *ibid.* p.81

changed 'into intellectual 42cm cannons' was devastating, an ethical failure which indicated that 'their exegetical and dogmatic presuppositions could not be in order'. Thus:

a whole world of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics and preaching which I had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations, and with it all the other writings of the German theologians.⁽¹⁶⁾

What Barth perceived at this time was the extent to which theology had become wedded to German culture, at the same time he was thrown into confusion by the extent to which European socialism abandoned its internationalism and swung into line with war hysteria.

In the midst of this confusion Barth, through his friend Thurneysen was strongly influenced by the message of Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880) and his son Christoph Friedrich Blumhardt (1842-1919). After a visit to the younger Blumhardt at Bad Boll, April 10-15 1915 his thinking took on a decisive new direction, that of 'hope' and a new concern for 'the essentials'⁽¹⁷⁾ and particularly with 'the question of according God a place of central importance'.⁽¹⁸⁾ Out of the spiritual crisis through which Barth was passing emerged a desire to 'get serious with God'.⁽¹⁹⁾

These new and disruptive elements coincided with a further

(16) *ibid.* p.81

(17) *ibid.* p.86

(18) *ibid.* p.87

(19) A. B. Come op cit p.34

preoccupation arising out of the practical demands of the pastoral task and particularly an issue which would overshadow the whole of Barth's life work, that of preaching. Preaching, Barth discovered had to be radically concerned with God⁽²⁰⁾, but how can the preacher speak of God? In searching for the answer to this question the 'key phrase' was to be uttered by Thurneysen in 1916. 'What we need for preaching, instruction and pastoral care is a "wholly other" theological foundation'. This new foundation was not to be found in the liberalism which has its origin in Schleiermacher, nor in the religious socialism of Kutter nor in a return to Kant or Hegel.

In fact we found ourselves compelled to do something much more obvious. We tried to learn our theological ABC all over again beginning by reading and interpreting the writing of the Old and New Testaments more thoughtfully than before. And lo and behold they began to speak to us - but not as we thought we must have heard them in the school of what was then 'modern theology'. They sounded very different on the morning after the day on which Thurneysen had whispered that phrase to me (he had meant it in quite general terms). I sat under an apple tree and began to apply myself to Romans with all the resources that were available to me at that time. I had already learnt in my confirmation instruction that this book was of crucial importance. I began to read it as I had never read it before. I wrote down carefully what I discovered point by point. I read and read and wrote and wrote.⁽²¹⁾

Barth had stumbled into 'the strange new world' of the

(20) *ibid.* p.90

(21) *ibid.* pp.97-98

Bible.⁽²²⁾ Having done so he discovered that knowledge of God stands at the beginning of the theological task and not at the end of a process of human reasoning. In the Bible we find 'not the right human thoughts about God but the right divine thoughts about men' so that the Bible takes us out of 'the old atmosphere of men to the open portals of a new world, the world of God'.⁽²³⁾

Barth had undergone his own Copernican revolution and would now bring vast creative resources to bear in urging that same revolution upon the theological scene in general. Already within his own experience we see the outlines of his line of attack in the emphasis on the otherness of God, the place of the Bible, the pretentiousness of religion, God's contradiction of man. Barth began to apply himself to the outworkings of these insights in the first edition of his commentary on Romans which was written in 1918 and published in 1919. In time the one thousand copies of the first edition were sold but by this time Barth's thinking had advanced to the degree that a second edition could only be a completely re-written commentary. It was this work which would have profound repercussions on its appearance in 1922. Its impact is difficult to conceive in retrospect but its effect upon a theological world with a minimal 'otherworldly' content was explosive.⁽²⁴⁾

(22) The phrase comes from the title of a lecture given by Barth 6 February 1917. *ibid* p.101

(23) *ibid.* p.101

(24) A. B. Come op cit p.43

Romans expresses the 'dialectical' phase of Barth's development, the attempt to express in manifold ways, by constant assertion and counterassertion, the Godness of God. Barth's concern is to stress that God is the Wholly other, the one who precipitates in man a crisis, who exists as the limit of man's existence, but who at the same time as being beyond man is also with him. It makes much of Kierkegaard's concept of the infinite 'qualitative distinction between man and God'.⁽²⁵⁾ Barth's concern appears to be in an abundance of negative assertions, to demolish any self-confidence man may have before God in order to assert the sovereignty of God himself. Later he would write:

In an attempt to free ourselves both from these early forms of one-sidedness, especially from that of Pietistic and Liberal Neo-Protestantism, and also from the unsatisfactory corrections with which our predecessors had tried to overcome them, we took the surest possible way to make ourselves guilty of a new one-sidedness and therefore to evoke a relatively justifiable but, in view of the total truth, equally misleading reaction, involving all kinds of protests and opposition to even the justifiable aspects of our own concern.⁽²⁶⁾

Barth shows himself however not to be content with merely saying 'No'. The ensuing years were to give him opportunity to develop along more constructive lines. In 1921 he was appointed to the chair of Reformed theology at the University of Göttingen and began to

(25) Karl Barth: The Epistle to the Romans. Trans. by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford, 1933) p.10

(26) CD II: 1 p.634

wrestle in earnest with this task. 'We had taken on responsibilities which we had not known about while we were simply in opposition'.⁽²⁷⁾ Specifically this meant coming to terms with Calvin and the Reformed tradition, a not uncongenial task as Barth had been nurtured in Calvinism and had already unconsciously moved back in this direction.⁽²⁸⁾

Thus, while during this period Barth came to be associated in the editorship of Zwischen den Zeiten with a cluster of innovative theological voices, including Friedrich Gogarten, Emil Brunner and Rudolf Bultmann, he was in fact moving in a direction which would eventually lead him in a quite different direction. Lecturing on Calvin caused Barth to discover the Reformers as a whole.

In Göttingen things changed almost at a stroke. Barth now felt that his previous theological view was really a pre-Reformation position, 'somehow in a corner along with nominalism, Augustinianism, mysticism, Wycliffe etc. It was not itself the Reformation but nevertheless the Reformation later sprang out of it.' 'Only now were my eyes properly open to the Reformers and their message of the justification and the sanctification of the sinner, of faith, of repentance and works, of the nature and the limits of the church and so on. I had a great many new things to learn from them'. At that time 'I "swung into line, with the Reformation" as they used to say', not uncritically but certainly with special attention.⁽²⁹⁾

From this point on, while still characterised by dialectical

(27) Busch, op cit p.126

(28) ibid p.129

(29) ibid. p.143

thought-forms, it is more apt to see Barth's theology developing as a theology of the Word. From 1924 onwards⁽³⁰⁾ Barth's independence could be seen in a growing and unfashionable interest in dogmatic theology. He was fascinated by Heppe's Dogmatics in which in spite of its being a summary of the older orthodoxy

I found a dogmatics which had both form and substance, which was oriented on the central themes of the witnesses to revelation given in the Bible, and which could also explore their individual details with an astonishing wealth of insights... I found myself visibly in the sphere of the church and, moreover, in the sphere of an academic discipline, which was respectable in its own way.⁽³¹⁾

Yet even at this point, Barth's concern with dogmatics was seen as having Christian preaching as its primary object,⁽³²⁾ and it was precisely this focus that was intended to preserve the dogmatic task from falling into the scholasticism of the old orthodoxy.

In 1925 Barth moved to the University of Münster. His concern with dogmatics issued in the publication in 1927 of Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf. In the event he remained dissatisfied with this work, seeing it as a 'false start' because of its existentialism that is its attempt to find in anthropology a point of departure for theology.⁽³³⁾ Before Barth could apply himself to the Church Dogmatics one further element of his theological development needed

(30) *ibid.* p.153

(31) *ibid.* p.154 See also Heinrich Heppe Reformed Dogmatics (London, 1950) p.v.

(32) *ibid.* p155

(33) CD III: 4 xii

to fall into place by means of which he could emerge out of his philosophical 'eggshells'.⁽³⁴⁾

In the preface to the second edition of his book on Anselm Barth indicates that in it he was working with 'a vital key, if not the key, to an understanding of that whole process of thought that has impressed me more and more in my Church Dogmatics as the only one proper to theology'.⁽³⁵⁾

Through his work on Anselm Barth was able to lay hold of an epistemological and theological method which was foundational to his further theological work. God gives himself to be known by faith and this faith is not established by anything outside of itself but is its own proof. God himself is the author of our own knowledge of him. But as God is himself truth there is a valid noetic rationality which corresponds to his ontic rationality and which it is our task to seek.⁽³⁶⁾ The task of understanding is one which requires the persistent application of intellectual powers and prayer⁽³⁷⁾ and a movement from implicit understanding to explicit understanding.⁽³⁸⁾ Faith involves cognition and the starting point for this is in the objective reality of Jesus Christ.⁽³⁹⁾

(34) Torrance op cit pl32. Karl Barth How I changed my mind ed J.D. Godsey (Edinburgh, 1969) p.44

(35) Karl Barth: Fides Quaerens Intellectum (London, 1960) p.11

(36) *ibid.* p.52, p.170

(37) *ibid.* p.41

(38) *ibid.* p.15f

(39) *ibid.* pp.19, 22

With this insight published in his 1930 work on Anselm, Barth was free to attempt again a comprehensive Dogmatics using this theological method. The basic insights and impulses which were to shape Barth's theology were by now assembled⁽⁴⁰⁾ and whereas there is a clear development in Barth's thought from this time onwards, it is within the framework hammered out up until this time. The first volume of the now more modestly re-named Church Dogmatics was to appear in 1932 and further volumes were to be his major preoccupation for the rest of his life.

(b) Leading Themes in Barth's Theology

With the insights gained from tracing Barth's theological pilgrimage thus far, we are in position to explore more fully the material content of his thought and specifically of the Church Dogmatics. This will be done firstly by examining some of the overriding themes which determine the whole course of his theological method and secondly by giving attention to specific dogmas.

(1) The word of God as the source and criterion of theology.

According to Barth, the task of Dogmatics is not to dictate to the church what she may or may not believe, but to verify the faith of

(40) Robert McAfee Brown in the preface to Karl Barth: Credo (London, 1964) p.viii

the church which exists independently of it and to serve the proclamation of the church by helping it to give careful attention to its content.⁽⁴¹⁾ As such the dogmatic task is to be pursued in penitence, obedience and prayer, in other words, as an act of faith.⁽⁴²⁾ The criterion of dogmatics as of preaching is the Word of God itself, that is the event and reality of God's revelation which is known in three forms existing in indivisible unity, the preached Word, the written Word and the revealed Word.⁽⁴³⁾ In the last analysis, the Word of God is Christ himself who is the one in whom revelation is made objectively known.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Holy Scripture is seen as witness to Christ, (the O.T. as expectation and the N.T. as recollection,)⁽⁴⁵⁾ which while containing merely human words is able to be in its contextual meaning by the miracle of God the Word of God to us.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Likewise the proclamation of the church as it serves God's Word is also, by the miracle of God, God's Word.⁽⁴⁷⁾ Therefore in the Word of God, there is an objective source of authority which is mediated to the church by the Holy Scriptures and to which the church is called to be subordinate in order that she herself may experience freedom under that Word.⁽⁴⁸⁾

(41) CD I pl4, Karl Barth Dogmatics in Outline (London, 1966) pp. 12-13

(42) CD I:1 pp.21-23

(43) CD I:1 pp.88-124

(44) CD I:2 p.1ff

(45) CD I:2 p.481-483

(46) CD I:2 p.513

(47) CD I:2 pp.743

(48) CD I:2 696ff

Barth abandoned work on his Christliche Dogmatik because he had come to the understanding that the truth about God, the universe and men would only be gained from God himself.⁽⁴⁹⁾ It is this belief that leads Barth to deny that God can be known in any other way. Anything which has its basis in man whether anthropology, philosophy, religion or culture is excluded as a source of theology.⁽⁵⁰⁾ This explains Barth's life-long antipathy to natural theology with its (in his perception) attempt to build theology on a alternative basis to the Word of God, his hostility to liberal Protestantism which roots itself in general anthropology and reduces religion to a purely human possibility,⁽⁵¹⁾ and to Roman Catholicism which seeks to merge the action of God with that of man, depriving him of his freedom and incorporating him into the existence of the Church.⁽⁵²⁾ On the other hand Barth's theology of the Word is also to be distinguished from the older Protestant orthodoxy which had moved into a 'stiffening' in the understanding of inspiration to the extent that the Word of God and the Scriptures were completely identified and God deprived of his freedom.⁽⁵³⁾ Barth's concern throughout is to preserve the freedom of God in his revelation. He refuses to allow any other basis for theology than that of the Word of God and although philosophy and science may be allowed a place as servants of the revelation of God they should not be allowed at any

(49) CD I:2 pp.1ff

(50) H. Hartwell: The Theology of Karl Barth: An Introduction p.43

(51) CD I:1 p.38

(52) CD I:1 p.40

(53) CD I:2 p.522

point to master it.⁽⁵⁴⁾

The Church Dogmatics bears eloquent testimony to Barth's understanding of the Word of God. It is a massive dialogue with the Bible's witness to revelation displaying great inventiveness and variety in its use of the text.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Few theologians in the history of the Church have used the Bible so consistently as has Barth and his own often emphasised wish was to be judged on the basis of his faithfulness to the Scriptures.

(2) Jesus Christ as the Centre of theology.

According to John Thompson:

In (Barth's) theology there is no Christology as such: on the other hand, it is all Christology. By this we mean the following. It is an interesting but a significant fact that there is no such thing as a section on Christology as such in the whole of Karl Barth's writings. Yet it is Christological through and through. This is due to the fact that Barth's theology as a whole and in every part is determined by its relation to Jesus Christ, his being and actions, so that one cannot detach any aspect of it from its Christological basis.⁽⁵⁶⁾

(54) CD I:2 p.715, Credo p184

(55) David H. Kelsey: The Uses of Scripture in Recent Theology (Philadelphia, 1975) p.39

(56) J. Thompson: Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh, 1978) p.1

Since Jesus Christ is the mediator between God and Man in literally every respect and the objective source of the knowledge of God, Barth seeks to bring the whole of dogmatics into relation with him. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, the point at which God has revealed himself to man and therefore he is to be the point of departure for all theological statements. Dogmatics is fundamentally Christology.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Furthermore this is to be understood concretely. It is not the idea of Christ but Christ in his historical reality who is the revelation of the Father, a reality which is mediated to us by means of a story focussed in the incarnation.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Thus the movement in Barth's theology is from the particular to the general, from the concrete to the universal and Barth's entire theology is an attempt to operate from this centre outwards.⁽⁵⁹⁾ It is here that God himself has given himself to be understood in a way which man can understand and which means that God can be spoken of meaningfully not by means of an analogia entis that proceeds from man to God but an analogia fidei which proceeds from God to man on the basis of God's own self-disclosure in Christ, the possibility of which is itself grounded in God. The implications of this for Barth's method are considerable. He does not seek to proceed from general principles established outside revelation and then applied to it but from within the revelation itself establishing a 'metaphysics of the Gospel story' and insisting that 'all

(57) CD I: 2 p.123

(58) CD II: 1 p.61

(59) Hartwell, op cit p.23

statements about the nature of God be "cashed" in biblical terms'.⁽⁶⁰⁾ Equally, Barth does not feel the need to justify God at the bar of natural theology or philosophy. The possibility of God is to be deduced from the reality of his revelation, thus he discusses the Word of God in its three-fold form before going on to discuss its knowability.⁽⁶¹⁾ The whole theological scene is thus to be viewed from the reality of God's 'lowering himself into time' in Jesus Christ.⁽⁶²⁾

(3) Grace as the theme of theology.

Barth himself was unwilling to concede that any one idea could be regarded as the key to his theology, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that 'grace' is the consistent idea behind his thought.⁽⁶³⁾ Barth himself would be happier to say that grace is the inescapable conclusion to which we are drawn through reflection on the concrete reality of Jesus Christ and is thus an a posteriori rather than an a priori. The God who has revealed himself in Christ has shown himself to be gracious⁽⁶⁴⁾ and there is no other God than this God, therefore grace must be central in all God's works. According to Hartwell, grace:

(60) D. F. Ford: 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible' in S. W. Sykes op cit pp 61,63

(61) CD I: 1, p.187 See also Hartwell op cit p.25

(62) CD II: 1 pp 61-62

(63) This was G. C. Berkouwer's point in The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth (ET London, 1956) Barth discusses this in CD IV: 3,1 pp 173-176

(64) CD IV: 1 pp 79-92

explains the concrete form and content of his teaching, his exclusive emphasis on revelation as the revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ, the wholly christological character of his theology, the pre-eminence given in his Church Dogmatics to the doctrine of the Trinity, his opposition to any kind of man-made or man-owned religion as well as his teaching on true religion as the work of God's grace, and the uncompromising rejection of natural theology, leaving no room for any kind of synergism for any operation of grace alongside nature, making on the contrary 'not nature but grace' the leitmotiv of his theology...further it is on account of God's grace that in Barth's theology the initiative is always with God, that it is always God who in Jesus Christ acts first in virtue of his grace, be it in election, revelation, creation, reconciliation or redemption, so that man can always only acknowledge and accept what God has done and is still doing, for him and to him in Jesus Christ and therefore can only show his gratitude to God in praise and thanksgiving by his obedience to God's command. (65)

The theme of grace thus impinges upon the whole structure of Barth's theology. It may also explain von Balthasar's description of him as a 'God intoxicated man' (66) and also the frequent criticism that Barth is fundamentally uninterested in man outside of this particular circle. (67)

(4) Barth's 'objectivism' and 'actualism'.

Hartwell draws attention to two further characteristics of Barth's

(65) Hartwell op cit pp 171-172

(66) Quoted by D. F. Ford in Sykes op cit p.197

(67) R. D. Williams: 'Barth on the Triune God' in Sykes op cit p.192

way of thinking - his 'objectivism' (or 'historicism') and his 'actualism'.⁽⁶⁸⁾ For Barth (in contrast to Bultmann) the objectivereality of the event of Jesus Christ is crucial. It is not at men's disposal nor of his making but it inescapably affects him. God is able to be objective for man because he is antecedently objective to himself in his trinitarian life.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Thus for Barth the incarnation, cross and resurrection are all to be seen as objective events established by God himself, even though in the case of the resurrection, they may at points exceed men's historiographical capabilities.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Our gaze is once more directed to the historical process in which the saving acts of God have taken place.⁽⁷¹⁾

With the word 'actualism' Hartwell signifies Barth's concentration on God's action leading him to emphasise the dynamic nature of the essential elements of the faith. 'God continually gives and man continually receives'⁽⁷²⁾ Barth does not deal in 'static' categories but understands the work of God in terms of a constant becoming in which, as examples, the Word of God needs constantly to become the Word of God by the free action of the Holy Spirit,⁽⁷³⁾ and the church of Jesus Christ needs constantly to become the church.⁽⁷⁴⁾ This ties in with Barth's understanding of

(68) Hartwell op cit pp 27-37.

(69) CD I: 2 pp 1 ff`

(70) CD III: 2 p.443

(71) CD IV/1 pp 247-248

(72) Hartwell op cit p.33

(73) I: 1 pp 143 ff

(74) IV/2 p.617

the grace and freedom of God. God is in no way obligated to men, it is only in his grace and freedom that he has given and continues to give himself to us in Jesus Christ.

Having pursued some of the overarching themes characteristic of Barth we now turn to an examination of his theological creativity.

(c) The Creative Contribution of Barth's Theology

While adhering to the supreme authority of Scripture Barth shows immense respect for the church's creeds as a secondary authority, regarding them rather as parents whom we are to honour.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Hence he is concerned to listen carefully to the church's tradition and to pass through it to fresh theological statements rather than go around it. Barth's achievement is not to be seen solely as a renewed attempt to listen to the Bible but also as an attempt to listen to what others have heard from the Bible in previous generations of the church's history thereby according to the church's tradition a renewed significance. He often finds himself in agreement with the tradition, occasionally wants to rehabilitate certain words and concepts and on rare but significant occasions feels the need to set the tradition firmly aside, as in the case of natural theology. He strongly opposes mere 'confessionalism', the defensive repetition of the tradition.⁽⁷⁶⁾ His creativity is seen in his ability to rework

(75) Barth Dogmatics in Outline (London, 1966) p.13

(76) Busch: op cit p.478

old themes in fresh ways on the basis of the leading themes upon which we have already touched. The purpose of this section is to highlight some areas where he distinctively contributes to talk about God.

(1) Revelation and Trinity

Barth, as we have seen, recalls theology to the task of thought about God whose revelation in Christ is entered into by faith. He roots the whole concept of revelation in the Triune God in a way which invites us to see the doctrine of the Trinity at the head of theology not as something simply to be read off from biblical texts but as rooted in the very structure of revelation and disclosing God's identity.⁽⁷⁷⁾ God's Word is God himself in his revelation and in this we perceive that he reveals himself as Lord and is, in unity and yet distinction, Revealer, Revelation and Revealedness.⁽⁷⁸⁾ For Barth it is fundamental that only God can reveal God. 'God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself'.⁽⁷⁹⁾ We are introduced to God as Lord in revelation three times. God unveils Himself to men. He does so by being God a second time in historical temporal terms through Jesus Christ who is the objective possibility of revelation. He is God the third time through the Holy Spirit, who is the subjective possibility of revelation, in his

(77) CD I/1 p.311

(78) CD I/1 p.293

(79) CD I/1 p.296

specific coming to us.⁽⁸⁰⁾ God is this because he is free to impart himself to us. Moreover, what God shows himself to be in his revelation he already is antecedently in himself. He is the one Lord in threefold repetition and exists in indissoluble unity in his three distinctive modes of being (Barth prefers this expression to 'persons') as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.⁽⁸¹⁾ So for Barth the doctrine of the Trinity is to be firmly rooted in the structure of revelation and revelation is itself a possibility because God is the Triune God who in his Son is 'free' for man and who in his Spirit can make man 'free' for God.⁽⁸²⁾

Barth's teaching that what God is in revelation he is antecedently within himself is of crucial importance. The Father can be Father to us ad extra because he is already Father ad intra to the Son. Likewise the Son is able to be the revealing Son for us because he already is the Son in the trinitarian life ad intra.⁽⁸³⁾ This leaves Barth with something of a problem when it comes to the Holy Spirit. In revelation, the Holy Spirit is the one who effects revealedness in man, but he can hardly fulfil this role within the Trinity. Barth solves the problem by seeing the role of the Spirit ad intra as the communion of the Father and Son and thus he can be in revelation the act of communion between God and men.⁽⁸⁴⁾

(80) CD I/1 pp 315 ff

(81) CD I/1 p.350

(82) CD I/2 p.33; pp 204-205

(83) CD I/1 pp 394f, p.414

(84) CD I/1 pp 470-471

Barth's understanding of the correlation of God ad intra and his revelation ad extra leads him to think about God in the concrete terms of the historical revelation rather than in abstracts determined elsewhere and imported into the revelation. God is to be understood through his act and his being is in his act.⁽⁸⁵⁾ The effect of this is not least to enable Barth to make the doctrine of God interesting, stripping it of the abstractions with which it is normally surrounded and summing up the divine perfections in terms of God's freedom and his loving.⁽⁸⁶⁾

(2) Election

This same Christological method led Barth to a recasting of the doctrine of election to rescue it from the forbidding overtones it had gathered for itself in Augustinianism and Calvinism. Election, Barth argues, is good news, it is the sum of the Gospel.⁽⁸⁷⁾ God in the freedom of his grace elects himself in Jesus Christ to be God for man and in Christ also elects man for himself. For Barth Christ is the correct starting place for the doctrine of election. There is behind him no hidden will of God (pace Calvin) nor any decretum absolutum which separates God and Christ,⁽⁸⁸⁾ but only the decision of God before space and time revealed in Christ to be gracious to

(85) CD II/1 pp 257 ff

(86) CD II/1 pp 272 ff, 297 ff

(87) CD II/2 p.3

(88) CD II/2 p.111

man and the choice of the Son to be obedient to grace.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Jesus Christ, then, is both electing God and electing man. In Christ God has determined man's lot for himself and his own life for man and in this way the double predestination of Calvinistic theology is reunderstood in positive terms.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Likewise, the supralapsarianism of high Calvinism is reinterpreted as the primordial decision of God, not to elect some and deny others, but to elect himself for man and fallen man for himself in Christ.⁽⁹¹⁾ It is this element which gives to the doctrine of election its importance since all other considerations flow from this primordial determination of grace. From this point Barth goes on to speak of the election first of the community and then the individual. It is for this reason also that the doctrine of election is seen by Barth to belong to the doctrine of God, and not for instance, that of providence. It belongs at the head of a work of theology, it is the very heart beat of theology and in Barth's work assumes great significance in placing 'eternal, free and unchanging grace as the beginning of all the ways and works of God'.⁽⁹²⁾

According to T.H.L. Parker, by reworking the Reformation doctrine in this way Barth has transformed the scene from severity and even gloom into a place of joyfulness and light. He has brought about a miracle that even Capability Brown could not achieve - he

(89) CD II/2 p.101

(90) CD II/2 p.167

(91) CD II/2 p.143

(92) CD II/2 p.3

has made the sun shine on the scene⁽⁹³⁾ That not everybody agrees with him is something to which we will return.

(3) Creation and creature.

Already we have seen Barth's willingness to recast the traditional structure of dogmatics in accordance with his particular insights. He has dispensed with the normal prolegomena in accordance with his view that dogmatics must begin and proceed with the reality of revelation rather than seek to establish revelation on some 'natural' basis. He has removed the doctrine of God from its speculative context and has placed God's purpose in election, and thus the doctrine of reconciliation in prospect, at the head of his work yet with its concrete manifestation in Christ. He now turns to the doctrine of creation, but even here moves away from the traditional approach which involves a treatment of the doctrines of creation, man and sin as independent loci in a way which sets the scene for the doctrine of Christ. Instead he begins once more with Christ and seeks to understand creation, the creature, providence and evil in the light of Christ. In doing so he finds it unnecessary to discuss the question of origins and relocates the 'sense of a beginning' in God's election and in the incarnation.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Jesus Christ 'is the Word by which God has fulfilled creation and

(93) T.H.L. Parker in A. Richardson (Ed). A Dictionary of Christian Theology (London, 1969) p.272

(94) CD III/1 p.3, p.42 See also D. F. Ford op cit p.70

continually maintains and rules it'.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The creation narratives, conceived of as sagas, serve to illuminate the relation between creation and covenant. The first creation account with its culmination in the divine sabbath, indicates that creation is the external basis of the covenant and the second that covenant is the internal basis of the creation. The goal and meaning of creation is thus the culmination of God's covenant in Jesus Christ.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Creation exists for the sake of reconciliation. It is for this reason that God allows creation to be outside himself. In the course of his exposition of the sagas Barth locates the image of God in man in the capacity of man for partnership, as male and female. It is in genuine confrontation with God and as a genuine counterpart to his fellows that man is to be distinguished.⁽⁹⁷⁾ The image of God is not then to be seen as a quality of man, but as co-humanity, which, itself reflects the covenant relation between God and man⁽⁹⁸⁾ and indeed as analogia relationis the relations within the Trinity.⁽⁹⁹⁾

Barth's doctrine of Man proceeds along the same lines already observed. Man is to be understood in the light of Jesus Christ who is the authentic man and reveals human nature in its original and basic form.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ Jesus Christ is both unlike us and like us. He is

(95) CD III/1 p.28

(96) CD III/1 p.219

(97) CD III/1 p.184

(98) CD III/2 p.298

(99) CD III/2 p.220

(100) CD III/2 p.52

like us in being man and unlike us in being also true man. Humanity is to be defined by Jesus Christ.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ It is in this way that theology becomes theanthropology since the knowledge of man is implied in the knowledge of God. In corresponding to the image of God the being of man is to be a being in covenant and is determined by God for life with God and in encounter with others.⁽¹⁰²⁾

(4) Christology and Reconciliation.

Barth's most mature work is to be found in his fourth volume on reconciliation. This is an amazing and complex weaving together of themes which while embracing new material, reworks and extends much that has gone before it. Christology, soteriology and ecclesiology are all here woven together in an 'unusually beautiful structure'⁽¹⁰³⁾ as Barth lays aside the tradition which treats them independently. Since God's being is his act and his act is his being, the person and work of Christ cannot be separated as they imply each other.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ Christ's true deity is not denied but rather to be perceived in the obedience and condescension which led him to the cross; the Lord became a servant and the Father's awakening him from death and his resurrection are the recognition and manifestation of his deity.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ In this action Jesus is the judge

(101) CD III/2 p.43

(102) CD III/2 p.203

(103) John D. Godsey: Karl Barth's Table Talk (Edinburgh, 1963) p.9

(104) CD II/1 p.128

(105) CD IV/1 p.157

who in displacing us is judged in our place and thus fulfils the priestly ministry of atonement and reconciliation.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ But Jesus is also true man and in a parallel movement to his condescension as the Son of God who goes into the far country,⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ he is also the Son of Man who is exalted as royal man, the servant as Lord.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ As such, and as representative man, he 'comes home'. In this he fulfils his kingly office.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ Barth thus combines the doctrine of the two natures with that of the two states, humiliation and exaltation, which he sees as simultaneous events. He further succeeds in recasting Christology in an historical rather than a speculative mould, discerning the person of Christ in the events of the cross and the resurrection.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ He goes on to discern in the unity of Godhood and Manhood in Jesus Christ the prophetic office. Christ is seen in his prophetic office to be the Light of Life and the Victor. He is the true Witness.⁽¹¹¹⁾

Barth's doctrine of reconciliation is a wonderfully creative interweaving of the traditional themes of the two natures, the two states and the threefold office. He adds to this themes which add further to the texture of the tapestry. Only in this section does he believe the Fall of Man and sin can be rightly understood. Men can

(106) CD IV/1 pp 211 ff

(107) CD IV/1 pp 157 ff

(108) CD IV/2 p.3

(109) CD IV/2 pp 20 ff

(110) CD IV/2 p.21

(111) CD IV/3:1 pp 38 ff, 165 ff

know themselves as sinners only in the light of grace and so within the framework already summarised the sin of man, his pride, sloth and falsehood are exposed in the light of Christ's humiliation, exaltation and truthfulness.⁽¹¹²⁾ In positive correspondence to these Barth places the benefits of reconciliation-justification, sanctification and vocation,⁽¹¹³⁾ which are subjectively realised by the Holy Spirit in the gathering, upbuilding and sending of the Christian community⁽¹¹⁴⁾ and in the being of the Christian as faith, love and hope.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

Barth himself acknowledged that his systematisation in the volume on reconciliation was an arbitrary one.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ In such systematization there is always the danger that an important element may be missed because it does not fit neatly but it represents without doubt his finest work.

(5) Politics, Ethics and Church

Throughout his life Barth was in constant interaction with the realities of life. As a young pastor he involved himself with the socialist struggle of the workers in his parish. As a university professor he perceived from the beginning the implications of Nazism

(112) CD IV/1 pp 358ff, CD IV/2 pp 378ff, CD IV/3:1 pp 368ff

(113) CD IV/1 pp 514ff, CD IV/2 pp 499ff, CD IV/3:2 pp 481ff

(114) CD IV/1 pp 643ff, CD IV/2 pp 614ff, CD IV/3:2 pp 681ff

(115) CD IV/1 pp 740ff, CD IV/2 pp 727ff, CD IV/3:2 pp 902ff

(116) Godsey, op cit p.13

and was a leader in the Confessing Church and in the framing of the Barmen declaration in 1934. He was deprived of his professorial chair in Bonn because of refusal to conform to the totalitarian demands and expectations of the state. After the war he aroused much controversy because of his hostility to anticommunism and to nuclear rearmament. For much of his life he was against the current of prevailing opinion. It is no surprise then that Barth devotes considerable attention to ethics and understands them to be indissolubly linked to dogmatics. Knowledge of God is obedience to God.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ For Barth ethics were to be understood, consistent with his actualism, as God's command. He reversed the traditional order of Law and Gospel on the basis that only in the Gospel could man receive knowledge of himself as sinner and that Law was to be understood, as he saw it understood in the Bible, as the form of man's response to the goodness of God within the covenant. It is significant that his first section on ethics in the Dogmatics follows the doctrine of election.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ Barth selected the category of 'command' because it not only safeguarded God's freedom but moved ethics out of the realm of the general into that of the particular, out of the abstract, into the concrete and personal⁽¹¹⁹⁾ and specifically, into the realm of Jesus Christ. God does not give us a general command which we then have to apply to ourselves but makes

(117) CD II/1 p.26

(118) CD II/2 pp 509ff

(119) CD II/2:609

his specific and total demand upon his.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Ethics then must be conceived Christologically. We are called to hear Jesus Christ in the obedience of faith and to live in the freedom which he gives in the Holy Spirit.⁽¹²¹⁾

This same concern for Christological actualism is to be perceived in Barth's understanding of church and sacraments. His thinking led him increasingly to view the church in congregational terms as that which is formed in 'the event of its assembling' and to move away from episcopal and synodical forms of church government.⁽¹²²⁾ He came to advocate a break with the Constantinian Corpus Christianum and a radical appraisal of the practice of baptism.⁽¹²³⁾ He rejected arguments for infant baptism as inadequate and his progress towards 'responsible' baptism, already in process in 1943 in his book Die Kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe⁽¹²⁴⁾ was carried further in Church Dogmatics IV/4, the fragment on baptism. In it he indicates that he has moved decisively not only towards responsible baptism but also towards a non-sacramental understanding of the act which signals a similar (although undeveloped) approach to the Lord's Supper.⁽¹²⁵⁾ The goal of baptism is to point beyond itself to God's act of reconciliation in Christ and has meaning in

(120) CD II/2 p.664

(121) CD II/2 p.780

(122) Busch op cit p343

(123) ibid. p.320

(124) ET The Church's Teaching on Baptism trans. by E.A. Payne (London, 1948)

(125) CD IV/4 pp IX-X

that it corresponds to the divine act.⁽¹²⁶⁾ At the end of the day Barth ends up nearer to Zwingli than to any other theologian on this issue. From one who was deeply wedded to the Reformed tradition and was able to follow Calvin very closely, this is further indication of Barth's independence of thought.

(d) Some theological response to Barth.

It is hard to overestimate the significance of Karl Barth for 20th Century theology whether in the agreement or disagreement provoked by his work. One may regard Barth as a 20th Century Church Father or see his work as 'the stricken, glorious hulk of some great Dreadnought' to be dismembered and where possible salvaged and exploited,⁽¹²⁷⁾ but it is clear that he cannot and will not be ignored and that it is only 'by working through Barth and not by going round him that a pathway exists to constructive contemporary theological endeavour'.⁽¹²⁸⁾ The truth of this has been recognised in a way which surprised and gratified Barth himself, by the attention which has been accorded to him by Roman Catholic theologians of the calibre of Hans Küng, Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri Bouillard. Criticism has not, of course, been in short supply at any stage of Barth's career. It has been and is asserted that Barth's rejection of natural theology goes too far and is based upon

(126) CD IV/4 pp 71-72

(127) R.F. Roberts: 'Barth's Doctrine of Time' in S.W. Sykes op cit p.146

(128) S.W. Sykes op cit p.16

a misunderstanding of Aquinas' analogia entis, that he errs in reversing Law and Gospel, that he is guilty of Christomonism, that Christ is abstracted from his historical humanity, that he lacks a doctrine of creation or of the fall, that in emphasizing grace he does despite to nature, that the material order is subsumed and disregarded, that he is guilty of universalism, enthusiasm and ethical illuminationism. Barth is certainly not beyond criticisms and it will be the task of this work to examine some of them especially those emanating from representatives of the evangelical tradition. Those who would criticise Barth do however have problems. Barth's dialectical method of doing theology can be misleading. It is not easy to take account of everything that he said since there is so much of it and important sections might be ignored leading to misinterpretation of his true intention. Barth himself, although having secured his basic theological approach by the time he began the Dogmatics, does develop significantly over the period of writing the Dogmatics giving rise to precisely this possibility. G.W. Bromiley notes:

Many of the fashionable complaints about Barth dissolve on closer material acquaintance with his actual statements; for example, that he finds no truth outside revelation, that he subjectivizes the gospel, that he makes faith too cognitive, that he finds no place for obedience, that he gives scripture only a spasmodic existential role and allots it no controlling function. (129)

(129) G.W. Bromiley: Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh, 1979) p.248

However, more recent trends in theology have found inspiration in Barth's understanding that God is known in his revelation in the concrete event of Jesus Christ. Barth himself progressed significantly in his understanding of God between Volumes I and IV of his Dogmatics, sufficient to prompt the observation that he needs to be read backwards on this matter.⁽¹³⁰⁾ R.D. Williams discerns this progress as a movement towards a greater sense of plurality within God as Barth develops the notion of God's becoming in CD IV and therefore goes beyond the more limited discussions of the Trinity given in CD I/1 in the context of revelation. Williams finds Barth moving towards a more satisfactory doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the unwritten CD V The Doctrine of Redemption, but as he did not live to complete his life's work it remains for others to construct a revised model of the Trinity, a task accomplished most effectively so far in Jürgen Moltmann's The Crucified God.⁽¹³¹⁾

These works extend the dynamic which led Barth to speak of the humanity of God on the basis that the God who is made known in Jesus is not to be thought of apart from this man. Jesus of Nazareth is in

(130)The observation is that of Dr J. Thompson at the centenary conference on Karl Barth at Oxford, September 1986

(131)R.D. Williams: 'Barth on the Triune God', in S.W. Sykes op cit p.184,pp 176-177. God's being in becoming is also the theme of Eberhard Jüngel's The Doctrine of the Trinity. God's Being is in Becoming (Edinburgh and London, 1976) esp pp 89-108.

For Moltmann's development of Barth's idea of the death of the Living God see The Crucified God (London, 1974) pp 201-207.

H.P. Owen§ draws attention to the 'holy mutability' of God according to Barth in Concepts of Deity (London, 1971) p.103

the beginning with God in the sense that 'from all eternity God's self-differentiation as Son or Word is directed towards the human and worldly object of election, Jesus of Nazareth'.⁽¹³²⁾ Barth moved from his early emphasis on the infinite qualitative difference between man and God to a position which, without retreating from his former insight, saw that the deity of God also included his humanity.⁽¹³³⁾ Barth appears to mean by this, not the eternal existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth, but God's 'free affirmation of man' in his sovereign and free election of man for himself in Christ and of himself to be man's 'God, his Lord, his compassionate Preserver and Saviour to eternal life'.⁽¹³⁴⁾ The implications of this progression for the way we think of God are considerable, but equally it affects our understanding of the value and significance of man and the world. We are thrust into thinking of this suffering of God in Christ in history and in his eternity and of the importance of that for the impassibility of God. The cross has the most far reaching implications for our understanding of the very nature and being of God who is able to endure it.⁽¹³⁵⁾ Profound as these themes are, it is possible here only to indicate them as one of the ways in which the foundations laid by Barth are being built upon by his successors.

(132) R.D. Williams op cit p.178 See also CD II/2 p.96

(133) Karl Barth: The Humanity of God (London, 1961) pp 45-6

(134) ibid. p.51

(135) Moltmann op cit p.4

(e) Karl Barth as an evangelical theologian

With this heading we draw to the close of this summary and to the core of the matter to be explored in this study. How is Barth to be evaluated as an evangelical theologian? Immediately we encounter a problem of definition since the words 'evangelisch' and 'evangelical' carry different senses in German and English. That Barth was evangelisch in the German sense is a matter of plain fact. He was by birth, conviction, profession and education a member of the Reformed Protestant tradition. His own understanding expressed in his work Evangelical Theology was as follows:

The theology to be introduced here is evangelical theology. The qualifying attribute "evangelical" recalls both the New Testament and at the same time the Reformation of the sixteenth century. Therefore, it may be taken as a dual affirmation: the theology to be considered here is the one which, nourished by the hidden sources of the documents of Israel's history, first achieved unambiguous expression in the writings of the New Testament evangelists, apostles and prophets: it is also, moreover, the theology newly discovered and accepted by the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The expression "evangelical", however, cannot and should not be intended in a confessional, that is, in a denominational and exclusive sense. This is forbidden first of all by the elementary fact that "evangelical" refers primarily and decisively to the Bible, which is in some way respected by all confessions. Not all so called Protestant theology is evangelical theology. Moreover there is also evangelical theology in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox worlds, as well as in the many later variations, including deteriorations of the Reformation departure. What the word "evangelical" will objectively designate is that theology which treats of the

God of the Gospel. "Evangelical" signifies the "Catholic", ecumenical (not to say conciliar) continuity and unity of this theology. Such theology, intends to apprehend, to understand and to speak of the God of the Gospel, in the midst of the variety of all other theologies and (without any value judgement being implied) in distinction from them. This is the God who reveals himself in the Gospel, who himself speaks to man and acts among and upon them. Wherever he becomes the object of human science, both its source and its norm, there is evangelical theology.⁽¹³⁶⁾

Barth, then, understands himself as an evangelical theologian, not just a Protestant one, because his concern is to speak of the God of the Gospel in continuity with the Bible and the Reformation. Whether others have understood him likewise and whether they have considered him to be consistent in this task, we will have to consider further. For the moment, and by the way of interim assessment, we will conclude this section with a summary of points that will be useful as we progress.

(1) Barth is totally committed to the authority of the Bible

Theology has to do with revelation and revelation is definitively witnessed to by the Bible hence the Bible is central and supreme in the life of the church and its authority cannot be usurped either by human reason or the church's tradition. The church has the task of speaking God's Word in the language and realities of

(136) Karl Barth: Evangelical Theology (Edinburgh, 1963) pp 75-6

today but cannot accommodate to any higher authority than the Bible, because there is none. However, once embraced by faith the knowledge of God is eminently reasonable because God himself is reason and truth. Both tradition and reason find their place in submission to God's Word but it is the Godness of God in his revelation which is supreme.

(2) Barth holds firmly to the historical and objective nature of the revelation of God in Christ

He affirms the historical truths of the virgin birth, the crucifixion, the resurrection of Christ and his appearances, and the ascension. He has no interest in demythologizing these events or in reducing them to the internal and private world of the religious subject. From first to last of his theology he is concerned to assert the primary objective and historical nature of revelation within which human subjectivity can find its place of relative importance. He is no theological reductionist.

(3) Barth respects the historic statements of the orthodox faith and the Reformation

He is not an innovator in the sense that he wishes to go beyond the historic faith of the church. He proves himself to be a creative innovator when it comes to expressing again what he hears in the church's tradition. Even so, the creeds function only as a secondary

authority and are themselves subject to the primary authority of God's Word. Where a conflict is perceived Barth does not hesitate to remodel the tradition, but the intention is essentially a conservative one which aims at leading the church back to the springs of its life in Christ. This includes for Barth taking seriously such typical evangelical concerns as the wrath of God as a form of his love,⁽¹³⁷⁾ the substitutionary work of Christ⁽¹³⁸⁾ and the motif of atonement as satisfaction albeit rendered by God rather than to him in doing that which is satisfactory to remove sin.⁽¹³⁹⁾

(4) Barth is preoccupied with the task of preaching

The task of dogmatics is to serve the preaching ministry of the church. He does not see theology as an abstract pursuit but as one directly related to the pastoral and proclamatory work of the church. It is therefore a responsible science. It is also a persuasive science in that by the exposition of the inherent rationality of Christian truth on its own terms and on the basis of its own presuppositions it has far more power to persuade than an apologetic which takes as its starting point the premises of unbelief.

(137) CD IV/1 pp 220-221

(138) *ibid.* p.230

(139) *ibid.* p.254

(5) Barth is an implacable opponent of all forms of theological liberalism.

This was manifestly true in his 'Romans' days but remained true throughout as he engaged the work of his contemporaries in the course of his theological output and took issue with the modern heirs of Schleiermacher. CD IV has a constant, although veiled dialogue with Bultmann running through it. So widespread has Barth's judgement on nineteenth century liberal theology become that it is now possible to speak of a 'Barthian captivity' of liberal theology. Towards the end of his life, Barth envisaged that the theological task could be enterprised in many different ways but insisted on the need for it to remain free, that is, not bound to patterns of thought alien to revelation.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ Barth's supreme charge against Neo-Protestantism is that it reduces all theology to a form of anthropology so that Jesus becomes the crowning Keystone in the arch of our thinking instead of being understood as God become man. The way theology must follow is that from God to man not man to God.⁽¹⁴¹⁾

On the basis of these theological characteristics we contend that Barth is to be regarded as an evangelical theologian of the first rank. That this judgement is no isolated one may be seen from two further quotations:

(140) Godsey op cit p.13

(141) T.F. Torrance op cit pp 60-61

We should see Barth first of all as an evangelical theologian. Whereas in his earlier phase he was heavily influenced by Kantian and existentialist philosophy, when he embarked on the Church Dogmatics he broke with this philosophical heritage desiring only to be a theologian of the Word of God. In his later years, Barth had no compunction in describing his theological position as 'evangelical' but by this he meant neither a rigid adherence to the letter of Scripture nor a belief in inerrancy. Instead, he thought of himself as evangelical in the classical sense - committed to the gospel of reconciliation and redemption, the message that we are saved by the free grace of God alone as revealed and confirmed in Jesus Christ. (142)

What Shakespeare is to English literature and Mozart is to classical music, Karl Barth is to Christian theology today. Any-one still unfamiliar with Barth today must be judged theologically illiterate! But what I like most about his theology is that it is evangelical to the core, for it is utterly faithful to the Gospel and its message of the reconciling love and grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ. (143)

(142) Donald G. Bloesch 'The Legacy of Karl Barth' in TSF Bulletin Vol.9 No.5 (May-June 1986) p.6

(143) T.F. Torrance 'Karl Barth: 1886-1986' in TSF Bulletin Vol.10 No.1 (Sept-Oct 1986) p.4

II Evangelicalism and Karl Barth

(a) Definitions: Broad and Narrow

Evangelicalism is a broad but recognisable tradition. As is indicated by Barth himself⁽¹⁾ its source is in that interpretation of the Christian faith expressed in the Reformation and summarised under the headings sola scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide, but its subsequent course has followed many divergent contours. At the time of the Reformation variant forms of evangelicalism were already to be found outside the mainstream in the radical Protestantism of Andreas Bodenstein von Carlstadt and of the evangelical Anabaptists of Zürich. Some would argue that the various Anabaptist groups were only partly indebted to the Reformers for their impulse and for the rest drew upon older mediaeval renewal movements.⁽²⁾ In the course of the centuries the original Reformation divides of Lutheran, Reformed and Anglican were qualified by the emergence of the Arminian-Calvinist controversies, the growth of Puritanism in England and Pietism in Europe, and by the extension of the free church - state church, paedobaptist-believer baptist tensions. In the seventeenth century the Wesleys represented an interesting amalgam of Anglican and Pietist (Moravian) influences and from them are to be traced the holiness emphasis of the nineteenth century and

(1) See above pp 36-37

(2) See for example Leonard Verduin: The Reformers and their Stepchildren (Exeter, 1966) pp 13-15

the charismatic of the twentieth, with their stress on realised communion in the knowledge of God. The more recent evangelical tradition has been strongly influenced by such British theologians as James Denney (1856-1917), James Orr (1844-1913), T.M. Lindsay (1843-1914) and P.T. Forsyth (1848-1921), the influential American voices of Charles Hodge (1797-1878) and B.B. Warfield (1851-1921) and the Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and Hermann Bavinck (1895-1964).

Historically, within the evangelical tradition, there is considerable diversity but one which is given cohesion by its loyalty to the leading tenets of the Reformation. Seen in this breadth there is no great difficulty in perceiving Barth to be an outstanding figure within this tradition.

A peculiar feature of 20th Century British-American evangelicalism, however, and one which is integral to this thesis, is the tendency to see evangelicalism not so much as a broad tradition as a conservative party within Protestantism, which is marked by fidelity to evangelical doctrines in an age of declension.⁽³⁾ This tendency is distinguishable in the differing uses in German and English of the words 'evangelisch' and 'evangelical'. British-American evangelicalism is at this point reflecting its own struggle with liberal Protestantism and is deeply marked by the Modernist-Fundamentalist debates of the early

(3) James Barr: Escaping from Fundamentalism (London, 1984) pp 156-7

twentieth century at which time walls went up and a siege mentality developed amongst many evangelical Christians resisting the encroachment of modernism.⁽⁴⁾ The heirs of fundamentalism prefer to denominate themselves as 'conservative evangelicals', thereby distancing themselves from the negative and reactive attitudes which came to be associated with Fundamentalism while retaining the positive commitment to fundamental doctrines.⁽⁵⁾ Those doctrines may be summarised as follows:

Evangelical Christians are thus marked by their devotion to the sure Word of the Bible: they are committed to the inspired Scriptures as the divine rule of faith and practice. They affirm the fundamental doctrines of the Gospel including the incarnation and virgin birth of Christ. His sinless life substitutionary atonement and bodily resurrection as the ground of God's forgiveness of sinners, justification by faith alone, and the spiritual regeneration of all who trust in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.⁽⁶⁾

Critics of conservative evangelicalism point out that the religious conservatism of the movement reflects not simply theological conviction but an 'intellectual structure' which 'aspires to hold itself close to the traditional positions of the mainstream churches, considering that these traditional positions

(4) G.G. Bolich: Karl Barth and Evangelicalism (Downers Grove, 1985) pp 35-40

(5) Bruce L. Shelley: 'Fundamentalism' in New International Dictionary of the Christian Church (Exeter, 1924) pp 396-397

(6) Carl F.H. Henry: 'Evangelical' in ibid p 358-359

would have remained totally satisfactory if they had not been spoiled by deviation into "modern" theology and biblical criticism⁽⁷⁾ Such an 'intellectual structure' is not altogether open to the normal processes of rational debate and charitable dialogue. Thus James Barr can characterise conservative evangelicalism as maintaining:

- (a) a very strong emphasis on the inerrancy of the Bible, the absence from it of any sort of error;
- (b) a strong hostility to modern theology and to the methods, results and implications of modern critical study of the Bible;
- (c) an assurance that those who do not share their religious viewpoint are not really 'true Christians' at all.⁽⁸⁾

In his two books on Fundamentalism Barr has been accused of 'battering away on the heads of conservative believers' and of being 'venomous'.⁽⁹⁾ One may indeed suspect that he is trying to exorcise his own demons in his writing, but he comes by no means far of the mark by distinguishing between an honourable, evangelical tradition with its own perceptions and consistent theology and a conservative mentality which actually threatens that position while claiming to represent it.⁽¹⁰⁾ Where he does fail is in the indiscriminating way in which he assumes all of whom he writes can easily be comprehended within the terms of his definitions.

(7) James Barr: Fundamentalism (London, 1977) pp 8-9

(8) James Barr: ibid p.1 see also p.9

(9) Clark H. Pinnock: The Scripture Principle (London, 1985) p.227

(10) James Barr: Escaping from Fundamentalism (London, 1984) p.157

The fact is that evangelicalism, even 'conservative evangelicalism', is a broad spectrum of views more in the nature of an affirming coalition than a monolithic uniformity. Granted this, it perhaps comes as no surprise to discover that Karl Barth has been variously perceived by evangelicals and the purpose of this chapter is to describe those perceptions and reflect upon them. The intention is not only to seek through this process a better understanding of Barth but also to view this as a heuristic exercise which will disclose the main loci of debate within evangelicalism. Barth, it will be argued, is viewed ambivalently precisely because he touches on those matters which are significant to evangelicals and the element of attraction or threat he represents relates directly to the varying evangelical responses to those matters. This accords with William C. Fletcher:

It seems to me to be that precisely because his thought runs so close to the position of mainstream Christianity Barth represents the most formidable threat to the Church today. Or else he is no threat at all, but marks the much needed turning point in the history of modern theology.⁽¹¹⁾

(b) Obstacles to Interpretation

Before proceeding to a review of some of the evangelical interpretations of Barth, it is necessary to indicate something of the gap between Anglo-American evangelicalism and Karl Barth which has hindered interpretation.

(11) William C. Fletcher: The Moderns (Grand Rapids, 1962) p.155

(1) The Language Barrier.

It is self-evident that Barth wrote in German and that this should constitute a barrier to all but the most fluent German speakers. The work of translating the Dogmatics as a whole began in the 1950s (with the exception of an earlier translation of CDI/1 in 1936) and was completed in 1969. Add to this the complexity and bulk of the Church Dogmatics and it ought not to be surprising that a mature assessment of Barth would take some time to find expression in the English-speaking world or that Robert Jensen could indicate that 'almost nothing of what people have spoken of in America or England as "Barthianism" has much to do with the thought of the man from Basel'.⁽¹²⁾

(2) The Transition Factor

Barth nowhere hid the fact that he perceived his theology as a theologia viatorum but he did express the hope that he might be judged on the basis of his later theological work and not his earlier. He has not always been accorded this courtesy. The Barth of the Dogmatics although the same as that of Romans has nevertheless changed significantly in his theology and yet this transition factor has frequently gone unrecognised and has consequently obscured understanding. Barth's dialectical method of doing theology is one

(12) Robert Jensen: God After God (Indianapolis, 1969) p.6

which is apt to mislead through overstatement of the point he wishes to make. To find the balancing remarks which will make sense of his true point of view requires a knowledge of the fuller scope of his work.

(3) Cultural Distance

There can be no mistake that the cultural distance between the kind of church life known to Barth and that of British-American evangelicalism is immense. Behind much that Barth says is a tradition of debate which is not always immediately clear to a reader from a different background. There is a marked absence in the Dogmatics of debate with English-speaking theologians and thus the bulk of Barth's ongoing dialogue with the church's tradition is within the orbit of Continental theology and philosophy. To enter fully into Barth requires penetration of what for many English-speaking thinkers is another world.

(4) The Caricature Problem

Barth was bracketed from the 1920's as a 'neo-orthodox' theologian, along with Brunner, Bultmann, Tillich and the Niebuhrs with the results that the essential and immense distinctions between their approaches to theology were obscured. The issues are clarified by Bernard Ramm: 'In some instances a neo-orthodox theology is but

an orthodox theology with a neo-orthodox corrective and in another instance it is a liberal theology with a neo-orthodox corrective'.(13)

These, and other, obstacles to interpretation will be evident in the reviews that follow.

(c) Evangelical Interpretations of Barth

This section must of necessity be selective. The method to be followed will consist of an examination of nine evangelical theologians' appraisal under three headings indicating the spectrum of option. The three headings are Reformed Hostility, Sympathetic Criticism and Cautious Assimilation. Interim comments will be kept to a minimum and will deal only with incidental points postponing evaluation of the main themes of evangelical interpretation until the following sections where other commentators will also be included. Before embarking on the task, it is necessary to indicate a line of approach which, while not uncritical, does not fit easily into any of the above categories. Barth has had an abiding and ready reception from an early date among certain evangelical theologians and it is no accident that the two editors of Church Dogmatics, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, are in the evangelical tradition, Bromiley in particular being closely identified with conservative evangelicalism. Probably no other theologians have done more to make

(13) Bernard Ramm: Handbook of Contemporary Theology (Grand Rapids, 1966) p.89

Barth's work available and to further its impact in the English-speaking world. For Bromiley Barth is no less than 'the great Church Father of Evangelical Christendom, the one genuine Doctor of the Church the modern era has known...only Athanasius, Augustine, Aquinas and Calvin have performed comparable services in the past, in the search for a unified and comprehensive basis for all theology in the grace of God'.⁽¹⁴⁾ Torrance would agree with this seeing him as 'the greatest figure in Christian theology that has appeared for decades'⁽¹⁵⁾ and asserting 'no one who really gets inside Barth's thinking and has learned to follow him in his persistent and profound enquiry into the Truth of God can remain unchanged or unmoved, or be ungrateful'.⁽¹⁶⁾ Torrance has in addition consistently developed his own theological thinking from a Barthian base. The contribution has been extended by a further scholar standing in the evangelical tradition, John Thompson in his work on Barth's Christology.⁽¹⁷⁾ Thompson indicates his own perspective: 'The writer finds himself more in agreement with Barth than his critics and has himself only rarely and briefly entered a critical caveat. It is his belief that Karl Barth's contribution to this central theme and so the whole of theology has been outstanding and is most relevant to the current debate on who Jesus really was

(14) Preface to CD IV/4 p.vi

(15) T.F. Torrance Karl Barth: An Introduction to his Early Theology (London, 1962) p.15

(16) Torrance ibid p.10

(17) J. Thompson: Christ in Perspective in the Theology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh, 1978)

and is.⁽¹⁸⁾ These writers are representative of others in the same tradition who have readily occupied the same ground for many years and the following citation of conservative evangelical writers needs to be seen against that backdrop.

(1) Reformed Hostility

(i) Cornelius von Til

Much of the suspicion concerning Barth in evangelical circles is to be attributed directly to the interpretation of Barth offered in van Til's writings,⁽¹⁹⁾ the titles of which indicate clearly his line of approach. It is significant that van Til was writing in 1946 and therefore had to confine himself to Barth's earlier writings. His basic proposition is that the dialectical theology of Barth and Brunner is the new enemy of the Reformed Faith. 'This enemy comes in the guise of a friend; he is all the more dangerous for that. The Theology of Crisis acts as a fifth-column in orthodox circles'.⁽²⁰⁾ While employing the language of orthodoxy, Barth is actually no different from the modernists for while he may trim off the evil branches of modern Protestantism he has 'steadfastly refused to deal with the stem and root from which these branches have sprung'.⁽²¹⁾

(18) ibid p.vii

(19) Cornelius van Til: The New Modernism (London, 1946) and Christianity and Barthianism (Philadelphia, 1965)

(20) The New Modernism pp 3-4

(21) Ibid p.366

That root is the modern philosophy of Kant, Kierkegaard and Heidegger of which van Til finds abundant evidence in Barth's theology and the presence of which entirely vitiates anything Barth may have to offer.⁽²²⁾ Barth was wedded to Criticism and such a theology has no possibility of being Christian.⁽²³⁾ Van Til perceives the presence of modern philosophy in Barth's 'activism' and finds in Barth's statement that God's being is in his act a denial of a 'self-contained ontological Trinity'⁽²⁴⁾ and with that the denial of every other fundamental Christian doctrine.⁽²⁵⁾ Dialectical theology is thus to be distinguished from modernism which places God at man's disposal.⁽²⁶⁾ Van Til indicates in his later book that his estimate of Barth remains the same after further study and a more complete statement of his theology.⁽²⁷⁾ His urgent purpose continues to be to warn believers that in Barth they have 'new wine in old bottles'.⁽²⁸⁾

Dialecticalism is a basic reconstruction of the whole of Reformation theology along critical lines. A Calvinist should not object to Lutheranism in Barth; there is no Lutheranism there. A Lutheran should not object to the Calvinism in Barth; there is no Calvinism there. An Arminian should not object to the Calvinism of Barth's doctrine of election; there is no Calvinism in it. A Calvinist should not object to the

(22) Ibid 365-366

(23) Ibid p.42

(24) Ibid p.3

(25) Ibid p.5, p.7

(26) Ibid p.3

(27) Christianity and Barthianism p.vii

(28) Ibid p.2

Arminianism in Barth's universalism; there is no Arminianism in it. A Reformation theology reconstructed along the lines of modern critical principles is not a Reformation theology in any form.⁽²⁹⁾

To read van Til after reading Barth is to be struck by two completely different atmospheres. For all van Til's criticism that Barth is wedded to modern philosophy, it is Barth who reflects a preoccupation with scripture and van Til who appears to be taken up with philosophy, despite all his apparent contempt for it. What is even more striking is the fact that van Til appears not to understand Barth or even to want to. To affirm, for instance, that Barth denies the ontological Trinity can only be described as a serious misjudgement in the light of Barth's affirmations in CD I/1 and throughout the Dogmatics. Barth's own estimate of The New Modernism was that it made out 'I was possibly the worst heretic of all time'⁽³⁰⁾ and he affirmed in amazement that he could not recognise himself at all in it,⁽³¹⁾ perceiving only a wilful caricature.⁽³²⁾ Von Balthasar's comment that van Til's interpretation is 'fully grotesque'⁽³³⁾ comes as no surprise, although it is perhaps surprising when van Til receives equal criticism from other Reformed theologians. Berkouwer added an

(29) The New Modernism p.366

(30) Busch Karl Barth p.380 See also CDIV/2xii

(31) G.C. Berkouwer: The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth p.388 p.11

(32) G.W. Bromiley: Karl Barth in Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology Ed. P.E. Hughes (Grand Rapids, 1969) p.52

(33) Quoted by Berkouwer op cit 386

appendix to the English-language edition of his book to disassociate himself from van Til.⁽³⁴⁾ He urged that criticism of Barth should be based on 'legitimate and warranted analysis of his work'⁽³⁵⁾ and criticised 'an unsound analysis which draws conclusions which Barth draws least of all, conclusions, in fact, which he himself has more than once and at great length opposed'.⁽³⁶⁾ To adopt the method which van Til applies to Barth, i.e. that of exposing what are imagined to be his philosophical premises and then deducing his theology from them,⁽³⁷⁾ would have us rejecting Augustine as a neo-Platonist, Aquinas as a neo-Aristotelean and the Reformers as neo-Scholastics if the same method were applied to them.⁽³⁸⁾ Van Til's method gives the impression of being sharp but is in reality weak.⁽³⁹⁾ Berkouwer himself dissents from some of the confident assumptions van Til makes about what orthodoxy actually is.⁽⁴⁰⁾ In the light of these criticisms it is remarkable to find van Til using Berkouwer freely in his book Barthianism and Christianity while failing to respond to his criticisms. Others have criticised van Til's lack of biblical exegesis to support his own presuppositions⁽⁴¹⁾ and the refusal to recognise that some of

(34) Berkouwer ibid 384-393

(35) ibid p.384

(36) ibid p.386

(37) ibid p.386

(38) ibid p.389

(39) ibid

(40) Ibid p.390

(41) Colin Brown: Karl Barth and the Christian Message (London, 1967) pp 155-156

Barth's presuppositions may actually come from the Bible, or if they come from elsewhere be retained because they were reinforced by the Bible.⁽⁴²⁾ In reviewing The New Modernism one scholar commented: 'If Dr. van Til were as critical with respect to his own presuppositions as he seeks to be with Barth and Brunner, his book would have a good deal more of scholarly interest'.⁽⁴³⁾

The scholarly response to van Til has been examined at some length for the simple reason that the thesis advanced in his work gained widespread currency among conservative evangelicals and contributed to the suspicion with which Barth has been regarded. The thesis was consistently popularised in the work of Francis Schaeffer that Barth was an existentialist using theological language⁽⁴⁴⁾ and that neo-orthodoxy is to be radically distinguished from biblical Reformation theology.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Both Van Til and Schaeffer find in Barth a rejection of a system of truth which for them is identical with historic orthodoxy and which may be designated as Christian rationalism.⁽⁴⁶⁾ It is at this point, in epistemology, that their basic objections are focussed and we shall return to them in due course.

(42) Bernard Ramm: After Fundamentalism (New York, 1983) p.33

(43) E.T. Ransdell: 'Barth as heretic!' Christian Century 7 Aug 1946 pp 964-965

(44) Francis Schaeffer: The God Who is There (London, 1968) p.54.p.80

(45) Francis Schaeffer: Escape from Reason (London, 1968) p.51

(46) van Til: The New Modernism p.xiii. Schaeffer: The God Who is There p.54

(ii) Fred H. Klooster⁽⁴⁷⁾

Klooster writes with similar theological concern to van Til but does so in a way which is measured and accurate. Having had the benefit of a year's study with Barth⁽⁴⁸⁾ he is in a good position to do so. He writes with great appreciation of Barth's opposition to Liberalism which has been so effective because it originated within German theology and Liberalism itself.⁽⁴⁹⁾ Yet his conclusion is that Barth is offering a new theology⁽⁵⁰⁾ which departs both from scripture and from Calvin. Barth's departure from scripture is inevitable because of his denial of the Bible's inspiration and infallibility. This precludes a truly Reformed theology from the start⁽⁵¹⁾ and is evidenced by Barth's distinction between Geschichte and Historie and the category of saga.⁽⁵²⁾ This leads to a denial of the fall, the denial of Adam as an historical person and consequently affects the entire doctrine of reconciliation and the failure to take sin seriously.⁽⁵³⁾ Barth's doctrine of election suffers equally from his defective presupposition and his deduction of election from Christ means that what was intended for the elect is wrongly universalised.⁽⁵⁴⁾ What this amounts to is that Barth's

(47) Fred H. Klooster: The Significance of Barth's Theology (Grand Rapids, 1961)

(48) ibid p.5

(49) ibid p.17

(50) ibid p.26, p.31

(51) ibid p.24-30

(52) ibid p.81

(53) ibid p.85, p.93

(54) ibid p.46

understanding of the Christ event becomes the criterion by which all statements in Scripture relating to election are evaluated.⁽⁵⁵⁾ Barth fails to let Scripture interpret Christ and sets Christ and Scripture against each other.⁽⁵⁶⁾ He runs into difficulty with election because, having rejected the thought of a hidden decree of God he is forced to reintroduce the equivalent in order to avoid the deduction of universal salvation being made as a consequence to universal election.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Significantly, Klooster objects to those points where Barth departs from Calvin, as in the doctrine of election, the federal headship of Adam,⁽⁵⁸⁾ the historical fall, the covenant of works⁽⁵⁹⁾ and the doctrine of the two states,⁽⁶⁰⁾ behind which he detects an effective denial of the Council of Chalcedon⁽⁶¹⁾ despite verbal similarity. Reconciliation is reduced to incarnation with a devaluing of atonement.⁽⁶²⁾ In short:

In spite of Barth's appeal to Scripture, to the Reformers and to the historic Reformed creeds, his theology is not really in harmony with these writings. When appeal is made to the historic creeds, it is often to their words rather than their substance. The claim to find support in Calvin sometimes involves a re-interpretation of Calvin to substantiate such an appeal. And it is recognised that Barth's exegesis of

(55) *ibid* p.47,p.45

(56) *ibid* p.46

(57) *ibid* pp 69,70

(58) *ibid* p.85

(59) *ibid* p.82

(60) *ibid* p.95

(61) *ibid* p.94

(62) *ibid* p.96

Scripture often involves an almost complete break with the history of interpretation.⁽⁶³⁾

Apart from some inaccuracies,⁽⁶⁴⁾ Klooster deals fairly with Barth while seeing him clearly as a threat to the 'old system'⁽⁶⁵⁾ and to orthodoxy as defined by Calvin.⁽⁶⁶⁾ This stems from his defective view of Scripture evidenced by the fact that he embraces higher criticism and thereby vitiates any gain made. Such false presuppositions preclude a genuine hearing of the biblical message.⁽⁶⁷⁾ Although much separates Klooster from van Til in style, the conclusions they come to are substantially the same - Barth has reworked traditional theology and because he is wedded to higher criticism there is a basic epistemological flaw at the heart of his new theology.⁽⁶⁸⁾

(iii) Gordon H. Clark⁽⁶⁹⁾

Clark's reservations concerning Barth also relate to his epistemology and particularly his attitude to verbal inspiration. While finding Barth firm on issues such as the deity of Christ, the

(63) *ibid* p.31

(64) As e.g. Klooster's claim that Barth denies inspiration. See CDI/2 517ff

(65) *op cit* p.95

(66) Klooster also errs in seeing liberal Protestantism and orthodoxy as Barth's two enemies (*ibid* p.19) cf CDI/1 pp31-36

(67) Klooster *ibid* p.23

(68) *ibid* pp 27-28. Van Til makes the same point in The New Modernism pp 286-289. See also Schaeffer: The God Who is There p.54

(69) Karl Barth's Theological Method (Philadelphia, 1963) Historiography Secular and Religious (Nutley, New Jersey, 1971)

virgin birth and his hostility to modernism,⁽⁷⁰⁾ he locates his fundamental flaw in an irrationality which stems directly from the rejection of propositional revelation.⁽⁷¹⁾ Despite Barth's desire to be rational he cuts the ground from under his own feet by a faulty view of language which he sees as being creatively shaped by the world and therefore limited.⁽⁷²⁾ In denying that a system of propositions can correspond with the Word of God he condemns us to utter ambiguity.⁽⁷³⁾ In attributing error to the biblical text and the limitations of the biblical authors, Barth is denying the reality of inspiration.⁽⁷⁴⁾ His theological method and supremely his epistemology are therefore faulty. This is further evidenced in the concepts of saga and legend and the distinction between Geschichte and Historie. In denying that the Gospel events can be established by Historie, the process of historical enquiry accessible to a neutral observer, Barth reduces the resurrection to an event which never took place but in which God acted on man.⁽⁷⁵⁾ Thus for Clark revelation is tied to a particular view of verbal inspiration in which truth is given propositionally and in which the literal historicity of all scripture is crucial for the rationality of Christian theology. He explicitly identifies himself with the older

(70) Karl Barth's Theological Method pp3-4

(71) ibid p.109

(72) ibid p.120

(73) ibid p.136

(74) ibid pp 186-188

(75) Historiography: Secular and Religious p.300

Protestantism which he considers to have been far from wrong in its approach to these issues.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Interim commentary

Despite dissimilarities of approach van Til, Klooster and Clark have in common a desire to maintain a heritage of Reformed orthodoxy which they perceive Barth to be attacking. At the root of this lies a particular epistemology which understands the inspiration of the Bible primarily in terms of revealed propositions which are accessible to reason. A highly literal view of Scripture is required by such an approach and is accompanied by an understanding of Christian theology as a system of truths which can be defended against alternative philosophies. The corollary of this is a fierce loyalty to Calvin (almost to the point of regarding him as an infallible oracle)⁽⁷⁷⁾ and the theological system as evolved by his successors and a difficulty in accommodating new or radical departures from this system. However, the Calvinism here embraced is understood and received through the channel of Protestant scholasticism. Whether it is an accurate description, or the only possible description, of Calvinism is contested.

(76) Karl Barth's Theological Method p.185

(77) Eg Loraine Boettner The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination (Grand Rapids 1941) p.1 cp CDII/2 p.36

Alternative interpretations of Calvin's doctrine of Scripture which are in line with Barth's dynamic view are not wanting.⁽⁷⁸⁾

(2) Critical Sympathy

(i) Gerrit C. Berkouwer⁽⁷⁹⁾

Barth himself called Berkouwer's work 'the great book on myself and the Church Dogmatics' and commended it for its good will and Christian aequitas⁽⁸⁰⁾ as well as 'its perspicuous and penetrating mode of exposition and the sharpness and balance of its criticisms'.⁽⁸¹⁾ In a letter to Berkouwer he acknowledged that it had given him a great deal to think about.⁽⁸²⁾ The work remains the most penetrating critique of Barth from a conservative evangelical standpoint and a useful summary in its own right of Barth's theology. Berkouwer argues that Barth consistently develops one central thought, namely the 'triumph of God's grace'.⁽⁸³⁾ This

(78) J.K.S. Reid The Authority of Scripture (London, 1957) p.26, pp 37-38

W. Niesel The Theology of Calvin (London, 1956) p.31

F. Wendel Calvin (London, 1963) pp 157-158

One of the results of Barth's interest in Calvin has been a renewal of Calvin studies. Cp John T. McNeill The History and Character of Calvinism (Oxford, 1954) p.429

(79) G.C. Berkouwer: The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth (London, 1956)

(80) CD IV/2 p.xii

(81) CD IV/3.1 p.173

(82) Busch Karl Barth p381

(83) Berkouwer op cit p.10,p.19

dominant motif is evident throughout Barth's theological development, even in the theology of crisis in which the purpose is to show that 'all human ways are dead end roads in order that the one way might be revealed'.⁽⁸⁴⁾ The 'No' is uttered for the sake of the 'Yes'. Great stress is laid upon the triumph of grace in creation whereby God overcomes the Nihil in order to create room for development of the covenant of grace.⁽⁸⁵⁾ At the very outset, then, creation prefigures redemption⁽⁸⁶⁾ and creation itself is rooted in God's election. His primordial decision to be gracious to men in Jesus Christ is the beginning of all the works of God. Jesus Christ is the reality and revelation of the act of God,⁽⁸⁷⁾ the foundation and not simply the executor of God's election.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Reconciliation further reveals the triumph of God's grace not in God's beating down the opposition but through his self-humiliating love and grace.⁽⁸⁹⁾ The eschatological triumph is seen in Barth's concept of the 'eternalisation of our past life' (his understanding of the resurrection of the body) in preference to any concept of continuance.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Ostensibly, it appears very difficult to criticise a theology which magnifies sola gratia,⁽⁹¹⁾ but Berkouwer's concern is whether Barth's concept of the triumph is identical with the

(84) *ibid* p.33

(85) *ibid* p.60

(86) *ibid* p.56

(87) *ibid* p.90

(88) *ibid* p.97

(89) *ibid* p.132

(90) *ibid* p.158, 160

(91) *ibid* p.196

Bible's concept of that triumph.⁽⁹²⁾ Historical theology indicates that other such theologies have detached the concept from its Biblical matrix. Berkouwer refers to Marcionism, Antinomianism, Perfectionism and Universalism as examples of the perversion of the triumph of grace.⁽⁹³⁾ There are in Barth strange elements far removed from traditional theological thought which arise from his mode of thinking.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Berkouwer has critical things to say about many of these areas but his most substantial criticism is that in his viewing all from the perspective of God's supralapsarian reconciling grace Barth devalues the significance of history and human decision. All has already been done, all decisions taken, only the revelation of redemption in history is at stake. There is thus no room for the history of redemption in its 'step-wise' character as spoken of in Scripture.⁽⁹⁵⁾ The initiative of grace wholly absorbs the full historical significance of evil⁽⁹⁶⁾ and history is deprived of decisive significance becoming merely the illustration of an eternal idea.⁽⁹⁷⁾ The effect of this is to be traced in Barth's rejection of an historical fall and of the movement from the need for preservation to that of salvation in his doctrine of providence,⁽⁹⁸⁾ his rejection of the two states and the transition

(92) *ibid* p.22

(93) *ibid* pp 196-213

(94) *ibid* p.12

(95) *ibid* pp 200-252

(96) *ibid* p.253

(97) *ibid* p.256

(98) *ibid* p.259

through the atonement from wrath to grace,⁽⁹⁹⁾ his reversal of law and gospel,⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ his ambiguity concerning the relation between election and human decision⁽¹⁰¹⁾ and his radical underplaying of the continuing conflict with evil.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Barth's fundamental error is that he has opposed grace and chaos whereas the Bible opposes grace and sin. His theology of grace stands out against this background of chaos and the conquest of chaos is not an historical event but an event in the eternal counsel of God.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Berkouwer's critique is so weighty that it will be frequently referred to in this and other chapters. Further comment will be postponed, however, until completing the selection of responses to Barth.

(ii) Colin Brown⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

Brown sees Barth as both the great problem figure of contemporary theology and as the thinker from whom there is most to learn because of his ability to see issues in breadth and depth.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ He discerns, however, major flaws in his understanding of Scripture and in his Christological concentration.

(99) *ibid* p.257

(100) *ibid* p.325

(101) *ibid* p.116

(102) *ibid* p.238

(103) *ibid* p.381

(104) Colin Brown: Karl Barth and the Christian Message (London, 1967)

(105) *ibid* p.9

Unlike some other evangelical writers Brown detects a high degree of agreement with Barth on the nature of Scripture understanding him as 'trying to restate the position of Protestant orthodoxy in a way that is dynamic, biblical and Christ-centred'.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ He appreciates Barth's stress on revelation as encounter with God and the placing of inspiration within the context of the dynamic process of revelation,⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ and also his recovery of Calvin's stress on the self-authenticating authority of the Word.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ He seeks to counter common misunderstandings of Barth. Against the interpretation that Barth thinks in terms of God's historical revelation being unreliably witnessed to by fallible human witnesses, he quotes G.W. Bromiley:

The word 'witness' is a dangerous one if used in its ordinary sense, but if we think of the Bible as a witness in the way in which the Bible itself describes the prophets and apostles as witnesses - 'he that receiveth you, receiveth me' - it is perhaps not quite so objectionable as some critics of Barth suppose. This is at least how Barth himself is thinking of it, and in this sense it has the merit of being a word which the Bible uses even about itself (cf John 5:39).⁽¹⁰⁹⁾

Against those who accuse Barth of subjectivism he clearly indicates his teaching that Scripture is objectively the Word of God in the power of the Holy Spirit.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ Against those who perceive

(106) *ibid* p.58

(107) *ibid*

(108) *ibid* p.36

(109) *ibid* p.32

(110) *ibid* p.39, p.56

Barth as denying the possibility of revelation in human language he quotes Barth himself to the contrary.⁽¹¹¹⁾ Having affirmed these points, and added that Barth is closer at this point to traditional Protestantism than is often allowed⁽¹¹²⁾ he goes on to discern a 'crack at the very foundation of Barthian dogmatics',⁽¹¹³⁾ namely his refusal to deduce the inerrancy of Scripture from their inspiration and his plain insistence that Scripture is and remains fallible.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ He quotes Barth:

To the bold postulate, that if their 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, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any 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.⁽¹¹⁵⁾

To Brown this position amounts to 'double-think' with its assertion of the simultaneous truth and untruth of the Bible.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ He correctly discerns in this correspondence with Barth's assertion that Christ took upon himself fallen human nature⁽¹¹⁷⁾ and believes that Barth himself reveals the inconsistency of his position by in

(111) *ibid* pp 42-43

(112) *ibid* p.134

(113) *ibid* p.62

(114) *ibid* p.59

(115) *ibid* p.59 citing CDI/2 529f

(116) *ibid* p.62

(117) *ibid* p.59

practice finding it impossible to say what is erroneous or not and indeed specifically denying that a standpoint could be found in order to make such a judgement.⁽¹¹⁸⁾

Important though this may be, Brown's fundamental criticism of Barth is not dissimilar to Berkouwer. He is paradoxically guilty of being too Christ-centred, his motive being that his Christ is really a Christ-idea which functions as a Procrustean bed leading to a recasting of theology in a non-biblical direction.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ He detects the centre of Barth's theology in the concept of covenant, 'a union of God with mankind in view of the union with divine and human nature in the person of Jesus Christ'.⁽¹²⁰⁾ Brown's criticism here is similar to the accusations of Christomonism often made⁽¹²¹⁾ and as with Berkouwer the issue concerns the identity of the Christ-idea with the biblical Christ. Brown's thesis is that the covenant for Barth

is the very key to understanding the divine nature. For this is the most important thing about God. God would not be without the covenant. It is also the key to creation. For man is above all the covenant partner of God. The world and the universe came into being because of the covenant. Moreover we only know what man is when we see him in the light of the covenant. When Barth turns to the question of sin, he sees it basically as a reaction against the covenant. All God's dealings with men are affected in and through Christ through

(118) *ibid* p.61 citing CDI/2 p.509

(119) *ibid* p.12, p.138

(120) *ibid* p.138

(121) Bromiley op cit pp 51-52

whom grace triumphs over all. Barth has far surpassed all his predecessors in making his theology Christ-centred. But this, its apparent strength, is in fact its real weakness.⁽¹²²⁾

The weakness is that Barth becomes artificial and forced in applying his principle, most noticeably in his recasting of the doctrine of election and that in so doing he fails to remain true to the N.T. witness.⁽¹²³⁾

(iii) Klaas Runia⁽¹²⁴⁾

Runia uses an examination of Barth's doctrine of scripture as a starting point for a work which stands as a study of Scripture in its own right. Indeed, Barth's doctrine must be seen to play a crucial part in the contemporary debate about Scripture.⁽¹²⁵⁾ While sharing the Calvinism of all the writers examined so far, Runia is significantly to be distinguished from van Til, Klooster and Clark in that for them inspiration had priority over revelation. Runia demonstrates the effect of Barth's influence by asserting the priority of revelation⁽¹²⁶⁾ and that God's word is received in faith.⁽¹²⁷⁾ Epistemology is therefore no longer the issue. Instead the focus, as with Colin Brown, has become the infallibility of

(122) Brown op cit p.151

(123) ibid

(124) Klaas Runia Karl Barth's Doctrine of Holy Scripture (Grand Rapids, 1962)

(125) ibid p.vii

(126) ibid pp 114-115

(127) ibid p.130

Scripture in contrast to Barth's stress on its capacity for error. Runia appreciates the value of seeing Scripture as a witness, since this is clearly biblical and points to Christ as the centre of revelation.⁽¹²⁸⁾ This is a corrective to Reformed theology which has obscured this fact.⁽¹²⁹⁾ But he finds difficulty with Barth's assertion only of the indirect identity of Scripture with the Word of God (and particularly with Barthian interpretation of Calvin at this point),⁽¹³⁰⁾ and with his concentration of all revelation in Christ.⁽¹³¹⁾ Revelation points to Jesus Christ but did not begin with him. Runia rejects the Barthian equation of humanity with fallibility⁽¹³²⁾ although he appreciates the need to stress the humanity of Scripture and the role of criticism as a preliminary to hearing the Word of God in Scripture.⁽¹³³⁾ He finds difficulties in the concept of saga or legend believing that it totally threatens the historical facts which are at issue⁽¹³⁴⁾ and proposes the alternative notion of 'prophetic history' to allow for the different biblical approach to accuracy.⁽¹³⁵⁾ He understands the sinlessness of Christ to imply that he was infallibly preserved from error, although his knowledge was limited.⁽¹³⁶⁾ This paradigm entitles us

(128) *ibid* p.32

(129) *ibid*

(130) *ibid* p.35

(131) *ibid* p.50

(132) *ibid* p.58

(133) *ibid* pp 63-65

(134) *ibid* p.95

(135) *ibid* p.97

(136) *ibid* p.76

to believe in the Bible as a fully human but infallible book. To assert the opposite would lead to a fallible Christ.⁽¹³⁷⁾ He believes that Barth's approach to inspiration recaptures an essential element of God's speaking in Scripture⁽¹³⁸⁾ but confuses inspiration with illumination⁽¹³⁹⁾ and denies the ontic status of Scripture and the sense of revealedness by stressing the dynamic, existentialist - personalist element.⁽¹⁴⁰⁾ He appreciates the sense of the material inspiration of Scripture as opposed to the formal as consistent with Calvin⁽¹⁴¹⁾ and seeks to reconcile a view of infallibility with the phenomena of Scripture by recognising its Kerygmatic historiography which differs from contemporary canons of accuracy,⁽¹⁴²⁾ the differing literary genres of Scripture⁽¹⁴³⁾ and the divine dialectic within Scripture's overall unity.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ Runia thus seeks to develop a doctrine of Scripture which maintains an emphasis on the givenness of revelation and the infallibility of Scripture by identifying Scripture and the Word of God. In doing this he distances himself from Barth but his entire exposition exhibits the impact of Barth's influence and has moved substantially away from the understanding of propositional revelation safeguarded by inspiration as maintained by van Til, Klooster and Clark.

(137) *ibid* p.78

(138) *ibid* p.143

(139) *ibid* p.152

(140) *ibid* p.161, p.202

(141) *ibid* pp 164-166

(142) *ibid* p.180

(143) *ibid* p.188

(144) *ibid* p.107

Interim assesment

The three theologians under review in this section have moved to a position of greater appreciation of and dialogue with Barth. Although their criticisms are substantial, centring around the suggestion of an overarching, somewhat off-centre theme running through his theology and the issue of the infallibility of Scripture, Barth is clearly being understood less as an enemy and more as a valuable partner in dialogue.

(3) Cautious Assimilation

(i) B^ernard Ramm⁽¹⁴⁵⁾

Ramm's thesis is a straightforward one: 'Barth's theology is a restatement of Reformed theology written in the aftermath of the Enlightenment but not capitulating to it'.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ Barth is both a child and critic of the Enlightenment, a child when it represents true learning and positive progress and a critic when it pretends to find final truth.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ As such Barth is to be contrasted with the obscurantism of much evangelical theology which seems to deny the validity of modern learning⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ and which seeks to return to a

(145) Bernard Ramm: After Fundamentalism (New York, 1983)

(146) *ibid* p.14

(147) *ibid*

(148) *ibid* p.19

pre-Enlightenment epistemology and to adhere to an older model of theology. Van Til and Schaeffer are both examples of this.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ It is Barth's duality in this respect which creates suspicion among conservative theologians.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ Yet to stay with the older theological method is both impossible and hypocritical because the Enlightenment represents a genuine challenge to Christian theology.⁽¹⁵¹⁾ The only way forward is to 'grant all that which is valid in modern learning but without the self-defeating strategy of capitulating to it with regard to theology'.⁽¹⁵²⁾ Barth opposed Schleiermacherian liberalism and its twentieth century variant in Bultmann because they were wholesale sell-outs to the Enlightenment.⁽¹⁵³⁾ But he does not do so by retreating into obscurantism⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ and this explains why he was never on happy terms with fundamentalism.⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ Ramm quotes Torrance with approval:

The theology of Karl Barth is to be understood as rethinking and restating of Reformed theology after the immense philosophical and scientific developments of modern times which have supplied us with new conceptual and scientific tools.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾

(149) *ibid* p.26

(150) *ibid* p.16

(151) *ibid* p.19

(152) *ibid* p.15

(153) *ibid* p.17, p.21

(154) *ibid* p.20

(155) *ibid* p.21

(156) *ibid* p.17 citing T.F. Torrance Theological Science (Oxford, 1969) p.8

As such Barth offers evangelical theology a paradigm, a theological method which will enable it to be consistently evangelical and also to be consistent with modern learning,⁽¹⁵⁷⁾ although not necessarily to be followed at every point.⁽¹⁵⁸⁾ Specifically, Barth may be taken as a paradigm for the understanding of preaching,⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ apologetics,⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ history,⁽¹⁶¹⁾ the Bible,⁽¹⁶²⁾ freedom.⁽¹⁶³⁾ This is not to say that Barth can be taken on board uncritically⁽¹⁶⁴⁾ but that he is able to serve evangelical theology as a paradigm even if only heuristically.⁽¹⁶⁵⁾

(ii) Gregory G. Bolich⁽¹⁶⁶⁾

Bolich advances substantially the same thesis as does Ramm in his review of the evangelical response to Barth. In the belief that evangelical theology needs reform and renewal,⁽¹⁶⁷⁾ the vigour of a new beginning,⁽¹⁶⁸⁾ he sees Barth as one of the essential change agents in this process,⁽¹⁶⁹⁾ whose theology he attempts to apply

(157) *ibid* p.27

(158) *ibid* p.48

(159) *ibid* p.55

(160) *ibid* p.70

(161) *ibid* pp 85-6

(162) *ibid* p.99, p.114, p.124, p.133

(163) *ibid* p.142

(164) *ibid* 199-205

(165) *ibid* p.vii

(166) G.G Bolich Karl Barth and Evangelicalism (Downers Grove, 1980)

(167) *ibid* p.14

(168) *ibid* p.8

(169) *ibid* p.14, p.19

'redemptively' to evangelicalism.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾ Like Ramm he finds valid points of criticism against Barth⁽¹⁷¹⁾ but finds in Barth a reliable guide for the future especially in the 'need to abandon the past and return through it to our point of origin'.⁽¹⁷²⁾ Specifically Barth offers the material for a new statement on scriptural authority, one of the major areas of tension in evangelicalism's debate with Barth.⁽¹⁷³⁾ Four insights from Barth shape such a statement - that Scripture is the single source of knowledge concerning God's revelation, that its authority rests in itself, that God speaks in the language of man so that the Bible is both genuinely human and fallible and yet because it is also divine is infallible in the event of revelation.⁽¹⁷⁴⁾ Where Barth is to be distinguished from the older, evangelical approach to scripture is that for him its authority rests in its relation to revelation not in its existence as the final revelation itself.⁽¹⁷⁵⁾

(iii) Donald Bloesch⁽¹⁷⁶⁾

Bloesch finds in Barth a fine example of an evangelical

(170) *ibid* p.27

(171) *ibid* pp 187-194

(172) *ibid* p.173

(173) *ibid* pp 195ff

(174) *ibid* pp 196-199

(175) *ibid* p.123cf CDIV/2 p.119

(176) Donald G. Bloesch The Evangelical Renaissance (London, 1973) pp 80-100. Jesus is Victor: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Salvation (Nashville, 1976)

theologian and is strongly affirmative of his theological contribution rejecting many of the criticisms against him.⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ Whereas much of the comment on Barth has been concerned with epistemology, Bloesch focusses on Barth's soteriology and especially on his universalism, the basis for which he perceives in his historical objectivism.⁽¹⁷⁸⁾ He sides with Barth in decisively rejecting a limited atonement or election⁽¹⁷⁹⁾ and does not believe him to be guilty of teaching a universal homecoming.⁽¹⁸⁰⁾ God in Christ has taken upon himself our reprobation and therefore we are free to be the elect people of God. This election goes out to all, but not all respond to it.⁽¹⁸¹⁾ Grace does not find its goal and fulfilment in each and every person. Those who refuse to believe stand under the threat of God's judgement.⁽¹⁸²⁾ Barth's doctrine is more accurately to be described as a 'particularism within a universalism' or a 'universalism of hope' which accords well with the Bible and which enables the church to view all men with hope.⁽¹⁸³⁾ The real weakness of Barth's doctrine is that in so stressing the objective salvation of men he leaves inadequate room for its subjective realisation in personal faith.⁽¹⁸⁴⁾ Human

(177) The Evangelical Renaissance p.81

(178) *ibid* p.85

(179) *ibid* p.87

(180) Donald G. Bloesch 'The Legacy of Karl Barth' in TSF Bulletin (Vol.9 No.5) p.7

(181) Donald G. Bloesch 'Karl Barth, Appreciation and Reservations' in Donald K. McKim (Ed) How Karl Barth changed my mind (Grand Rapids, 1986)

(182) TSF Bulletin (Vol.9 No.5) p.7

(183) *ibid*

(184) *ibid* p.8

response is therefore limited to a noetic and ethical decision for obedience rather than a salvific decision of faith.⁽¹⁸⁵⁾ Behind this lies Barth's rejection of religion and mysticism as attempts to make contact with God. This has led him to empty faith of any mystical, experiential content in favour of the noetic and volitional.⁽¹⁸⁶⁾

Interim assessment

With Ramm, Bolich and Bloesch a new impetus is to be discerned in the relationship between evangelicalism and Karl Barth. Barth is now seen as an evangelical theologian whose theology opens up new possibilities particularly in the areas of epistemology and soteriology. A progression from hostility to critical appreciation to a willingness to assimilate Barth is thus clearly discernible and has developed in proportion to the extent to which his theology has had opportunity to be more fully understood in the English speaking world. Ramm, Bolich and Bloesch all embrace an evangelicalism which has been strongly influenced by Barthian concerns. The changing nature of evangelicalism is itself disclosed by such a process. Bolich summarizes his perception of the position as follows:

The evangelical response to Barth has seen the alignment of scholars along two lines. Both sides have formulated their decisions with regard to Barth. The one side - 'negative' in that it cannot accept Barth except as an example of what must be avoided, resisted and overcome - points to the data

(185) *ibid*

(186) *ibid* p.9

confidently in the expectation that it will again and again show a neo-modernist. The other side - 'positive' in that it welcomes evangelical elements in Barth while still finding his theology a 'mixed bag' - warns of finding in Barth 'what is not there' and insists that the data substantiates its claims. (187)

(d) The frontier with Evangelicalism

We are now in a position to identify and discuss the main strands of Barth's interaction with evangelicalism.

(1) Neo-modernism

Van Til's characterisation of Barth has received wide acceptance in evangelical circles and through it, according to Bolich, Barth was 'declared off-limits to a generation'. (188) Despite van Til's voluminous support for his own thesis it appears to be an odd criticism to make of one whose theology originated in a profound anti-modernist reaction and which was characterised to the end by antipathy to that whole approach. Barth's own declared intention was to be consistently faithful to scripture. He may or may not have been successful in that aspiration but he must at least be credited with the intention and that alone ought to set him firmly apart from all forms of modernism. He was consistently opposed by the older and newer proponents of liberalism, who did not see Barth in their own

(187) *ibid* p.99

(188) Bolich op cit p.66

camp. Against van Til's charge must be set not only Barth's own declaration of intent but his spirited defence of all the central doctrines of the faith including his insistence on the reality of the virgin birth, resurrection and ascension. In addition we may deduce his advocacy of dogmatic theology and his constant use of the Bible, from which he quotes in the Dogmatics 15,000 times excluding a further 2000 exegetical inserts. Few theologians in the history of the church, have made such use of Scripture.⁽¹⁸⁹⁾ Of course, the use of Scripture does not mean of itself that Barth interprets the Scripture correctly but it surely says something about his orientation and is to be contrasted with the lack of Scripture in some of those, as van Til himself, who claim to be more orthodox. Hartwell comments on Barth's exegetical excurses.

They are indispensable to a full understanding of the theological expositions preceding them and anyone who wants to attack the latter will have to examine first whether the biblical exegesis on which they are based is at fault. It is at this point that many of Barth's critics fail.⁽¹⁹⁰⁾

Van Til is careful to point out the difficulty of classifying Barth (and Brunner);⁽¹⁹¹⁾ yet to describe Barth as a new modernist is to commit the same fault of which he stands accused, namely to use traditional terminology with new content.

(189) op cit pp 34-35

(190) Hartwell op cit p.15 (including note 34)

(191) Van Til The New Modernism p.1 "Their hand seems to be against every man, while yet they are friends of all".

Yet is van Til completely far of the mark? Barth himself admits that he is no confessionalist, that his aim is to go through the creeds, not merely to restate them, in a way in which it would be difficult imagining Klooster attempting, or even wanting to. He certainly diverges from Calvin when he believes it to be biblically warranted and does use traditional words with newly defined content. This is surely acceptable in principle given Barth's basic premiss that all the historical statements of the church are subject to the criterion of Scripture and his emphasis on the freedom of the Word of God. It would be subject to criticism only if he failed to explain on what grounds his use of words shifted. In practice the dialogue continues as to whether he has improved on his fathers. But an element of doubt evidently lingers even in the minds of those who are sympathetic to Barth. Bernard Ramm confesses to apprehension:

Has he brilliantly restated the historic Christian faith so as to bring it fully into the twentieth century, or has he in the process of rewriting it shoved it off base? Are his novel interpretations of humanity, sin, and unbelief really remarkable new scriptural insights, or are they serious deviations?⁽¹⁹²⁾

The same doubt is not unknown to G.W. Bromiley:

Barth deliberately seeks a new language in which to state the Gospel and to fashion his proclamation in the modern age. This may be sound in principle but it raises its own problems. The

(192) Ramm op cit p.204

language is often difficult. It makes old truths sound strange. Does it also make them different? It carries overtones of current philosophies. Does it also introduce their assumptions and concepts? Even if not, does it do any good? Is not ambiguity or confusion introduced? Can one ever be sure of Barth's real meaning no matter how he tries to explain himself?(193)

The fear that Barth may not completely have shed the dominant influence of philosophy is not altogether unwarranted, despite his own view of philosophy as a useful servant but a poor master.(194) His own theological development required a shaking free of the influence of several philosophical giants, not least Kierkegaard. How much such influence remains to distort his hearing of the Word of God? Oscar Cullmann detected in Barth's view of time, as an example, 'the last but quite momentous remnant of the influence of philosophy upon his exposition of the Bible'.(195) R.H. Roberts traces Barth's concept of time to the influence of German Idealism and thus sees in his theology a 'reworking of metaphysical theology albeit in "biblical guise"'.(196)

All theology takes place within a context and cannot therefore be free of philosophical influence, conscious or otherwise. This is true of all theologians of whatever degree of orthodoxy. The issue

(193) Bromiley in Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology p.51

(194) Karl Barth Credo (London, 1964) pp 183-186

(195) Oscar Cullmann Christ and Time (London, 1971) p.xiii

(196) R.H. Roberts 'Barth: Doctrine of Time' in S.W. Sykes Karl Barth Studies of his Theological Method (Oxford, 1979) pp 88-9, p.145

for both Karl Barth and Evangelicalism is whether the biblical witness is distorted by such influence. I hope to indicate in this thesis at least one place in Barth's theology where this can be said to be the case and therefore van Til's argument is not without some merit, although in a far lesser sense than that intended by van Til himself.

(2) Revelation and Epistemology

In the light of Barth's criticisms of the older orthodoxy it is not surprising that he himself should be criticised by the modern representatives of that tradition. Barth considered that the older orthodoxy deprived God of his freedom and came to the Word of God with a prior assumption as to 'what revelation must be, may be, and ought to be'.⁽¹⁹⁷⁾ God was therefore to be docketed along with other objects with man standing as judge over his revelation on the basis of some general knowledge of God known beforehand. This is the same error as liberalism.⁽¹⁹⁸⁾

Dominant in the concern of such as van Til, Klooster and Schaeffer is that Barth rejects any attempt to present a system and denies that the truth can be 'possessed'.⁽¹⁹⁹⁾ Their own approach to theology is deeply wedded to what Schaeffer calls a 'unified view of

(197) CDI/2 pp 4ff

(198) *ibid*

(199) Van Til The New Modernism pp 4+5, Klooster op cit pp 26-27. Clark Karl Barth's Theological Method p.56

truth', a belief in absolutes and the principle of non-contradiction.⁽²⁰⁰⁾ This unified view of truth is to be identified with historic, Reformed Christianity and is dependent on the verbal inspiration and literal truth of the Bible, on 'propositional' revelation.⁽²⁰¹⁾ Reason thus comes before faith.⁽²⁰²⁾ Seen from this vantage point, Barth represents the intrusion into the realm of theology of Hegelianism, with its concept of truth as dialectic and relative, and Kierkegaardianism, with its requirement of the irrational leap of faith.⁽²⁰³⁾ This is evidenced by his holding of higher critical views while at the same time professing belief in the orthodox doctrines.⁽²⁰⁴⁾ The charge that Barth is guilty of subjectivism and fideism is repeatedly made against Barth in conservative circles. According to C.H. Pinnock, the dialectical theologians are guilty of 'mysticism and chaotic subjectivity'.⁽²⁰⁵⁾ At root the objection is to Barth's epistemology.

To accuse Barth of subjective fideism is to misunderstand his thesis in Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. For Barth faith is not an irrational leap into the dark but a specific form of rationality

(200) Schaeffer The God Who is There p.14, p.54

(201) *ibid* p.92

(202) *ibid* p.143

(203) *ibid* p.54 See also Gordon H. Clark: 'Special Divine Revelation as Rational' in C.F.H. Henry (Ed) Revelation and the Bible (London, 1969) p.35

(204) Van Til op cit p.6, p.28

(205) Clark H. Pinnock Set Forth Your Case (Chicago, 1971) p.133

which is required by the nature of the object under investigation.⁽²⁰⁶⁾ It was precisely this insight that caused Barth to lay aside his Christliche Dogmatik as being too existentialist. Barth's concern is to safeguard the fact that knowledge of God comes to us by grace and that God is not at the mercy of human reason. Other evangelical writers have understood this point. Ramm describes the charge of fideism as 'plainly very wrong'⁽²⁰⁷⁾ and draws attention to Barth's own words:

We may also dismiss, on the one hand the idea that faith is a blind subjection to a law imposed upon the will and understanding from without, and on the other the idea that it is a conviction of the truth and importance of certain objective facts, a conviction which is established and attained by man himself, and then, and to this reason, chosen and adopted by man himself. As opposed to the second idea, faith is, of course, an arrest and commitment in which man is set free from his own caprices and acquires a Lord whom he must follow. It is a new and strange light shining upon man from above. But - in contrast to the first idea - it not only shines upon human life, and therefore the human will and understanding, from without, but it also illuminates them from within. It does not close our eyes but opens them. It does not destroy our intellect and compel us to sacrifice it, but it sets it free just as in a definite sense it captivates it, i.e. for itself.⁽²⁰⁸⁾

Contra existentialism Barth advocates the theological rationality

(206) See above p.11 and nb Barth's rejection of Otto's irrational numinous CDI/1 pp.135-6

(207) Ramm op cit p.60

(208) CDIII/3 p.247 See also Evangelical Theology pp 100-101

of faith, but precisely this sets him apart from those forms of Christian rationalism which rely for their apologetic upon the construct of a verbally inspired inerrant Bible conceived as propositional revelation accessible to reason apart from faith.

Which of these positions is to be regarded as more evangelical? Bolich argues that Barth is in the true descent from the Reformation and that the fundamentalists are the heirs of Protestant Scholasticism.⁽²⁰⁹⁾ Barth is justified in arguing that the Bible's authority rests in its relationship to revelation, not in its final existence as the revelation itself. In doing this he is in agreement with the Bible itself which is plainly the deposit of those revealing acts of God whereby God has laid hold of man, with the Reformers and with the majority of evangelical thought as it now stands.⁽²¹⁰⁾ Men do not believe that God has revealed himself in the Bible because it is inspired. They believe the Bible is inspired because God reveals himself in the Bible. This in no way denies the propositional element in the Bible, the law of contradiction or the importance of reason and the verbalness of revelation⁽²¹¹⁾ but it does deny that man can be master over revelation, as fundamentalism effectively asserts⁽²¹²⁾ and stresses the need for the Bible to

(209) Bolich op cit p.123

(210) Brown op cit p.144

(211) Godsey op cit p.31 'The personalising of the concept of the Word of God which we can not avoid when we remember that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, does not mean its deverbaling' CDI/1 p.138

(212) Godsey op cit p.41

become the Word of God in freedom.⁽²¹³⁾ Reason is involved in faith but cannot be said to have priority over it. For this reason apologetics as an independent activity is regarded by Barth to be impossible.⁽²¹⁴⁾

The charge that Barth's epistemology is a subjective one is wide of the mark. From the beginning of his critique against liberalism and evidenced by his break with Kierkegaard Barth has so opposed subjectivity that he has been in danger of going to the other extreme. Bromiley's assessment is as follows:

It must be remembered that in the context of the revealed Word and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, scripture is for Barth genuinely and objectively God's Word, although he resists any static conception of it which might abstract the written text either from God or from his Word in its threefold totality. This means that he tends to ascribe more validity to the present inspiring of scripture by the Spirit in its reading and hearing, although he finds a satisfactory objectivity both in the person of the Holy Spirit and also in the authors as the unique witnesses to Christ who are given a place in the event of revelation itself. In no sense does he think of a constitution of scripture as God's Word by subjective experience of it.⁽²¹⁵⁾

The Word of God stands concretely and objectively over against men, but it is to be perceived by faith and its rationality is to be understood in obedience.

(213) *ibid* p.26

(214) CDI/1 pp 30ff

(215) G.W. Bromiley Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh, 1979) p.43 See also p.10 and CDI/1 pp 198-227

(3) Fallibility and Infallibility

'Barthian' is popularly understood to denote among evangelicals a theology which believes in the Bible but with the qualification that it is fallible and that it is only God's Word in part. It has been argued that the latter is a misunderstanding.⁽²¹⁶⁾ But what of the former point? Brown draws attention to Barth's words:

To the bold postulate, that if their 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 stress about man, which applies to them too, they can be at fault in any 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.⁽²¹⁷⁾

Many similar passages could be quoted in support of Bromiley's assertion: 'He has little time for inerrancy, which he seems to regard both as irrelevant and even misleading'.⁽²¹⁸⁾ The fallibility of Scripture is for Barth of the essence of its humanity as is indicated in the above extract. 'We must not compromise either directly or indirectly the humanity of its form and the possibility

(216) See also CDI/2 p.531. 'We are absolved from differentiating the Word of God in the Bible from other contents, infallible portions and expressions from the erroneous ones, the infallible from the fallible and from imagining that by means of such discoveries we can create for ourselves encounters with the genuine Word of God'.

(217) CDI/2 pp 529-530 My emphasis

(218) Bromiley op cit p.43

of the offence which can be taken at it'.⁽²¹⁹⁾ It is by the grace and miracle of God that Scripture can become the Word of God and we should not be ashamed of this:

If God was not ashamed of the fallibility of all human words of the Bible, of their historical and scientific inaccuracies, their theological contradictions, the uncertainty of their tradition, and, above all their Judaism, but adopted and made use of these expressions in all their fallibility, we do not need to be ashamed when He wills to renew it to us in all its fallibility as witness, and it is mere self-will and disobedience to try to find some infallible elements in the Bible.⁽²²⁰⁾

To deny the fallibility of the Bible is in Barth's perspective to be guilty of docetism, and this is the error of fundamentalism and scholastic orthodoxy.⁽²²¹⁾ Through the 'materialising' of the concept of the witness to revelation the Bible was grounded upon itself and transformed into a 'paper pope'.⁽²²²⁾ There are clear parallels between Barth's understanding of scripture and his understanding of the incarnation of Christ in fallen, human nature and indeed the recognition of the Simul iustus et peccator of Christian existence.⁽²²³⁾

What Barth sees as the 'miracle' of God Brown sees as 'double

(219) CDI/2 p.528

(220) CDI/2 p.531

(221) CDI/2 p.525 See also Godsey op cit p.53

(222) CDI/2 p.525

(223) CDI/2 pp 147-154, CDIV/1 p.596

think' which is 'intolerable', the 'crack at the very foundation of Barthian dogmatics'.⁽²²⁴⁾ Barth's failure to deduce inerrancy from inspiration is the 'Achilles' heel' of his theology posing the 'intolerable dilemma that the Bible is at least in theory true and false at the same time. It is true in so far as God speaks through it. But it may be false in so far as the same passage may be factually wrong'.⁽²²⁵⁾ This is not the same criticism as that of van Til and Schaeffer since its aim is not to prove Barth guilty of existentialism but to indicate that he makes inadequate deductions from the fact of inspiration, deductions that he finds it hard to live with and which are concessions to his critical background.⁽²²⁶⁾ Barth opts out of the responsibility of defending the historicity of the biblical writings.⁽²²⁷⁾ Others have criticised Barth on this same point, arguing that with his category of *saga* and his distinction between Historie (verifiable, empirical history) and Geschichte (significant, non-verifiable history) he attempts to have all the advantages of history while running none of its risks.⁽²²⁸⁾

Paradoxically other evangelicals find Barth's strength precisely at the point where Brown finds his weakness. It is here that, for Ramm, it is possible to grant critical study its rightful place in investigating the humanity of scripture while maintaining its

(224) Brown op cit p.62

(225) ibid p.146

(226) ibid p.62, p.146

(227) ibid p.146

(228) Godsey op cit p.45

theological integrity as the Word of God.⁽²²⁹⁾ At this point interaction with Barth discloses a rift within evangelicalism between those who profess allegiance to a Scripture inerrant in every respect and those who find God's infallible Word in a fallible human book. Harold Lindsell regards this to be 'the most important theological topic of this age' and views the growing evangelical drift from inerrancy (involving even such as G.C. Berkouwer) as a spreading infection.⁽²³⁰⁾

In this debate Barth, or 'neo-orthodoxy', tends to assume the position of an eminence grise and the exchange continues against this backdrop.⁽²³¹⁾ It is instructive therefore to compare Barth's position with that which argues for an inerrant Scripture.

(i) The nature of speech

For Barth, the fallibility of human speech is of the essence of humanness, as is clear from the above extracts.⁽²³²⁾ To deny Scripture its fallibility is therefore to posit a docetic Scripture.⁽²³³⁾ As all language is inescapably shot through with particular worldviews to insist upon infallibility is to canonize a

(229) Ramm op cit p.89

(230) Harold Lindsell Battle for the Bible (Grand Rapids, 1976) p.13, p.135, pp 185ff

(231) Carl F.H. Henry (Ed) Revelation and the Bible (London, 1959) pp 7-10

(232) See pages 86-87

(233) Brown op cit p.59

cultural worldview which rapidly becomes indefensible. Brown, on the other hand, wants to scale down the use of the word 'infallible' and argues that most language is infallible, since it corresponds to fact.⁽²³⁴⁾ But if this is all that infallibility means then why not use other words such as adequate, reliable and accurate? To argue about the adequacy of human language to convey divine truth is not the point at issue. The question is whether that language can still continue to contain error in the process. In practice those who insist upon inerrancy must resort to considerable qualification of this term in order to preserve the humanity of the text, and in so doing the word dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Ordinary human speech (to which Brown appeals) indicates that it is perfectly possible to communicate with language which is not strictly true at every level. To deny this is to deprive language of metaphor, poetry, hyperbole and to insist upon an unsustainable propositionalism. Barth insists upon the adequacy of human language to convey truth but also upon the grace of God in condescending to use it.

Brown is correct in seeing a parallel between inspiration and incarnation but detects an inconsistency in Barth's assertion that Christ's human nature is both fallen and sinless.⁽²³⁵⁾ Behind this lies the failure to see that fallibility and sinlessness are not

(234) *ibid* p.60

(235) Brown op cit pp 59-60

identical. The resistance to the concept of error has a similar origin. Human fallibility is not to be necessarily identified with human sinfulness, but is part of our boundary as creatures. To speak of human error sullying Scripture is therefore inappropriate,⁽²³⁶⁾ just as it would be inappropriate to speak of Christ's limited humanity 'sully'ing' his divinity. Christ's humanity serves his divinity⁽²³⁷⁾ and it is the miracle of both inspiration and incarnation that God condescends to give himself in this 'veiled' way.

To Brown's suggestion that the fallibility of Scripture is an a priori deduction from the weakness of human nature rather than an a posteriori deduction from the phenomena of the text⁽²³⁸⁾ must be set the opposite claim that inerrancy is an a priori deduction from the concept of inspiration which is shown to be unsustainable precisely by an examination of the text. Bromiley points to Barth's restraint at this point in that 'he does not follow here his own rule and deduce the possibility of error from its reality'.⁽²³⁹⁾ Barth's reticence concerning actual error is not to be taken as a tacit admission of the inconsistency of his case but as unwillingness to determine in advance 'what revelation may be, must be and ought to

(236) Ramm op cit p.103

(237) CD IV/2 p.98

(238) Brown op cit p.60

(239) Bromiley op cit p.44

be',⁽²⁴⁰⁾ or to stand in judgement over God's Word.⁽²⁴¹⁾ Scripture is to be accepted for what it is and delighted in as such. David Ford's thesis, that Barth accepts Scripture as 'realistic narrative' with a 'middle distance' concern for accuracy is valid at this point. The nature of Scripture is that it is a story in which form and content are inseparable and through which its thoughts are conveyed.⁽²⁴²⁾ For Barth the issue of inerrancy is irrelevant.

Perhaps Barth saw clearly what some inerrantists have failed to see, that it is impossible to define a concept of inerrancy without at the same time depriving God of his freedom in his Word. To do so implies a subjecting of the Word of God to our own definitions. The difficulty does not stop here. It is impossible to define inerrancy without also depriving the Bible of its humanity in any meaningful sense. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the word 'inerrancy' has become problematic and is something of a cypher denoting the reliability of the Bible.⁽²⁴³⁾ The cause of biblical authority would perhaps best be served by dropping it and focussing on the material, rather than the accidental authority of God's Word.⁽²⁴⁴⁾

(240) See above p.81

(241) CDI/2 509-510

(242) David F. Ford 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible' in S.W. Sykes op cit pp 55-87. See also D.F. Ford Barth and God's Story (Frankfurt, 1981) pp 47-49

(243) Clark H. Pinnock The Scripture Principle (London, 1985) pp 224-225 acknowledges this.

(244) Bromiley op cit p.44

(ii) Inspiration and its implications

Barth adheres to a doctrine of verbal inspiration and believes that God speaks to man in concrete human language.⁽²⁴⁵⁾ He does not believe, however, that this should be seen as 'verbal inspiredness', 'the infallibility of the biblical word in its linguistic, historical and theological character as a human word' but rather as a two-fold reality.⁽²⁴⁶⁾ Inspiration is both an objective fact⁽²⁴⁷⁾ and that act of God whereby the human word of witness is used by God to say to us what the text says.⁽²⁴⁸⁾ By this Scripture is recognised as the Word of God, and yet is not to be completely identified with it.

Of the book, as we have it, we can only say:

We recollect that we have heard in this book the Word of God; we recollect, in and with the church, that the Word of God has been heard in all this book and in all parts of it; therefore we expect that we shall hear the Word of God in this book again and hear it even in those places where we ourselves have not heard it before. Yet the presence of the Word of God itself, the real and the present speaking and hearing of it, is not identical with the existence of the book as such. But in this presence something takes place in and with the book for which the book as such does indeed give the possibility, but the reality of which cannot be anticipated or replaced by the existence of the book.⁽²⁴⁹⁾

(245) CDI/2 p.532

(246) *ibid*

(247) CDI/2 pp 534-539

(248) CDI/2 p.532

(249) CDI/2 p.530

Barth differs from evangelicalism by locating the inspiration of the Bible both in the constituting of the biblical witness⁽²⁵⁰⁾ and in the hearing of that witness within the church. 'According to the Bible, God's "spiratio" and inspiration are the effective powers by which God discloses himself freely to man'.⁽²⁵¹⁾ He also differs in refusing to identify the Word of God and holy scripture absolutely. They are only indirectly identical. Ramm points out that of the Word of God Barth uses the following words, in strong affirmation of the divinity of Scripture massgeblich, untrüglich, unfehlbar, authentisch, glaubwürdig, authoritativ,⁽²⁵²⁾ and yet in being translated into human language the Word of God undergoes a refraction since there is no such thing as pure conceptual language; all language has its inner limitation.⁽²⁵³⁾ The infallible Word of God consists therefore not in the text of Scripture, but in that to which Scripture bears witness we do indeed have the infallible Word of God when perceived in the event of revelation. But the witness is borne by fallible men who remain fallible even as they bear witness.⁽²⁵⁴⁾

This position is to be contrasted with that taken by the advocates of inerrancy:

(250) CDI/2 p.520

(251) Barth, Evangelical Theology p.53

(252) Ramm op cit p.116

(253) CDII/1 p.195

(254) CDI/2 p.508

The Bible in its entirety is God's written Word to man, free of error in its original autographs, wholly reliable in history and doctrine. Its divine inspiration has rendered the book "infallible" (incapable of teaching deception) and "inerrant" (not liable to prove false or mistaken)... Inspiration involves infallibility as an essential property and infallibility in turn implies inerrancy.⁽²⁵⁵⁾

Inerrancy is here deduced a priori from the concept of inspiration as God-breathedness (theopneustia) and relates to the whole of the Biblical text as originally given. That this is a correct or necessary deduction is contested. W.J. Abraham argues⁽²⁵⁶⁾ that this approach fails because of its failure to deal convincingly with the actual phenomena of Scripture but also because of a logical inadequacy. More definition is required of 'inspiration' to enable the conclusion of inerrancy to be logically drawn. Behind this approach he detects a more sophisticated version (despite denials) of the dictation approach. He proposes to understand the word 'inspiration' by analogy of the teacher-pupil relationship, the inspiring of one agent by another. God inspired the biblical writers by his acts and his words in a polymorphous fashion. Thus they were inspired by God in a way which denied neither their own involvement, nor their varying styles and characteristics, nor their ability to be inspired from other,

(255) Clark H. Pinnock A Defence of Biblical Infallibility (Grand Rapids, 1967) p.1

(256) W.J. Abraham Divine Inspiration of Holy Scripture (Oxford, 1981) What follows is a summary of Abraham's argument see pp 9, 63-65, 93ff.

fallible sources. This inspiration is evidenced by the testimony of those inspired and by a commonness of outlook and approach amongst them. Abraham argues that this gives a good basis for understanding the Bible while doing justice to its given character. He further argues in exegeting II Timothy 3:16 that Paul is not speaking of the original autographs but of the Scriptures as they then were and points out that Paul does not himself deduce inerrancy from inspiration but only the functional ethical and theological value of Scripture.

It can be seen that this alternative evangelical understanding of inspiration is close to Barth. The Word of God cannot simply be read off but must be sought in the pages of Scripture.⁽²⁵⁷⁾ Scripture contains an 'extremely polyphonic, not monotonous, testimony to the work and word of God'.⁽²⁵⁸⁾ This is done by a threefold process of observation, reflection and application.⁽²⁵⁹⁾

We remind ourselves that what is concealed is objectively a self-concealment of the divine word only in so far as in the form of the scriptural word the latter has adjusted itself to our human world of thought, thus exposing itself to the darkening prism of our human understanding, although of course, clear in itself (even in the form of the scriptural word). Yet even in this darkening, it still retains its power to explain itself, which means above all to present itself. As

(257) Barth Evangelical Theology p.35

(258) *ibid* p.33

(259) CDI/2 pp 722-740

it does this, there arises the corresponding human task: To follow this self-presentation, to repeat it and, as it were, to copy it.(260)

The Word of God is to be found objectively in the picture, substance and word (Bild, Sache, Wort) which confronts us in the biblical text⁽²⁶¹⁾ and which is to be discovered by biblical exegesis.

Barth has remained true to his statement in the Preface to the first edition of Romans that he was not forced to choose between the historical-critical method and the doctrine of Inspiration.⁽²⁶²⁾ His understanding of inspiration is testimony to his desire to honour both the humanity and the divinity of Holy Scripture. It marks an advance on evangelicalism which by identifying revelation and the biblical text as such forces itself to deny the presence of errors which, in any other body of literature would be taken as read. The Bible is not honoured by attempts to deny the presence of obvious discrepancies nor by the novel expedient of taking refuge in a non-existent original autograph. The fact is, as all are agreed, that the Bible we actually possess is not perfect either in grammar, punctuation or detail and yet it is even so the place where the Word of God has been, is and will be heard. Even had we an inerrant Bible we would lack an inerrant interpretation of it. The use of words such as inerrancy and infallibility are useful only in so far as

(260) CDI/2 p.722

(261) Ramm op cit p.94

(262) Barth: Romans p.1

they affirm that the Word of God meets us objectively and reliably in the Bible. Barth's approach to inspiration safeguards this truth while genuinely accepting the humanity of its recipients. W.J. Abraham's work unpacks and develops this further in a helpful way. Barth also helps to safeguard the Bible against that approach which renders the Bible a dead book, manipulated by men, by reminding the church, in the tradition of the Reformers, that the authority of the Bible resides in itself, not in theories about the text, and is to be received in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(4) Universalism

When considering Barth's doctrine of election we are near to the heart of his theology. Barth reinterprets the Reformed doctrine of election in such a way as to remove from it the shadow that has always accompanied it and to transform it into good news, 'the sum of the Gospel'.⁽²⁶³⁾ His re-interpretation is a major contribution to the history of the doctrine and is a powerful attempt to assert with Calvin that salvation is wholly by the grace of God and yet to remove from it the dark underside of the doctrine expressed in the concepts of double predestination and reprobation and implied in God's eternal, hidden and 'horrible' decrees to save some and damn others for his own glory.⁽²⁶⁴⁾ According to Barth Christ has suffered rejection for all men; he is the only Reprobate and all men are elect in Christ.⁽²⁶⁵⁾ Furthermore, God's eternal decree is not a

(263) CDII/2 p.3

(264) Calvin Institutes III, xxiii,7

(265) CDII/2 pp 317ff

static and quasi-deistic decree to which, once made, even God must now submit, but rather a living, dynamic decree, a divine activity in the form of a history between God and man.⁽²⁶⁶⁾ God is therefore free to enlarge the circle of the elect without limitation.⁽²⁶⁷⁾

The charge that the logic of this position must lead to universalism is quite understandable and is frequently made.⁽²⁶⁸⁾ The structure of Barth's doctrine of election clearly moves in the direction of universal salvation. Emil Brunner's criticism of Barth is particularly penetrating and moves in the same direction as that of Bloesch.⁽²⁶⁹⁾ Barth, he claims is the victim of his own objectivism, and denies the decisive significance of faith. No less than in the older doctrine of double predestination God's decision is made to be not so much the primary as the only decision:

in both cases everything has already been decided beforehand, and there remains no room for man to make a real decision. In the older doctrine everything has already been decided in anticipation in the sense of a terrible duality: eternal destiny of salvation for some, eternal destiny of doom for the rest. In this latest doctrine everything is decided in the sense of an encouraging unity: eternal destiny to salvation for unbelievers as well as for believers, the impossibility of anyone ever being lost.⁽²⁷⁰⁾

(266) CDII/2 pp 175-179

(267) CDII/2 pp 415-418

(268) Klooster op cit pp 64-65, p.69 Berkouwer op cit p.116. See also P.K. Jewett Election and Predestination (Exeter, 1985) pp 51-52

(269) Emil Brunner The Christian Doctrine of God (London, 1949) pp 347-351

(270) ibid pp 357-352. See also Jewett op cit p.51

In contrast to the apparent logic of Barth's position must be placed his own clear and repeated denial of apokatastasis. He rejects universalism as a doctrine on the basis that to do so limits God's freedom⁽²⁷¹⁾ and turns God's grace into an obligatory right. On the other hand neither may we place limits upon the grace of God and say that he cannot enlarge the circle of election.⁽²⁷²⁾ For Barth universal election clearly does not necessarily imply universal salvation. A threat remains:

To the man who persistently tries to change the truth into untruth, God does not owe eternal patience... We should be denying or disarming that evil attempt and our own participation in it if, in relation to ourselves or others or all men, we were to permit ourselves to postulate a withdrawal of that threat and in this sense to expect or maintain an apokatastasis or universal reconciliation as the goal and end of all things.⁽²⁷³⁾

Similarly, however,

There is no good reason why we should forbid ourselves or be forbidden, openness to the possibility that in the reality of God and man in Jesus Christ there is contained much more than we might expect and therefore the supremely unexpected withdrawal of that threat.⁽²⁷⁴⁾

Barth's position would appear not to want to draw too simplistic a line between the election of man in Christ and actual salvation.

(271) CDII/2 pp 417-418

(272) *ibid* p.418

(273) CDIV/3:1 p.477

(274) *ibid* pp 477-478

Nowhere does the New Testament say that the world is saved, nor can we say that it is without doing violence to the New Testament. We can say only that the election of Jesus Christ has taken place on behalf of the world, i.e. in order that there may be this event in and to the world through him. And this, of course, we do have to say with the strongest possible emphasis and with no qualifications. (275)

There is a distinction in Barth's thought between man's ontological definition as elect in Christ and the ontic inclusion of any individual man in the election of Jesus Christ through the continuing activity of God himself. (276) The great value of this position is to be seen in the proclamation of the church. The church bears witness to each individual that he is elect in Jesus Christ, (277) but the church does not possess the power to make any man one of the elect, only God can do this. This church can and must, however, witness to eternal life. (278)

What is not clear in Barth's theology is why, having asserted the election of all in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit should not follow this through with the ontic inclusion of all in Christ. (279) To avoid the deduction of universalism Barth appeals at this point to the divine freedom, but in doing so runs the danger of reintroducing what he has already been at pains to avoid, namely the

(275) CDII/2 p.423

(276) J.E. Colwell 'Actuality and Provisionality' (Unpublished PhD thesis, King's College, London) pp 274-275. See also CDII/2 p.422, CDIV/2 p.270

(277) CDII/2 p.306

(278) CDII/2 p.320

(279) Bromiley Introduction p.97

concept of a hidden God whose decisions are unknown.⁽²⁸⁰⁾ 'He is no doubt on biblical grounds in making the appeal, but why not bring this out much earlier instead of leaving the initial impression that the relating of election to Christ removes all obscurity?'⁽²⁸¹⁾ Berkouwer perceives that Barth is on the horns of a dilemma at this point and reintroduces the element of God's freedom in order to avoid deducing an ultimate restoration and thereby nullifying, the role of the human decision.⁽²⁸²⁾ The element of uncertainty the 'vacuum' in Calvin that Barth sought to escape from thus returns in Barth but at a different point.⁽²⁸³⁾ Logically Barth could resolve his difficulty, as did Brunner, by making man's decision the point at which election is accepted or resisted and this is what he appears to do:

Jesus Christ died and rose for thee. It is thou who art elect with Him and through Him. And now that all this has been said to thee, it is the event of what thou for thy part shalt say and do (or not say and not do) which decides whether the ancient curse will again be laid on thee with what is said, or the eternal blessing will come on thee in utter newness. In and with that which thou dost now say or do (or not say and not do) thou must and shalt give answer to that which has been said to thee, and either way (persisting in thy ungodliness or turning thy back upon it for thy salvation or destruction) confirm its truth.⁽²⁸⁴⁾

(280) Klooster op cit p.70

(281) Bromiley op cit p.97

(282) Berkouwer op cit p.288

(283) *ibid*

(284) CDII/2 p.324 See also Brunner op cit pp 319-320

Where such resistance to God takes place it is ineffective in abrogating God's electing love since God has rejected rejection but it remains as an impossible possibility.⁽²⁸⁵⁾ Bloesch's interpretation of Barth's doctrine as a 'particularism within a universalism' holds good although without a doubt the possibility of rejection is a muted note in Barth since he is concerned with the proclamation by the church of universal good news.⁽²⁸⁶⁾

Barth's doctrine of election appears to labour therefore under the difficulty of a certain ambiguity and even a contradiction in the tension between universal election and universal salvation. It might be argued that the gains of his doctrine nevertheless outweigh its demerits or that in the tortuous history of the doctrine of election it is no more difficult a version to accept than those promulgated elsewhere. Barth's exegesis has also been questioned. Whereas he argues that Christ is the electing God it is clear from Scripture that election is the function per appropriationem of the Father,⁽²⁸⁷⁾ although in support of Barth it is equally clear that the Son participates in this work.⁽²⁸⁸⁾ He differs crucially from

(285) CDII/2 p.450. This interpretation of Barth's intention is confirmed by J.D. Bettis 'Is Karl Barth a Universalist?' SJT (Vol.20 1967) pp 431-432

(286) Eberhard Busch records how in later years Barth had a terrifying dream of hell and commented to him. 'There are people who say I have forgotten this region. I have not forgotten. I know about it more than others do. But because I know of this therefore I must speak about Christ. I cannot speak enough about the Gospel of Christ'. 'Memories of Karl Barth' in Donald K. McKim op cit pp 13-14

(287) Eph 1:4, Romans 8:29-30

(288) Luke 10:22, John 15:16

Calvin in interpreting Ephesians 1:4 to mean that Christ is the foundation of election rather than simply its executor and makes a strong case for his position.⁽²⁸⁹⁾ More complex and less defensible in his 'quixotic theologizing'⁽²⁹⁰⁾ in his use of typology in relation to Judas as a paradigm of the rejected.⁽²⁹¹⁾

On the other hand, Barth advances far beyond traditional Calvinism in stressing the universality of God's grace and seeks to do so without giving the will and decision of man priority over God's will. In this universal emphasis he is surely hearing an authentic strand of biblical witness which traditional Calvinism must either ignore or unconvincingly explain away.⁽²⁹²⁾ The Calvinist stress on the particular leaves no convincing explanation of the universality of God's atoning grace and must either ignore it or live with the antimony it produces. Barth is surely right in perceiving that to construct a hidden decree of God to explain the paradox brings God into conflict with Christ and introduces an element of naked uncertainty in the Christian understanding of God. Equally to deny the universal grace of God and to replace it with a concept of particular atonement runs the danger of reducing the majority of the human race to insignificance, as the 'waste products of the plan of salvation'.⁽²⁹³⁾ Understood in the way in which Barth

(289) CDII/2 pp 110-112

(290) Jewett op cit p.53

(291) CDII/2 pp 458-506

(292) Eg 2 Cor 5:19, Romans 5:18-19, 1 John 2:2, John 1:29

1 Timothy 2:5-6, Titus 2:11, 1 Timothy 2:4, John 3:16, 2 Peter 3:9

(293) Ramm op cit p.120

suggests it is possible to view the mass of human race in a quite different light, as brothers and sisters, de jure if not de facto Christians.⁽²⁹⁴⁾ This need not detract from a wholly legitimate stress on the radical importance of human decision. (Berkouwer's warnings in this area are serious.) It does provide the basis for a positive Christian humanism which is rooted in the humanitarianism of the God who in Christ shows himself to be for us.⁽²⁹⁵⁾ Evangelicalism, which has often suffered from a world-denying tendency needs to hear this without surrendering its stress upon the 'deciding event', the turning point of the individual's history in response to the 'decisive event' which was the turning point of human history.⁽²⁹⁶⁾

Berkouwer suggests that Barth stands at the crossroads. His rejection of apokatastasis leaves him only the alternative of reflecting again on the place of man's decision.⁽²⁹⁷⁾ Yet he is reluctant to do this because of his stress on the priority of grace. The logic of Barth's doctrine is that God will seek to save all those he has elected and since men are not free for God unless he renders them free, he must seek to save men, engaging them in and through the Gospel for free response to himself. For them to respond in faith is not synergism. 'It is the way of faith which gives God the glory in the acknowledgement that salvation is exclusively His

(294) *ibid* p.169, CD IV/2 p.510

(295) Ramm op cit p.169

(296) Jewett op cit p.115

(297) Berkouwer op cit p.290

gift'.⁽²⁹⁸⁾ Salvation is thus entirely of grace and immensely powerful, but is it irresistible? The fact that the Bible clearly witnesses to the reality (and not just the possibility) of future judgement⁽²⁹⁹⁾ would suggest not. The fact that at the end there are sheep and goats must either be because God wills that it be so or that men insist on it against all God's attempts to win them. To argue so is one possible way of clarifying Barth at a point at which his own answer is muted. It is one which is evidently preferred by Hartwell.

Barth has no satisfactory answer to the question why some hear the Word of God and believe whilst others fail to do so. If the rejection of God's Word is the impossible and inexplicable behaviour of some men, there must be something in those that accept it by virtue of their own free choice and decision which constrains them to act in this way; in other words, there must be in them a will to good... that will to good, in the last analysis would still be the work of God's grace.⁽³⁰⁰⁾

The strength of Barth's doctrine lies in its universalism, not in the sense that all will finally of necessity be redeemed but in the properly biblical sense that all are loved by God, are embraced by the atoning work of Christ and are regarded in the light of hope. What Barth is doing is to follow a movement in biblical thought

(298) *ibid* p.278

(299) e.g. Matt. 25:31ff

(300) Hartwell *op cit* pp 186-187. Substantially the same position is advocated by Brunner *op cit* pp 313-315

towards universal salvation which is itself 'an echo, a reflection, a derivative of the outgoing movement of God's love'(301) while remaining 'basically an agnostic concerning the final fate of the spiritually lost'.(302)

(5) Dominant Motifs

Finally, we examine the claims of Brown and Berkouwer that the theology of Barth is dominated by the themes of covenant and the triumph of grace respectively in a way which distorts his understanding of the Biblical witness. Others have suggested that in Barth there is the consistent development of a central thought, but have not always agreed on what that thought was. David Ford illustrates this by indicating how the Trinity, justification, Christ, the Holy Spirit, Barth's political biography and the concept of time have all been convincingly offered as keys to his theology and method.(303) To these he proposes to add his own theme of the Bible as narrative. The variety of 'keys' to Barth should itself be a warning to advocates of any one approach. The richness of Barth's theology clearly lends itself to many diverse and coherent approaches all of which can be offered with a high degree of

(301) Charles S. Duthie 'Ultimate Triumph' in Scottish Journal of Theology 1961 Vol.14 pp 156-171

(302) Donald Bloesch TSF Bulletin Vol.9 No.5 p.7

(303) By Jüngel, Küng, von Balthasar, Rosato, Marquardt and Roberts respectively. See Ford 'Barth's Interpretation of the Bible' in S.W. Sykes op cit p.56

consistency and persuasion. Yet the fact that no one central thought has been agreed on by commentators on Barth would indicate that they may be looking for something that is not there. The fact that there may be such a central motif does not of itself invalidate Barth's theology any more than Calvin's was invalidated by his stress on the sovereignty of God or Luther's by the doctrine of justification by faith, but is such a motif to be found?

Barth himself expressly denies that he was developing a basic principle and in discussing Berkouwer's book indicates his approach.

I can only speak for myself, and I maintain that for me thinking is christological only when it consists in the perception, comprehension, understanding and estimation of the reality of the living person of Jesus Christ as attested by Holy Scripture, in attentiveness to the range and significance of his existence, in openness to His self-disclosure, in consistency in following Him as is demanded.⁽³⁰⁴⁾

Christological thinking is therefore to be distinguished from deduction from a given principle. 'I underline... that we are not dealing with a Christ-principle but with Jesus Christ Himself as attested by Holy Scripture'⁽³⁰⁵⁾ He then goes on to illustrate how his concept of nothingness is drawn from a consideration of Jesus Christ, laying great stress on the fact that 'Jesus is Victor!',⁽³⁰⁶⁾ affirming that for him, the historical struggle

(304) CDIV/3:1 p.174

(305) *ibid*

(306) *ibid* pp 179-80

against evil is very much a reality. He summarised his position in correspondence with Berkouwer:

I'm a bit startled at the title, The Triumph...Of course I used to use the word and still do. But it makes the whole thing seem so finished, which it isn't for me. The Freedom... would have been better. And then instead of Grace I would much have preferred Jesus Christ. My intention, at any rate, has been that all my systematic theology should be as exact a development as possible of the significance of this 'name' (in the biblical sense of the term) and to that extent should be the telling of a story which develops through individual events. (307)

Understood in this way, and with Barth's thoughtful and self-conscious denial Berkouwer's basis thesis, although not his supporting criticisms, must be discounted. Brown must be considered to fall at the same hurdle and for the same reason. Barth may have been mistaken in much of his interpretation but it is difficult to see with Brown how Barth's apparent strength in constructing a Christocentric theology is in fact his real weakness. (308) Barth is criticised for operating with a Christ-idea (despite his protests to the contrary) as opposed to the biblical, historical Christ. (309) He is guilty of creating a natural theology of his own through his Christocentric programme. (310) It is certainly possible to argue that Barth may apply the Christocentric principle too consistently,

(307) Busch Karl Barth p.381

(308) Brown op cit p.151

(309) ibid p.152

(310) ibid p.12

but can a method which starts from Christ as the very revelation of God be wrong in principle? There is a variance of the theological method at this point between Barth and both Berkouwer and Brown. The latter, as Barth perceives,⁽³¹¹⁾ are operating with a concept of revelation which sees Christological revelation as one aspect of the total biblical revelation. Therefore one may start with any part of the scriptural revelation and work one's way to Christ. For Barth, Christ is the revelation of God and Scripture witnesses to this, therefore one begins with Christ and from him refers to other parts of the biblical witness for further illumination. Methodologically, Barth must surely be right.⁽³¹²⁾ Scripture cannot be rightly understood apart from Christ. But Christ must be confessed according to the Scriptures and not 'played off' against Scripture. This is Brown's concern and as such is legitimate although it bears traces of the older epistemology. Where it falls short is in the temptation it opens up to make Christ a mirror reflecting what is understood to be taught in other parts of Scripture and to underestimate the revelatory primacy of Christ. The corrective in Barth against an overarching a priori principle is that the object of his theology is the objective, historical Christ.⁽³¹³⁾

Criticism of Barth must concentrate on whether what he thinks he hears in Christ is genuinely there or is the product of his own

(311) CDIV/3:1 p.175

(312) See John 1:1,14,18; John 5:39; Luke 24:27.

(313) T.F. Torrance Karl Barth: An Introduction to his early Theology 1910-1931 pp 176-178

theological creativity. It has been Barth's great strength that he has been able to sustain deeply held intuitive perceptions against the fiercest of opposition. Evangelical theology must be profoundly grateful as an example for Barth's opposition to liberal theology and his ability to swim against the stream. But precisely that sense of inner certainty which Barth displayed in his many controversies, as in the Church struggle against Hitler, may have caused him to perceived with profound conviction insights which were not entirely biblical or to overstate arguments which missed the truth in the position he was demolishing. The real task of an evangelical theology in its discussion of Karl Barth is to discern where, and where not, this may happen to be the case in his theology.

(e) Summary

The evidence indicates that despite initial hostility the theology of Karl Barth has gained increasing acceptance among evangelical theologians. The hostile response of van Til, Klooster and Clark is considerably muted by Berkouwer, Brown and Runia who are willing to accept Barth's epistemology, while faulting him on the overall structure of his theology and, in the case of Brown and Runia on his inadequate view of Scripture. Ramm, Bolich and Bloesch show themselves inclined to accept both Barth's epistemology and his view of Scripture and find in him the necessary paradigms for future evangelical theology while not necessarily agreeing with Barth in toto.

Our review of specific issues has argued against the objections to Barth on the basis of his supposed modernism, his epistemology, his view of Scripture and the suggested distorting motifs. The debate with Barth appears to be moving on from these issues. At the same time there are sufficient questions raised against Barth to indicate that there are areas of disagreement where evangelical theology needs to be involved dialectically with him, not as an enemy but as a friend. One primary area is that of his doctrine of election which has many positive aspects and could be of great value in correcting the strong elements of world negation and of pessimism characteristic of much evangelicalism. Barth's apparent universalism may be clarified by modifying it along the lines suggested but it must also be heard in its attempt to do justice to the all embracing and gracious purposes of God. It is not sufficient merely to retreat into past formulae in dialogue with Barth. Study of Barth indicates that the only way in which true dialogue can be entered into is on the basis which he himself so clearly exemplifies, careful and extensive biblical exegesis. At a later point in this thesis the attempt will be made to enter into dialogue with Barth over his concept of 'nothingness'.

Addendum: Karl Barth and Anabaptism

We have already given indication that Anabaptism represents a strand of evangelicalism only obliquely related to the magisterial

Reformers. Strictly speaking, only certain Anabaptist groups may be properly designated 'evangelical', others being spiritualist or unitarian. Clasen identifies twenty Anabaptist groups, although only six were of major importance.⁽³¹⁴⁾ According to G.H. Williams,

The Radical Reformation was a tremendous movement at the core of Christendom during the threescore years following Luther's three great Reformation tracts of 1520. Embracing peasants and princes, artisans and aristocrats, devout wives and disillusioned humanists, it was as much an entity as the Reformation and the Counter Reformation. To be sure, only by assimilation to the nomenclature imposed by these other two religious movements of the age can it be itself called a reformation. It was, rather, a radical break from the existing institutions and theologies in the interrelated drives to restore primitive Christianity, to reconstruct and to sublimate.⁽³¹⁵⁾

The first Anabaptists to emerge were the most evangelical, have proved historically the most enduring and are the originators of the largest contemporary Anabaptist grouping, the Mennonites. On January 21, 1525, a small group of disillusioned erstwhile disciples of Huldreich Zwingli met in Zurich to perform the first believers' baptisms of the modern age. Shortly afterwards the first free church congregation was formed at Zollikon near Zurich.⁽³¹⁶⁾ Anabaptism as

(314) Claus-Peter Clasen 'Anabaptism: a Social History' in James M. Stayer and Werner O. Packull The Anabaptists and Thomas Müntzer (Dubuque, 1980) p.33

(315) G.H. Williams The Radical Reformation (Philadelphia, 1962) p.846

(316) Fritz Blanke Brothers in Christ (Scottsdale, 1961) pp 19-20, 21-42

represented by this stream has been misrepresented consistently by reason of its tenuous association with Thomas Müntzer,⁽³¹⁷⁾ the cloud that the rebellion at Münster in 1535 cast upon the whole of the Radical Reformation, despite the uncharacteristic nature of the Münster group,⁽³¹⁸⁾ and the standardizing of the interpretation of Anabaptism given by Zwingli's successor, Bullinger in Der Wiedertäufer Ursprung. According to Bullinger Anabaptism had its origin in Saxon Zwickau and ultimately in Satan, but certainly not in Zürich or in Zwingli!⁽³¹⁹⁾

It is not surprising that Barth, despite his proximity to the Anabaptist fountainhead, appears to have been largely in ignorance of Anabaptism, apart from the standard caricatures, since the bulk of Reformed Christianity has received its interpretation of Anabaptism via Bullinger and Calvin's refutation of Anabaptism. Even today the Continental ignorance of the free churches is in evidence. The Baptist G.R. Beasley-Murray relates how: 'Quite recently a prominent German theologian of the Faith and Order Movement addressed a question to me on the assumption that Baptists deny the doctrine of the Trinity!'⁽³²⁰⁾ What is surprising is how, despite

(317) On their specific disassociation from Müntzer see the letter by Conrad Grebel in G.H. Williams and Angel M. Mergal Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers (Philadelphia, 1867) pp 71-85

(318) On this see Cornelius Krahn "Münster Anabaptists" in The Mennonite Encyclopaedia (Scottsdale, 1957) pp 777-782

(319) Williams: The Radical Reformation pp 848-849

(320) G.R. Beasley-Murray: Baptism in the New Testament (London, 1962) p.306 n3

this relative ignorance, the theological heir of Calvin has been consistently moving towards positions maintained by Anabaptists.

As to two of the four tenets widely held in the Radical Reformation, namely believers' baptism and the sleep of the souls of the dead pending the resurrection, it is a poignant fact that the greatest modern Protestant theologian who is the counterpart and in a sense the successor of Zwingli or Calvin - who teaches as it happens not in Zurich or Geneva but in Basel - is in accord with the once despised antipaedo-baptists and psychopannychists.⁽³²¹⁾

In another place I have sought to characterise the evangelical Anabaptist distinctives under four headings: the believers' church with its corollary believers' baptism, the concept of fall and restoration applied to the church, the love principle and the centrality of Jesus.⁽³²²⁾ It is instructive to compare Barth against these points.

(1) The Believers' Church

The Anabaptists were persuaded by their reading of Scripture that the true church was composed of the regenerate, was to be understood as a gathered community committed to holy living under Christ and therefore could only consist of those who had voluntarily embraced discipleship and expressed this in believers' baptism. They rejected entirely the concept of the corpus Christianum. This may be

(321) Williams op cit p.863

(322) Nigel G. Wright: The Radical Kingdom (Eastbourne, 1986) pp 35-45

favourably compared with the position Barth came to embrace on the nature of the church, baptism and church-state relationships. This became evident in the paper he prepared in 1947 for the Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam. Busch indicates that:

Under the title 'The Church - The Living Congregation of the Living Lord Jesus Christ', he put down in writing thoughts which in his view he was expressing for the first time with such precision and detail. They were on so-called 'congregationalist' lines. Starting from a strict understanding of the church as the 'event of its assembling' 'I have demolished the whole concept of church "authority" in both its episcopal and its synodical form - and constructed everything (rather like the Pilgrim Fathers) on the congregation'.(323)

Barth appears to have been unaware that the true origin of the free churches was in his own homeland.(324) In the Dogmatics he develops the concept of the church as a 'brotherly Christocracy':

The main definition of Erik Wolf hits the nail on the head. As he sees it the Christian community is the community of the Lord and of those who are elected by Him and thus made his brethren '...It is a "brotherly Christocracy"...In a subsequent and subordinate sense, it can then be regarded and understood and described as a "Christocratic brotherhood"...Even so, the idea of Christocracy is dominant. And by it the brotherhood is characterised as a fellowship of law, i.e. a fellowship ordered by the superior law of Jesus Christ'.(325)

(323) Busch op cit p.343

(324) Franklin H. Littell 'The Anabaptist Concept of the Church' in G.R. Herschberger (Ed) The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision (Scottsdale 1957) p.130

(325) CDIV/2 pp 680-68

In another place he writes:

The Real Church lives as the assembly which is called together by Him. No-one belongs to her as a result of birth or descent, no-one by virtue of something that others have done for him, but also no-one by virtue of his own decision and attainment, no-one because of his religious experiences or any other inward charge. The Real Church is the assembly which is called, united, held together and governed by the Word of her Lord, or she is not the Real Church. (326)

Nothing could be more natural than that Barth should follow the Anabaptists in moving from the concept of the believers' church to that of believers' baptism. In 1938 we find that in preparing a seminar for the first time on baptism 'he came to completely negative conclusions over Calvin's arguments for infant baptism at any rate'. (327) In Holland in 1939 'he terrified his audience with the critical attitude which he had now adopted to infant baptism'. (328) In 1943 he published his lecture Die Kirchliche Lehre von der Taufe in which he argued that baptism:

did not bring about the salvation of man ('causative') but attested his salvation by the symbolic representation of his renewal in Christ ('cognitive'). As a consequence he argued for the rejection of infant baptism and put forward the demand that 'instead of being a passive object of baptism, the person baptised must again become a free partner of Jesus Christ, that is, freely deciding and freely confessing'. He was clear

(326) Karl Barth 'The Real Church' Scottish Journal of Theology Vol.3 1950 pp 341-342

(327) Busch Karl Barth p.286

(328) ibid p.292

that the price for changing the practice of baptism in this way was to renounce 'the existence of the evangelical church in the Constantinian corpus Christianum, i.e. 'the present form of the national church'. 'If the church were to break with infant baptism, it could no longer be a people's church in the sense of a state church or a church of the masses.'⁽³²⁹⁾

Subsequently Barth was confirmed in his position by his son's, Markus', decision not to baptise his own children and his rejection of the sacramental view of baptism.⁽³³⁰⁾ Barth's non-sacramental view of responsible baptism is finally developed in CD IV/4 in which he argues that the case for infant baptism can only stand if it could be shown to be commanded and necessary.⁽³³¹⁾ He concludes that 'fundamentally the Baptists and Mennonites are on the right track in their baptismal practice'⁽³³²⁾ and recommends a 'presentation of infants' as a distinct alternative to infant baptism.⁽³³³⁾

(2) Fall and Restoration

As has been indicated, the break with infant baptism also marks a break with the corpus Christianum for Barth. In the Anabaptist perspective the Christian church 'fell' when it became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine.⁽³³⁴⁾ The task of the

(329) *ibid* p.320

(330) *ibid* p.369 cf Markus Barth Die Taufe ein Sakrament? (Zollikon-Zurich, 1951)

(331) CD IV/4 p.175

(332) CD IV/4 p.193

(333) *ibid* p.194

(334) Franklin H. Littell The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism (New York, 1964) pp 61ff

true church was now to work towards the restoration of the church along apostolic lines.⁽³³⁵⁾ The early Anabaptists came to these conclusions by studying the Bible. The origins of the movement in Zurich are to be found in the informal Bible study groups which were encouraged to meet as the Reformation gained ground.⁽³³⁶⁾ The disparity between the primitive church and the status quo is what gave rise to the analysis of the church's history in terms of fall and restoration. The Reformers had begun a good work but had not carried it through consistently.⁽³³⁷⁾ It was up to the Anabaptists to carry through this work.

The parallel here with Barth four centuries later should not go unnoticed. Barth stumbled into 'the strange world of the Bible' and castigated the religious status quo of his day. He particularly inveighed against the religion in which he saw the height of man's rebellion against God. He insisted that the Church be judged by the Word of God. The contrast between historical Christianity and the original foundation of the church in Christ and the apostles was a major theme of Franz Overbeck (1837-1905) and was learnt by Barth from him as well as Kierkegaard.

Barth saw beyond the devastating criticism to the desire on Overbeck's part for a real breakthrough in emancipation from the shackles of historical Christendom and its worldly

(335) *ibid* p.xvii, pp 79ff

(336) Williams *op cit* p.118

(337) Williams and Mergal Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers p.74

perversion in the Church, and return to the original history (Urgeschichte) of the Church in the lifetime of Christ himself. (338)

For the Anabaptists this dynamic meant immediate confrontation with the power of the sacral state. For Barth, the immediate engagement was with Liberal Protestantism but because of his starting point the break with the concept of corpus Christianum was inevitable. Verduin traces this to the time of the Confessing Church:

Realising that the German Nazi movement would have been impossible without the background of 'Christian Sacralism' he began to question the legitimacy of the whole Constantinian formula. Barth saw that Constantine had been 'the creator of the Christian Volkskirche', which Barth therupon rejected forthrightly. He found it deplorable that 'when Constantine elevated Christianity to the status of the religion of the state...and when the terrain of the Church was made to coincide with that of peoplehood then many thought they saw in this development the reinstatement of the Old Testament dispensation and at the same time the fulfilment of the New Testament prophecy of Revelation 20' (339)

Verduin further draws attention to a lengthy quotation from Barth:

(338) T.F. Torrance Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology (London 1962) pp 42-43

(339) Leonard Verduin The Anatomy of a Hybrid (Grand Rapids 1976) p.249

The citation is from Barth: 'Volkskirche, Freikirche, Bekenntniskirche' in Evangelische Theologie (1937) p.415

Do I err if I think that the real and determining ground for the baptism of infants was, with the Reformers and since that day each time again, quite simply this: men could not bring themselves then, not in any case or at any price - to let go of the idea of an evangelical church in the format of corpus Christianum, the image of a Volkskirche? A Volkskirche, as a state Church and Church of the masses, this the church can no longer very well be if it breaks with infant baptism. Hinc, Hinc, illae lacrymae! Does not that concern which reveals itself here perhaps have its primitive form in that fact to which Luther upon occasion confessed, namely that there would not be so very many baptised ones if and when people had to come to baptism rather than be brought to it?....Are we really so sure of the intrinsic correctness of the Constantinian system, the present configuration of our Volkskirche? Is our conscience in the matter then so good, that we can and may be determined, come what may to hang onto it - even at the price of inflicting, by a misconstrued baptism practice, endless wounds and sickness upon the church...? Where pray, is it written that the Christian Church is not to be a minority perhaps a small minority? Would she not be more useful to her surroundings if she were a healthy Church instead? What does it profit the Church to continue to be a Church-of-the-people rather than a Church-for-the-people...? What is needed is very simple: a baptism to take the place of Christening, one that is justifiable also from the side of the person receiving the baptism. He must, if things are to be right, pass from the status of a passive object of baptism to the status of a choosing and freely confessing....partner of Jesus Christ. (340)

Like the Anabaptists Barth came to look for a church composed of those freely confessing Christ, free of the formal ties with the state, practising responsible baptism and existing under the

(340) *ibid* p.250

spiritual government of Christ. When we add to this his concentration on preaching, his sacramentarianism⁽³⁴¹⁾ and his views on the order of worship and the liturgy, he makes a tolerable Anabaptist:

He thought that they should sit around in a semi-circle, and that, 'the ideal solution to the problem of forming a central focus' was to erect a 'striking wooden table, which should be easy to set up, but clearly different from an "altar". It should be provided with a movable desk, since it would have to serve both as a pulpit and a table for the Lord's Supper and in place of a font...Pictorial and symbolic representations are out of place in the Protestant Church!' Barth also suggested... that the eucharist be celebrated regularly: 'Why is the Lord's Supper not celebrated every Sunday in every church (at the very least in the presence of the whole congregation)... And occasionally baptism could form the beginning of the whole service (also without an unnecessary flood of words). Would not this make us a comprehensive "Church of the Word" - the Word which did not become speech, but flesh.'⁽³⁴²⁾

(3) The Love Principle

Barth might of course have difficulty qualifying for membership of an Anabaptist congregation on the grounds that he was not a pacifist. Non-violence is not a necessary part of wider free church ecclesiology but was an essential part of the Zurich Anabaptists' adherence to the Sermon on the Mount. Conrad Grebel, leader of the

(341) Understood as per Williams The Radical Reformation p.xxiii

(342) Busch op cit p.474

Zurich radicals, wrote in his letter to Müntzer (which probably never arrived): "The gospel and its adherents are not to be protected by the sword, nor are they thus to protect themselves ... neither do they use worldly sword or war, since all killing has ceased with them".⁽³⁴³⁾ Barth is widely known for his resistance to Hitler and his stated willingness to protect Switzerland if invaded.⁽³⁴⁴⁾ In the judgement of John Howard Yoder, Mennonite scholar and former student of Barth, this has created a wrong impression. Barth in fact 'stands nearer to pacifism than any other major theologian within the European Protestant tradition in modern times'.⁽³⁴⁵⁾ Yoder points to Barth's words that pacifism 'has almost infinite arguments in its favour and is almost overpoweringly strong'.⁽³⁴⁶⁾

Does not war demand that almost everything that God has forbidden be done on a broad front? To kill effectively, or in connexion therewith, must not those who wage war steal, rob, commit arson, lie, deceive, slander and unfortunately to a large extent fornicate, not to speak of the almost inevitable repression of all the finer and weightier forms of obedience? And how can they believe when at the climax of this whole world of dubious action it is a matter of killing?⁽³⁴⁷⁾

(343) Williams and Mergal op cit p.80

(344) Busch Karl Barth pp 303ff

(345) J.H. Yoder Karl Barth and the Problem of War (Nashville, 1970) pp 103-104

(346) ibid p.39

(347) CD III/4 p.454

According to Yoder:

Karl Barth is far nearer to Christian pacifism than he is to any kind of systematic apology for Christian participation in war. For him it is theologically not possible to construct a justification of war. There is only the possibility of 'limiting cases' whose sole ground is in God's sovereign (and exceptional) command to man.⁽³⁴⁸⁾

In his acute analysis, Yoder finds Barth wanting in his use of the concept of the Grenzfall (borderline and exceptional case). His rejection of casuistry gives no ground for determining when an exception may be commanded.⁽³⁴⁹⁾ His use of the category of the Grenzfall is merely 'a name for the fact that in certain contexts he is convinced of the necessity of not acting according to the way God seems to have spoken in Christ'⁽³⁵⁰⁾ It is more a reflection of the fact that Barth himself falls back on 'unconditional subjective certainty' than a valid ethical tool.⁽³⁵¹⁾ Despite this Yoder concludes:

Between Barth and an integral Christian pacifism the only differences lie at points where Barth did not finish working out the implications of his originality... Barth's best insights cannot but lead to a kind of rejection of war which... could still not reasonably be called anything other than 'Christian Pacifism'.⁽³⁵²⁾

(348) Yoder op cit p.52

(349) ibid p.63

(350) ibid p.74

(351) ibid p.90, p.73

(352) ibid p.118

Seen in the context of Barth's whole life this thesis has considerable cogency.

(4) The centrality of Christ

The Anabaptists were Christocentric both in their concept of the nature of discipleship and in their approach to the Bible in a way which cannot be said of the magisterial Reformers. This is to be seen in the debates held in Strasbourg in December 1531 between Martin Bucer, the Reformer and Pilgram Marpeck, the town engineer and Anabaptist leader.⁽³⁵³⁾ By appeal to the O.T. Bucer was able to justify the status quo, including the sacral state, coercion in religious matters and infant baptism. Marpeck by insisting that the Bible must be understood Christologically come to totally opposite conclusions. Barth's 'Christological concentration' is prefigured in the Anabaptists. A Mennonite scholar has expressed the insight articulated by Marpeck and developed in the Anabaptist tradition:

The promise of a new future (Is. 43:19) was fulfilled when God came to us in a Son (Heb. 1:2). With, by and in Jesus, God's will is most perfectly disclosed: in the community that seeks to follow Jesus, God's way is most perfectly known and lived. Jesus, as we know him in the Gospels, functions as the ultimate source of hermeneutical authority. All other Scripture must be seen through these Gospel lenses of biblical authority.⁽³⁵⁴⁾

(353) Walter Klaasen, 'Pilgram Marpeck and South German Anabaptism' in Cornelius J. Dyck (ed) An Introduction to Mennonite History (Scottsdale, 1967) pp 67-71

(354) William M. Swartley Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women (Scottsdale 1983) p.142

But the Christological concentration of the Anabaptists was not solely a matter of theological or hermeneutical method: rather it was primarily a matter of obedience and conformity to Christ which led them into nonconformity to the world.⁽³⁵⁵⁾ Discipleship was the test of the Christian and dissent was the inevitable outcome since Christ claimed total loyalty and every rival claim on the part of the state was to be resisted. The Anabaptists saw that their loyalty to Christ took precedence over the demands of earthly systems.⁽³⁵⁶⁾

It is undoubtedly true that the Anabaptists were overly negative towards society. Barth himself displayed high degrees of nonconformity without falling into the same kind of world negation. The struggle of the Confessing Church and particularly the Barmen declaration are examples par excellence of his understanding of the total claim of Christ:

Jesus Christ as He is attested to us in the Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God Whom we have to hear and whom we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We condemn the false doctrine that the church can and must recognise as God's revelation other events and powers, forms and truths, apart from and alongside this one Word of God.⁽³⁵⁷⁾

(355) H.S. Bender in Guy F. Herschberger op cit pp 42ff

(356) Robert Friedmann 'The Doctrine of the Two Worlds' in Stayer and Packull op cit pp 23-27

(357) CD II/1 p.172

Barmen is perhaps the clearest example of Barth's ability to dissent from the prevailing consensus on the basis of theological conviction and instinct. Other examples of this political strand in Barth are to be found in his opposition to the Great War, the Cold War, German remilitarisation,⁽³⁵⁸⁾ nuclear weapons⁽³⁵⁹⁾ and the Vietnam conflict.⁽³⁶⁰⁾ When it was rumoured in 1958 that Barth was not in agreement with the controversial ten propositions against nuclear arms being presented to the Synod of the Evangelical Church in Germany, he let it be known that he was in agreement with them 'as if I had written them myself'. It now appears that this is precisely what he had done!⁽³⁶¹⁾

It is a precarious, but not entirely invalid, task to test the strength of a person's theology against their political judgements. Barth shows in politics as in theology a willingness to swim against the stream on the basis of loyalty to what he considered to be the demand of God. Retrospectively, some of the positions he embraced and specifically his opposition to National Socialism have, from the limited perspective of our point in history, been vindicated,⁽³⁶²⁾ although the debate continues in other areas and invites at this

(358) Busch Karl Barth p.433

(359) *ibid* p.431

(360) *ibid* p.478

(361) Busch Karl Barth p.431

(362). 'There has rarely been in the whole history of the church a theologian so amply vindicated by history as Karl Barth' F.W. Camfield Reformation Old and New (London, 1947) p.22

point only subjective judgement. Barth's judgement may be contrasted with the predominant conformism of twentieth century evangelicalism. Donald W. Dayton cites an article entitled 'A failure of Evangelical Conscience' to indicate how in the 1960's American evangelical Christianity consistently opposed progressive trends as indicated by the editorial pages of Christianity Today:

Claiming to represent the 'biblical point view', the editors defended 'voluntary segregation', charged of Martin Luther King that 'communism ... is implicit in his integrationist ideology', condemned categorically demonstrations and civil disobedience, decried as a 'mob spectacle' the 1963 march on Washington at which Martin Luther King delivered his famous "I have a dream" speech, praised Mississippi's refusal to admit black student James Meredith to its state university and were horrified at the suggestion of inter-racial marriage. Concerning the war in Vietnam, the editors supported the American presence, stating that it was necessary for the security of Christian missions. They rebuked the critics of the war and called for the enforcement of laws against destroyers of draft cards and records while insisting that justice be 'tempered with mercy' for those convicted of war crimes. They denied that the United States had any economic or other 'ulterior motives' for its presence in Indochina. The journal, of course, altered its position on most of these issues, but only in response to a reversal of popular consensus or official national policy. (363)

In similar vein Eberhard Busch surveyed Pietist political attitudes in the 1920's as represented by the journal Licht und Leben and

(363) Donald W. Dayton Discovering an Evangelical Heritage (New York 1976) p.3 citing John Oliver 'A failure of Evangelical Conscience' The Post-American (May 1975) pp 26-30

found clear statements against the cinema, theatre, opera, hair fashions, female emancipation and pacifism, and clear statements in favour of antisemitism, German nationalism, anti-democratic and anti-worker sentiments and Adolf Hitler. Ludendorf and Hitler were described after the Munich putsch as "Gesalbte eines Volkes".(364)

My contention at this point is that evangelicalism displays two distinct approaches to Scripture, one of which, like Martin Bucer makes appeal to Scripture as a 'flat' book, the other of which interprets the Scriptures dynamically by reference to Christ as the definitive revelation.(365) While neither hermeneutical approach renders the interpreter infallible, one approach is far more open to manipulation and rationalisation of the status quo (Bucer) while the other is liable to set the obedient interpreter at variance with the received order (Marpeck). While conservative evangelicalism opts for Bucer's method, there is a distinct stream within evangelicalism which may properly be designated 'radical'. This stream, rising in Anabaptism, prefigures Barth. J.H. Yoder argues that: 'It could be shown how Anabaptists preceded state church theologians in the insight that the New Testament is the norm for the interpretation of the Old'.(366) This is not the only point at which 'the Theology of the Word of God' is prefigured in the Anabaptists:

(364) Karl Barth und die Pietisten pp 248-252

(365) Swartley op cit p.146

(366) J.H. Yoder 'The Prophetic Dissent' in G.F. Herschberger op cit, p.102

The concept of evil as Das Nichtige, the understanding that the command of God is the Gestalt der Freiheit, the rejection of a deterministic view of double predestination, the identity of justification and sanctification; much in short which modern theology owes to Karl Barth, was already expressed embryonically in the fragmentary works of (Hans) Denck, the only one of the speculative spiritualists to have maintained for a time positive relations with the Biblical Anabaptists.⁽³⁶⁷⁾

Despite the parallels with the radical Anabaptist tradition, parallels which can only be the result of a common desire to listen to Christ and not to Anabaptist influence on Barth as such, it is not proper to claim Barth for that tradition of radical evangelicalism. This is not only because Barth with his particular background was an 'insider' whereas sectarian Protestantism has the character of a minority, but because of Barth's Paulinism which is to be placed alongside his Christocentricity in a way which is not found in Anabaptism.

Whatever some groups may have claimed, in actual fact the Bible as a whole has never been and could never be taken as theologically authoritative; instead, certain portions of the biblical literature have been used as the key by means of which the mystery of the whole was unlocked. Thus, Protestant orthodoxy (and neo-orthodoxy) found the point of view expressed in the letters of Paul authoritative; the left wing Reformation sects looked more directly to the life and

(367) *ibid* p.102 n.14 This article was written while Yoder was a doctoral candidate at Basel (p.93)

teachings of Jesus, particularly in the synoptic gospels; protestant spiritualism found the Johannine tradition most meaningful. (368)

One of the achievements of Karl Barth may be his synthesis of the Synoptic and Pauline traditions with due attention also to the Johannine. His relation to evangelicalism may be perceived therefore as standing between the conservative and radical traditions, yet also ahead of them in the forging of a new synthesis. Barth is not properly designated an Anabaptist but it is possible to discover in the course of his theology a 'theological and ecclesiastical trajectory' which left him at the completion of CD IV/2 committed to the free church vision. (369)

As he developed his position, Barth came ever closer to the left wing Reformation with its emphasis on the church as a gathered fellowship of believers (Gemeinde) rather than a sacramental institution that dispenses grace. His advocacy of believers' baptism, his stress on discipleship under the cross and his defence of the priesthood of all believers shows his convergence with the concerns of the Anabaptists.

Perhaps we could say that Barth was a genuinely catholic theologian who was willing to appropriate the good and true not only in the Reformation tradition but also in the traditions of mediaeval scholasticism, Protestant sectarianism and even Enlightenment modernism. (370)

(368) Gordon D. Kaufman Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective (New York 1968) p.66

(369) John H. Yoder 'Karl Barth: How His Mind Kept Changing' in Donald K. McKim op cit pp 168, 171

(370) Donald G. Bloesch TSF Bulletin (Vol.9 No.5) p.9. See also Jesus is Victor! p.15

III Karl Barth and Pietism

(a) The significance of the subject

Continental Pietism is arguably a parallel phenomenon to particular strands of British-American evangelicalism and therefore to examine Barth's attitude to it will further illuminate the interface between Barth and evangelicalism. Pietism was influenced by English Puritanism⁽¹⁾ and in turn exercised through Peter Böhler and Zinzendorf its own influence upon John Wesley and the Evangelical Revival.⁽²⁾ It may therefore with justice be regarded as part of the heritage to which in its earlier forms evangelicalism is now heir.

(b) Pietism

(1) History and development

The origins of Pietism as a distinct movement are to be found in the ministry of Philip Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and particularly in the publication of his book Pia Desiderata in 1675. Pietism was a renewal movement which came into being as a reaction against the institutionalised dogmaticism of the Old Protestantism which had prevailed since the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648.⁽³⁾ Its

(1) Martin Schmidt 'Pietismus' in Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart V Band (Tübingen 1961) p.373

(2) Donald Bloesch The Evangelical Renaissance (London 1973) p.105

(3) E.S. Waterhouse 'Pietism' Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics (Edinburgh 1918) Vol.10 p.6

concern was to rediscover Luther's emphasis upon the heart which had been almost entirely forsaken in favour of the intellect.⁽⁴⁾ Stress was therefore laid upon the inner life. In the early 1670's Spener experimented in his Frankfurt parish with the concept of collegia pietatis as a stimulus to piety, although he was to suppress these in due course because of the dangers of aberration in less able hands.⁽⁵⁾ Pietism attracted considerable opposition from orthodoxy but growing support, not least from the great and privileged, enabled it to flourish. Spener himself became court Chaplain at Dresden in 1686 before moving to Berlin to become rector of St. Nicholas'. In 1694 he was involved in the founding of the University of Halle which established Halle as a leading centre of Pietism. Here August Herrmann Francke (1668-1727) served as a professor from 1691 succeeding Spener as the unofficial leader of the movement.⁽⁶⁾

A distinct form of Pietism flourished at Württemberg under the influence of Johann Albrecht Bengel (1687-1752) and Friedrich Christoph Oetinger (1702-1802).⁽⁷⁾ Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760) was educated at Halle but reacted against its particular tendency and established on his lands at Herrnhut a new community which combined his own brand of Pietism with the remnants of the Unitas Fratrum descended from Jan Hus. The result came to be the

(4) *ibid*

(5) *ibid* p.7

(6) *ibid*

(7) *ibid* p.8

Moravian Church. From Herrnhut a remarkably effective missionary work developed which marks the beginning of the missionary era.⁽⁸⁾

(2) Characteristics

The spiritual impetus for Pietism is variously located in the early Luther and a recovery of the essence of the Reformation,⁽⁹⁾ in the Anabaptists as more thorough and more decisive continuers of the Reformation⁽¹⁰⁾ and in mediaeval mysticism, especially that of Francis.⁽¹¹⁾ In line with other renewal movements it was a protest against the lukewarmness and formality of the church and an attempt to restore New Testament Christianity.⁽¹²⁾ As such it is possible to discern points of contact with the early Luther, Anabaptists and mediaeval monastic mysticism which were examples of the same impulse. Spiritually it was characterised by the following emphases:

(i) The inner life

The concern of the early Pietism was to regain the reality of

(8) E. R. Hasse "Moravians" Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics pp 837-40

(9) Martin Schmidt op cit p.372

(10) This is the view of Max Goebel as outlined by Albrecht Ritschl in his "Prolegomena" to the History of Pietism" in Three Essays : Albrecht Ritschl (Philadelphia 1972) pp 55-56. See also Schmidt op cit p.372

(11) Ritschl op cit pp 56ff

(12) Schmidt op cit p.372

Spiritual life in the individual Christian. Regeneration and sanctification were thus given a higher value than a theoretical justification by faith.⁽¹³⁾ In Pia Desiderata Spener stresses the activity of God in salvation, the depravity of man, the profound change of conversion leading to a new man who exists in the consciousness of being a child of God.⁽¹⁴⁾ It is not surprising that with this inward focus Weltverleugnung should become characteristic of much Pietism.

(ii) The relativity of doctrine

In keeping with the stress on inner reality, Pietism reacted against polemical theology and the prevailing view that correctness of doctrine would itself lead to correct living.⁽¹⁵⁾ It sharply distinguished itself from the tendencies of Protestant Scholasticism. Bible study was stressed in contrast to doctrine and the watchword 'not only doctrine but also life' adopted.⁽¹⁶⁾

(iii) Ecumenism

The stress on the inner life led to a lessening of confessional

(13) Waterhouse op cit p.8

(14) Schmidt op cit p.370

(15) Waterhouse op cit pp 6-7

(16) CD I/2 p.254

self-consciousness.⁽¹⁷⁾ The opposition of Spener to separatism and the non-sectarian breadth of Zinzendorf and Herrnhut in their missionary methods⁽¹⁸⁾ contributed to a healthy ecumenism. This was strengthened by the movement's openness to forms of spiritual devotion originating in Catholicism.⁽¹⁹⁾

(iv) Social action and mission

Pietism issued in philanthropy. This included orphanages, schools and missions.⁽²⁰⁾ Commitment to Christ was to be worked out in acts of love. The spirit of tolerance in Pietism in contrast to orthodoxy may have been a factor in the ending of witch hunts and the burning of witches.⁽²¹⁾ One of its primary philanthropic expressions was the attention given to education and the development of highly influential schools.

(v) Individualism

Despite the last point, Pietism remains fundamentally individualistic. World transformation was to be brought about by the transformation of individuals.⁽²²⁾ The individual is thus brought

(17) Schmidt op cit p.376

(18) E.R. Hasse op cit p.839

(19) Schmidt op cit p.372-3

(20) ibid p.374

(21) The opinion of Hans Küng as cited by Bloesch. op cit p.111

(22) Schmidt op cit p.371

centre-stage. The concentration is on the pious subject with the danger that the interest in the new man, the new community and the new world might obscure the vision of God.⁽²³⁾ The use of collegia pietatis needs to be seen in this light as a means for the edification of the individual.

(3) Influence

The widespread and significant influence of Pietism may be discerned in the re-emphasis upon religious experience, the restoration of vitality to the church, the growth of hymnology, the renewal of biblical studies and the missionary movement. Less expected is the extent of Pietism's influence on the intellectual and cultural climate. Many of the leading men of the Enlightenment and German Idealism were educated under the influence of Pietism, including Lessing, Kant, Schiller, Goethe, Fichte, Hölderlin and Novalis.⁽²⁴⁾ Schleiermacher was educated in a Moravian school and the Pietist interest in the religious subject can be said to have reached a climax in his theology of religious feeling. Paradoxically, therefore, the Enlightenment, which is in many ways Pietism's antithesis, was prepared for by its emphasis on religious experience, its individualism and its reduction of the importance of doctrine.⁽²⁵⁾ A further development of this trend is the philosophy

(23) *ibid* p.378

(24) *ibid* p.377

(25) E.S. Waterhouse op cit p.9

of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) with its emphasis on truth as subjectivity. The fathers of liberal theology and existentialist philosophy both have their roots in Pietism. In subsequent centuries Pietism took different forms and strictly it is inaccurate to speak of Pietism as a monolithic phenomenon. 18th century Pietists could be scrupulous, inward looking and world-denying. 19th century Pietists were concerned with spiritual awakenings, missions and good works and the Gemeinschaftsbewegung of the 19th and 20th centuries was influenced by American Revivalism and more nationally conscious. These differentiations make the issue of with whom Barth was debating somewhat complex.⁽²⁶⁾

(c) The Blumhardts

Barth was early and decisively influenced, as has been recorded, by his contact with Christoph Blumhardt. The impact of the Blumhardts on twentieth century German theology has been little recognised in British theology. Their distinctive form of Pietism needs to be examined and the nature of their influence on Barth assessed.

(26) Eberhard Busch Karl Barth und die Pietisten : Die Pietismuskritik des jungen Karl Barths und ihre Erwidernng (München 1978) p.12 p.151. This work is invaluable for understanding Barth's relation to Pietism. Busch was himself the son of a prominent Pietist pastor whose theology was tempered by studying under Barth at Münster and who was present at the Barmen Synod. See 'Memories of Karl Barth' in How Karl Barth changed my mind (Grand Rapids 1986) ed. by Donald K. McKim p.9

(1) History

Johann Christoph Blumhardt (1805-1880) was a Lutheran pastor in Möttlingen in Calw from 1838 to 1852. A product of Württemberg Pietism he experienced a remarkable and unusual spiritual struggle and victory in 1842 for his parishioner Gottliebin Dittus (to be described in the next chapter) which yielded him a decisive insight into the power of Jesus Christ over evil henceforth to be summed up in the phrase 'Jesus is Victor!' Blumhardt came to prominence in the spiritual renewal which followed in the wake of his Möttlingen experiences. He became a popular preacher and, (1852-80), the leader of a renewal centre at Bad Boll. The keynote for Blumhardt was that of Hope, the vivid expectation of the Second Coming and, prior to it, of spiritual awakening.⁽²⁷⁾

Christoph Blumhardt (1842-1919) imbibed the hopes and experiences of his father and succeeded him in 1880 as leader at Bad Boll. He became renowned as a mass evangelist and healer⁽²⁸⁾ but became impatient with the spiritual selfishness of the pious Christians who flocked there.⁽²⁹⁾ His interest took a 'turn to the world' and focused upon the socio-economic issues of the day.⁽³⁰⁾

(27) E. Jäckh 'Blumhardt' in Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart Band I (Tübingen 1961) p.1325

(28) Vernard Eller in Introduction to Thy Kingdom Come. A Blumhardt Reader p.xix

(29) James Bentley 'Christoph Blumhardt: Preacher of Hope' in Theology 78 (1975) p.517

(30) Eller op cit p.xx

140

From 1900-1906 he joined the struggle for workers' rights as a Social Democratic deputy in the Stuttgart Landtag, despite the wrath it called down upon him from both civil and ecclesiastical authorities and the obligation to resign his orders.⁽³¹⁾ The younger Blumhardt's motto expresses something of his approach: "Wait and hasten".⁽³²⁾ The Christian's task was to give himself actively to the cause of the Kingdom but to wait upon God for its fulfilment.

We Christians must be people of progress in accord with God who wants to make something new; who see the beginning of the kingdom of God today, expect progress tomorrow and fulfilment the day after tomorrow.⁽³³⁾

Here is something more than Liberal Protestant optimism. It is eschatological hope which changes the perspective in which the here and now is viewed. It is not a quietist waiting for the end but an activist hastening of the kingdom.

(2) Revisionist Pietism

The Blumhardts exemplified a modified Pietism. They were led to this by a recovery of eschatology which they maintained not against Liberal Protestantism but against a form of Pietism which had diluted hope to a purely individual hope for the soul, instead of

(31) *ibid*

(32) *ibid*

(33) Bentley op cit p.582

seeing it as the expectation of the kingdom of God which will rectify the whole world.(34)

They therefore called the world of piety with its apparently very definite faith in Christ to a conversion, to faith in the living Christ who is to come again and make all things new. They gave a central position to the prayer: "Thy kingdom come", and "Even so, come, Lord Jesus", and therefore to post-temporal eternity, although this involved them in conflict with the most earnest representatives of the anthropocentric Christianity of the Post-Reformation period.(35)

This attack on inward looking church Pietism was complemented by a belief in the all-embracing love of God which meant that the world could not be bypassed in the manner of world-denying Pietism. The positive in science and socialism needed to be reckoned with.(36) Jesus was the Victor, the Saviour of all the world overcoming all enemies. Even the division between the children of God and of the world was transcended by God's love for all and redemption of all which includes even those who do not know him in his service.(37) The individualism and narrowness of Pietism is thus transformed in the Blumhardts by a rediscovery of hope into an affirmative vision which embraces the whole world.

(34) CDII/1 p.633

(35) *ibid*

(36) E. Jäckh op cit p.1326

(37) *ibid*

(3) Influence

The influence of the Blumhardts is most immediately evident in the religious socialism of Ragaz and Kutter⁽³⁸⁾ and extends widely. Brunner saw in Kierkegaard and Christoph Blumhardt the 'two great figures of Pietism' who were the forerunners of dialectical theology.⁽³⁹⁾ He dedicated the third volume of his Dogmatics to Blumhardt's memory:

It was he, the prophetic witness to Jesus, who in the days of my youth by direct personal contact and later, through men like Kutter and Ragaz, rooted me deep in the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit. I have always loved and honoured him as one of those in whom the divine light shone forth and in gratitude I regard my theological work as the harvest of his sowing.⁽⁴⁰⁾

In addition to recording that Brunner's father had 'as much as been' converted by the younger Blumhardt, Vernard Eller indicates the indebtedness (made known to him in personal conversations) of Oscar Cullmann, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (through his biographer, Eberhard Bethge), Jürgen Moltmann and Jacques Ellul to the Blumhardts.⁽⁴¹⁾ What about Barth?

(38) CD II/1 634

(39) Brunner Truth as Encounter (London 1964) p.83

(40) Brunner The Christian Doctrine of the Church, Faith and the Consummation (London 1962) pp xii-xiii

(41) Eller op cit pp xiv-xv

Barth was introduced to Christoph Blumhardt by Edward Thurneysen in 1915. Although they had met before,⁽⁴²⁾ this further meeting came at a crucial point of Barth's theological pilgrimage. In a time of confusion, it was Blumhardt's message of hope which made sense to him.⁽⁴³⁾ Thurneysen already knew Blumhardt well. Barth was now to recognise a prophetic element in his message.⁽⁴⁴⁾

The way in which Blumhardt combined an active and eager search for signs and 'break throughs' of the kingdom of God with a tranquil patient 'waiting' on God and the decisive action which he alone could perform, was evidently important for Barth. Even more important was the fundamental connection in Blumhardt's thought between knowledge of God and the Christian hope for the future; through this he learnt to understand God afresh as the radical renewer of the world who is at the same time himself completely and utterly new. For Barth this could be - and had to be - the starting point for further developments.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Writing in 1920 Barth expressed puzzlement that for thirty years theologians had managed to ignore the Blumhardts. Theology would have been spared all sorts of round about ways and false paths if it had listened but the 'murky performances at Möttlingen' were a stumbling block too great for the spirit of the time.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Barth included a section on J.C. Blumhardt in his work on nineteenth century theology on the basis that, although he was not a

(42) Busch Karl Barth p.43

(43) ibid p.84

(44) ibid p.85

(45) ibid

(46) Karl Barth Theology and the Church (London 1962) p.55

theologian, he did possess knowledge.⁽⁴⁷⁾ This knowledge, gained in the pastoral struggle for Gottlieb Dittus, led him in a 'quite unpietistic' direction in stressing the objective power of the kingdom of God.⁽⁴⁸⁾ He further diverges from the path of Pietism by becoming a theologian of hope, expecting the imminent return of Christ, in the light of which suffering was not to be greeted with resignation but with an angry No!⁽⁴⁹⁾ He expected a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, his gifts and powers to herald the dawn of a new time of grace on earth.⁽⁵⁰⁾ Blumhardt has his theological limitations but:

Within this limitation there remains his contribution, that with stammering tongue, but audibly to those who had ears to hear, he raised a whole series of questions once again that had to break through this limitation, and indeed the limitations of both liberal and pietistic theology. He raised the question of the universality of revelation and grace, of the practical significance of the New Testament miracles, of the unity of soul and body, of the real power of reconciliation, of the character and presence of the Holy Spirit and the reality of Christian hope.⁽⁵¹⁾

The conclusion to which this evidence points is that the Blumhardts influenced Barth at a significant point and that he gained certain insights from them, particularly to do with hope and eschatology

(47) Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (London 1972) pp 643-653

(48) *ibid* pp 644-6

(49) *ibid* pp 646, 648

(50) *ibid* p.651

(51) *ibid* p.652

which permanently influenced the shape of his theology. Barth's theology indicates that insights once gained are not abandoned but developed in far more sophisticated ways than is true of their point of origin. Brunner was later to criticise Barth for moving away from the 'Swabian fathers' in his increasing pre-occupation with doctrine and dismissing the Blumhardts' concern for the Spirit's outpouring as 'pietism'.⁽⁵²⁾ This seems to be a harsh judgement, particularly in view of Barth's statement, that he, and others, was attempting to return to the original starting point of the older Blumhardt.⁽⁵³⁾ A fairer perception would be that Barth, like Brunner, is in his theological work part of the harvest which the Blumhardts had sown. This is most clearly evident in the constant note of universal hope which is sounded in his work, in the prominence of the watchword 'Jesus is Victor!' and its development as the 'first, last and decisive word' about the prophetic work of Christ⁽⁵⁴⁾ and in the socialist concerns which he evidenced throughout his life.

The Blumhardts themselves however need to be seen within a broader Swabian Pietist tradition. J.T. Beck (1804-1878) for instance stressed the Kingdom of God not as individual Salvation but as organic growth towards the future Salvation of the whole world⁽⁵⁵⁾ and it should not be imagined that the Blumhardts were alone in this witness to Pietism.

(52) Brunner Truth as Encounter (London 1964) p.43

(53) CD II/1 p.634

(54) CD IV/3:1 pp 165-274

(55) Haddon Willmer 'Johann Tobias Beck' in New International Dictionary of the Christian Church (Exeter 1974) pp 114-5

(d) Barth's critique of Pietism(1) Historical Overview

The form of Pietism represented by the Blumhardts raised questions about Pietism in general. At the beginning of his dialectical phase Barth was as bitingly critical of Pietism as he was of Liberalism. In his 1919 commentary on Romans he was to refer to 'the inferno of pietism in which the demons do their work'.⁽⁵⁶⁾ This may obscure the fact that he was himself the product of many pietist influences and that he was acquainted from within with Pietism at its best. These influences included his great grandfather, Abel Burckhardt, (whose distinctly pietistic songs Barth learnt as a child from his mother), his school and his own father who had been positively influenced by J.T. Beck to come 'out of the barren wastes of New Testament criticism into feeding on God's Word' and who stressed clearly conversion and new birth.⁽⁵⁷⁾ Barth was able therefore to criticise not a caricature but Pietism at its best. Pietistic influence was also present in the theology of his mentor Herrmann who offered the possibility of a liberal theology which maintained pietist concerns.⁽⁵⁸⁾

His early pastoral experiences brought both positive and negative contacts with Pietists - positive in the impression made upon him

(56) cited in Donald G. Bloesch The Evangelical Renaissance (London 1973) p.101

(57) Busch Die Pietismuskritik pp 18-19

(58) Barth Theology and Church pp 261-2

by the Salvationist Ernst von May⁽⁵⁹⁾ and Pastor H. Gelzer⁽⁶⁰⁾ and negative because of the opposition of a pietist group called 'Albrecht's bethren' in his own parish at Safenwil.⁽⁶¹⁾

His work on Romans inclined him against Pietism because through it he saw that men cannot identify their own standpoint with God's. This was further confirmed by the visit of an evangelist named Vetter which seemed to Barth to be 'a quite evil religious mechanism'.⁽⁶²⁾ The conflict with aspects of Pietism was thus a feature of Barth's earlier life and work. By contrast, in later years a more satisfactory relationship was arrived at.⁽⁶³⁾ In 1955 he could write in the preface to CD IV/2:

It is another question whether on our own side I have even remotely satisfied the concern of the Pietists and "Evangelical groups". To the best of my knowledge and conscience I have tried to do this, although I could not simply adopt their view. If I am not mistaken, there is much more openness and thoughtfulness among them now than in the forms of doctrine and practice that I knew when I was younger - or thought I knew, for I am not ashamed to confess that I now understand them better than I did.⁽⁶⁴⁾

In 1959 in conversation with a pietist group Barth was to assert that progress had been made and that he and they were agreed in

(59) Busch Karl Barth pp 87-88

(60) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.48

(61) Busch Karl Barth p.67

(62) *ibid* p.100

(63) *ibid* p.394

(64) CD IV/2 p.x

essentials. What remained was not to fight but to clear things up.⁽⁶⁵⁾ In 1960 an 'extremely positive' conference was held with German, Dutch and Swiss representatives of the Herrnhut communities in which Barth confessed his affinity to Zinzendorf:⁽⁶⁶⁾

If Zinzendorf was right about the main thing - not always in the right form - in taking as his centre Jesus Christ, all of him and him alone... if he was right in his view that the reconciliation of God with the world had already been completed, in his understanding of the relationship between gospel and law, in his view of the church as the community of the Lamb, the living Christ, then I may say in all modesty that I too am right. The whole of my theological thought revolves around this point, and this is where I am attacked. Zinzendorf and I stand and fall together.⁽⁶⁷⁾

Barth and Pietism converged without achieving full agreement. An examination of Barth's criticisms of Pietism will help to elucidate this.

(2) The points at issue

(i) Subjectivity

Pietism exalted the religious subject and according to Barth's assessment came to its natural culmination in Schleiermacher and the

(65) Busch Karl Barth p.445

(66) *ibid* pp 446-7

(67) *ibid* p.447

subjectivity of Liberalism. Barth considers that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries an apostasy had taken place leading from an orthodoxy which lost its inward context to a Pietism which exalted the Christian subject to a Rationalism which will only listen to the human subject.⁽⁶⁸⁾ This aberration may itself have stemmed from Luther's concern for personal justification.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Pietism, the Enlightenment and Idealism belonged together as enthroning the reason and conscience of the individual.⁽⁷⁰⁾ The preoccupation with the religious subject is noteworthy in the hymnology of Pietism which implies a congregation which is highly self-impelled, self-activating and self-exalted.⁽⁷¹⁾ The heresy is that the Spirit is no longer the Spirit of Christ but has become a spirit of God or a Christian spirit.⁽⁷²⁾ For the early post-liberal Barth therefore Pietism is ranked with Liberalism as essentially the same phenomenon, and a threat to the priority of God. Pietism and the Enlightenment are both attempts to incorporate God into the realm of sovereign human self-awareness.⁽⁷³⁾ When Pietists were to welcome Barth's attacks on Liberalism they were apt to forget that he also criticised them.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Barth's insistence on the basic identity of Pietism and Liberalism may be rooted in his own earlier liberal

(68) CD III/3 p.17

(69) CD IV/1 p.150

(70) CD I/2 p.666

(71) CD I/2 p.254

(72) *ibid* p.255

(73) Busch Karl Barth p.221

(74) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.9

attempts to accommodate the Pietist stress on the inner life which in his own case had led to a retreat from objective belief and into the religious individualism characteristic of both liberalism and pietism.⁽⁷⁵⁾

(ii) Individualism

Religious subjectivity gave rise to individualism among the Pietists. It was in response to this that the Blumhardts articulated a world-embracing theology of hope and protested, with religious socialism, against spiritualist individualism.⁽⁷⁶⁾ Blumhardt, Ragaz and Kutter were all seeking to modify a basically individualist Pietism by stressing hope for the world.⁽⁷⁷⁾ Barth agreed with this and came to criticise pietist religion as a private affair, a mere inwardness which was quietist, ineffective and bypassed life.⁽⁷⁸⁾ The Pietist stress on pro me needed to be accompanied by pro nobis and even better by propter nos homines.⁽⁷⁹⁾

Barth was a socialist well before meeting Christoph Blumhardt and his socialist concern indicates both why he would not be content with an individualised pietism and why Blumhardt's brand of

(75) *ibid* p.26

(76) *ibid*

(77) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.68. Ragaz opposed Ichherrschaft to Weltherrschaft and Kutter Weltvollendungschristlichkeit to individuelle Seelenchristentum

(78) Busch Karl Barth p.102

(79) CD IV/1 756

socialism which did not lose sight of eschatology and the futurity of God might appeal to him. Recent debate on the role of socialism in Barth's theology has highlighted the degree to which Barth was throughout his life a political and socialist thinker. Far from abandoning socialism along with liberalism, as is commonly suggested,⁽⁸⁰⁾ F.W. Marquardt has argued that Barth was and remained an unreconstructed socialist whose theology must be understood in the Sitz im Leben of his socialist activity and whose turn to theology is an attempt to articulate a socially reflected concept of God.⁽⁸¹⁾ To see socialism as the key to Barth's theology is an overstated thesis, but it serves to disclose the very real political dimension in Barth. According to Gollwitzer the voices of religious socialism in Blumhardt, Ragaz and Kutter made it clear to Barth that the gospel embraced both the individual and a world upheaval, a world revolution. This new reality could be reflected in socialism, not as an ideology but as a condition to be realised.⁽⁸²⁾

What God according to his Word wills with men and from men is that they should and must hear, believe, know and reckon with this; in great things and small, in whole and in part, in the totality of their existence as men, they should and must live with the fact that not only sheds new light on, but materially changes, all things, and everything in all things - the fact that God is.⁽⁸³⁾

(80) Eg J. Hamer Karl Barth (London 1962) p.218

(81) F.W. Marquardt. 'Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth' in George Hunsinger Karl Barth and Radical Politics (Philadelphia 1976) pp 47-49

(82) Helmut Gollwitzer 'The Kingdom of God and Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth' in Hunsinger op cit p.76

(83) CD II/1 p.258

Whether or not Barth remained an unreconstructed socialist is contested⁽⁸⁴⁾ but that he was the constant foe of individualism is clear. As Zinzendorf emerged from Pietism and rescued it from being a private affair of pious egocentricity, so J.C. Blumhardt emerged from the awakening of the early nineteenth century with a message of hope which embraced the body as well as the soul, and the world as well as the church.⁽⁸⁵⁾ Staying true to this legacy Barth argued that the church does not proclaim social progress or socialism but 'can and should espouse the cause of this or that branch of social progress or even socialism in the form most helpful at a specific time and place and in a specific situation'.⁽⁸⁶⁾

The attack on religious individualism was particularly prominent in Barth's first commentary on Romans in which he combined Ragaz's criticism of Pietism's world-denial, Kutter's criticism of its refusal to let God be the one who transforms the world and Blumhardt's and Beck's concept of the organic growth of the kingdom of God.⁽⁸⁷⁾ Barth's charge is that the individualism of Pietism is itself a reflection of the Cartesian and Romantic ages of which it is a product.⁽⁸⁸⁾ Retreat from the world is proof of Pietism's

(84) For Barth as Revisionist Socialist see James Bentley 'Karl Barth as a Christian Socialist' in Theology 76 1973 (pp 349-356)

(85) CD IV/3.2 p.569

(86) CD III/4 p.545

(87) Busch Die Pietismuskritik pp 689

(88) *ibid* p.70

worldliness.⁽⁸⁹⁾ Individualism is precisely that from which we need to be saved.

Es gibt nicht in meinem Sein als Einzelner sondern nur aus meinem Sein als Einzelner, keine individualistische Erlösung aus dem Individualismus - das ist mitten im Kern Barths These gegenüber dem Pietismus.⁽⁹⁰⁾

In the second edition of Romans, influenced by Kierkegaard to reinstate the importance of the individual, Barth's attack was more generally on religion as man's attempt to justify himself before God, and specifically on Pietism in so far as it taught the 'Pharisaism of the tax-collector',⁽⁹¹⁾ that is, a way of justification before God by means of a negative mysticism.⁽⁹²⁾

Barth's criticisms are weighty, but it is noteworthy that in making them he is himself drawing upon a Pietist tradition to criticise Pietism, specifically that of the Swabian fathers (Bengel and Beck in particular).⁽⁹³⁾ Equally, there is a strong element of community emphasis in certain streams of Pietism, as for example Herrnhut. The impression gained therefore is that Barth is not necessarily criticising Pietism as an historic phenomenon but pietism as an inclination of the human heart and Pietism in so far as the criticism is true of it.⁽⁹⁴⁾

(89) *ibid* p.57

(90) *ibid* p.58

(91) *Ibid* p.114, p.180 CDIV/1 p.617

(92) *ibid* p.115

(93) *ibid* p,73

(94) *ibid* p.71 'Wir sind alle von Natur Pietisten'

(iii) Theorie and Praxis

For Barth the Pietist Stichwort 'Not only doctrine but also life' actually amounted to 'Not doctrine but life'.⁽⁹⁵⁾ Doctrine and life could not be divided or played off against each other. In this context Helmut Gollwitzer points out that when people followed Barth's theology but not his politics he questioned whether they had understood him aright, so closely were theory and practice to be linked.⁽⁹⁶⁾ The pietist devaluation of doctrine was not acceptable to one who had come to see the importance of the dogmatic task, and to devote his life to it. Neglect of dogmatics would inevitably lead, and in the case of Pietism did lead, to anthropocentric theology.

(iv) Narrowness

In line with the heritage of religious socialism Barth criticised the narrow way in which the scope of salvation was conceived among Pietists and their successors. Even in his later years when a more satisfactory relationship with Pietism had been achieved he disliked and disapproved of the tendency to draw clear boundaries between believers and unbelievers in a way which divided people into friends and enemies.⁽⁹⁷⁾ This frontier was evident when he met Billy Graham

(95) CD I/2 p.254

(96) In his preface to F.W. Marquardt Theologie und Sozialismus : Das Beispiel Karl Barth (Munich 1972) p.7. See also CD IV/2 p.196

(97) Busch Karl Barth p.445

in 1960. personally he liked him greatly but when he heard him preach thought that he preached not the gospel but law, the gospel at gun-point.⁽⁹⁸⁾ Barth's universalism, his consciousness that Christ had died for all men and therefore of the ontological basis which now existed for all men in him, caused him to be reluctant to distinguish too sharply between Christians and non-Christians. What distinguished Christians was that in them the work done on behalf of all had been noetically and ontically realised.⁽⁹⁹⁾

It is my opinion that at this point we touch on something very close to the heart of the difference between Barth and Pietism/evangelicalism for Barth's theology is crucially shaped by his 'conviction regarding the universal range of the Kingdom of God, the cosmic relevance of his Word, the solidarity of the church with the world under grace'.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ The simul iustus et peccator assumes great importance in Barth. The Christian remains peccator, even while he is iustus.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ The implications of this are considerable for the way in which the difference between Christians and non-Christians is to be regarded. There is a difference but it is the relative one of calling.⁽¹⁰²⁾ Because Christ has died for all and because there is now an 'open situation' of proclamation⁽¹⁰³⁾

(98) *ibid* p.446

(99) Godsey op cit pp 942

(100) T.F. Torrance Karl Barth: An Introduction to his early theology (1910-1931) p.136

(101) CD IV/1 p.596

(102) CD II/2 pp 345-6

(103) CD II/2 p.476

the Christian hopes for all and sees himself as the provisional representation in the church of the 'whole world of humanity justified in Him'.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ The effect of this is to obscure the difference between believers and unbelievers. Damnation and holiness are not two groups of people but two sides of one judgement on us all.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ The Christian lives simultaneously in Romans 7 and Romans 8. Being justified he remains a sinner. But the non-Christian though a sinner is nevertheless objectively justified in Christ. It is not a question of Nacheinander but Ineinander.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ There is therefore no place for narrowness and all the room in the world for a hopeful, world affirming attitude on behalf of Christians.

(e) Pietism, Karl Barth and Evangelicalism

Barth's critique of Pietism is trenchant. At the same time his admiration for Zinzendorf and his indebtedness to the Blumhardts indicate that Pietism is not beyond redemption and, indeed, in some of its variant forms has great affinity to Barth for he is its heir in certain respects. Modern evangelicalism is vulnerable to Barth's second and fourth criticisms to a greater degree than the first two. Religious subjectivism divorced from doctrinal concerns cannot be said to be characteristic of the bulk of evangelicalism which attends closely to doctrinal matters and tends towards suspicion of

(104) CD IV/1 p.643

(105) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.220

(106) *ibid* p.274 .

'enthusiasm'. Although clearly these criticisms can be made to apply to certain streams and tendencies evangelicalism tends to be a combination of the doctrinal concerns of the older orthodoxy and the experiential emphasis of pietism. However, individualism and a narrow understanding of the scope of salvation are underlying constrictions in most modern day evangelicalism to which the antidotes must be the theology of hope and an understanding of a proper biblical universalism rooted in the love of God and the universal scope of Christ's reconciling work.

Does Pietism have anything to say to Karl Barth? Pietism was a reaction against formality and doctrinal/intellectual oppression. The recovery of a true Christian subjectivity must be right provided it is balanced with a proper objectivism. Brunner accused Barth of travelling too far along the road of doctrinal objectivism and thereby losing touch with the Blumhardts.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ For Brunner the true balance lay beyond Pietism and Orthodoxy in biblical faith.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ It is hard to imagine Barth formally disagreeing with this but there is a tendency to lose the experience of salvation within the great objective realities of the faith. In discussing with the Methodists Barth was keen to affirm that the experience of salvation was Golgotha, 'in contrast to that my own experience is only a vessel'.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ But the fact that the existence of men is

(107) Brunner Truth as Encounter (London 1964) p.43

(108) *ibid*

(109) Busch Karl Barth p.447

ontologically defined in Christ should not cause us to lose sight of the ontic realisation of that definition. The awareness of the ontic dimension is both the strength and potential danger of Pietism/Evangelicalism. Barth himself was to recognise the validity of a true Christian subjectivism as a starting point for theology. A theology of the Holy Spirit, he ventured, may have been the best response to Schleiermacher or Bultmann and may be possible after the year AD 2000 when the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are at a greater distance.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ We have already met the criticism of Barth that the triumph of grace devalues the place of history and of human decision in the drama of salvation. Pietism rephrases the criticism and asserts that in Barth the Christ event eclipses the vital and necessary subjective realisation of salvation in those who repent and believe.

Whereas a consistent, if misinformed, criticism of Barth from British-American evangelicalism has been to accuse him of a subjective approach to the Word of God, the opposite criticism has arisen consistently from within German Pietism, that Barth is too objective and needs the subjective element provided by Pietism.⁽¹¹¹⁾

Concerning this it must be said:

(1) That Barth's theology is not purely objective but takes care to

(110) Godsey op cit pp 27-28

(111) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.192

ground the subjective realisation of revelation,⁽¹¹²⁾ election⁽¹¹³⁾ and reconciliation⁽¹¹⁴⁾ in the work of the Holy Spirit.

- (2) Barth places the weight on the objective in order to relativise the place of experience and to avoid the Pietist emphases that the objective becomes salvific through human subjectivity⁽¹¹⁵⁾ or that the kingdom of God can be realised through individualism.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ He can say 'yes' to awakenings, to assurance and to experience, to 'Christ in us', but not in a way which sees these as human acts or allows any room for man.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ His concern is to guard against any suggestion of synergism or Pelagianism.
- (3) What Pietism perceives as an attack on subjectivity was in fact an attack on the 'Pharisaism of the tax collector', that is the view that a person is justified before God by virtue of the experiences which he or she may have.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ Barth's intention is not to deny experience itself but in itself. Experience should be like the brush with which Grünewald painted his picture. We forget it, but need it.⁽¹¹⁹⁾

These points enable us to close the gap between Barth and Pietism.

(112) CD I/2 pp 203ff

(113) CD II/2 pp 410ff

(114) CD IV/1 643-650

(115) Busch Die Pietismuskritik p.194

(116) *ibid* p.77

(117) *ibid* p.111 See also CD IV/2 pp ix-x

(118) *ibid* p.180

(119) *ibid* p.273

There is still however a gap to be crossed and whereas Pietism-Evangelicalism has much to gain in dialogue with Barth it has also something to contribute, namely a modifying of his objectivism in a way which allows greater stress on personal faith and sanctification. The crisis of human decision which allows a salvation already achieved to come to its terminus ad quem is not to be minimised. Such a decision is both ethical and soteriological. The stress on personal, individual response leading to justification is not an aberration of Pietism, but a concern to be found in the Reformation and, indeed, in the apostle Paul. It is thus profoundly biblical in its nature. In guarding against the dangers of individualism it is necessary to save the baby from being thrown out with the bathwater. In hearing the truth of the Ineinander the challenge of the Nacheinander should not be avoided.

An Evangelicalism, modified by reflection on Barth's theology generally and his critique of Pietism in particular, may prove to be not greatly distant from the witness of the Blumhardts and able to promote both spiritual and theological renewal in the church.

Another way to approach this issue is to ask whether Barth's doctrine of the Holy Spirit is an adequate one. Barth never lived to complete his Dogmatics and his exposition of the work of the Holy Spirit and towards the end of his life seemed to show some doubt as

to whether perhaps a theology commencing with the Holy Spirit may have been a more adequate response to Schleiermacher and Bultmann. In guarding against the dangers of an inadequate Christology and of an anthropologically grounded theology, his christological concentration overshadows both his elucidations of the Spirit and of the Christian life, thus allowing the protective wall of the city to tower over its inhabitants.⁽¹²⁰⁾ This brings into focus the criticisms that Barth devalues both nature and anthropology. Barth's consistently worked out pneumatology is impressive but appears to limit the work of the Spirit to producing between God and humanity the reciprocity which he produces within the Trinity.⁽¹²¹⁾ An alternative to this pan-Christological approach is to reverse the relation between Christology and pneumatology so that the Spirit is not understood within the circle of Christology but Christ is understood to be the product of the work of the Holy Spirit, who is 'seen to play an indispensable part in the very occurrence of the incarnation and not to be totally subservient to the already accomplished Christ-event'.⁽¹²²⁾ If the Father is to be seen as Creator and the Son as Recreator then the Spirit should be seen as the Transcreator of the universe who works in all things to achieve the 'forward-pointing, eschatological task of bringing the Father and Son, along with all creation, to a not-yet achieved unity.'⁽¹²³⁾

(120) Philip J. Rosato SJ The Spirit as Lord: The Pneumatology of Karl Barth (Edinburgh 1981) p.181

(121) *ibid* p.182

(122) *ibid* pp 184-5. See also J.G.D.Dunn Jesus and the Spirit (London 1975) pp 41-92

(123) *ibid* pp 182-3

If the Spirit is viewed as the spearhead of a movement from the Father through the Son, and then through the Son forwards to the Father, then anthropological and eschatological dimensions of Christian revelation will not be overclouded by the doctrine of the Trinity but highlighted and intensified through theology, preaching and pastoral practice. Such a theology of the Spirit as Transcreator and Transformer does not detract from the work of the Father and the Son; rather the Spirit can be seen to carry on and bring to completion the "Father-Son-Spirit" movement to man through the "Spirit-Son-Father" movement with man toward the eschaton. (124)

Here, in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit understood in an expanded way yet without losing touch with Christology so that the danger of confusing the Holy Spirit with our Spirits is obviated, (125) is a basis for establishing the legitimate concerns of Pietism in relation to experience and sanctification. At the same time such a train of thought raises questions not only about the theology of Karl Barth but the whole of the Western theological tradition. The Protestant emphasis on the cross and the Catholic stress on nature need to be informed by the centrality of pneumatology characteristic of Orthodoxy.

The pneumatocentrism of the East which reacts incessantly to the West's Christocentrism, offers such richness to ecumenical dialogue on the person and work of the Holy Spirit that it provides a major corrective not only to Barth's

(124) *ibid* p.183

(125) A danger stressed by T.F. Torrance Theology in Reconstruction (London 1965) p.227

pneumatology but to that of the whole Western Church.⁽¹²⁶⁾

Addendum: Karl Barth and the charismatic movement.

(a) Introduction

In the light of the foregoing remarks the growth of interest in the work of the Holy Spirit in the West is extremely significant. Barth was probably unaware of the modern phenomenon known as the charismatic movement but an attempt to relate his theological contribution to it can be justified on several grounds.

- (1) Like Pietism, the charismatic movement is a renewal movement and bears many of the same characteristics particularly the stress on the inner life, the relativising of doctrine and ecumenism.⁽¹²⁷⁾ As with the Blumhardts the movement is familiar with healings and demonic encounters and, in terms of the restoration of spiritual gifts coincides with the aspirations of the elder Blumhardt. The movement is prone to the same temptations of subjectivity, individualism and egoism as was Pietism and therefore comes under the kind of criticism launched by Barth in that direction. Although it has issued in new acts of philanthropy, charismatic renewal does

(126) Rosato op cit p.186

(127) For a recent scholarly account of the origins and character of the movement in Great Britain up to 1965 See Peter Hocken Streams of Renewal (Exeter 1986) esp. pp 153-179

have an inward gravitational pull rather than an outward, world-affirming thrust.

- (2) Despite this the movement witnesses to a new consciousness of the Holy Spirit and of the human experience of God. As such it provides a possible starting point for the development of a theology from the doctrine of the Holy Spirit such as Barth himself envisaged as a response to Schleiermacher and Bultmann and such as has already been touched upon, a form of Christian subjectivity which preserves the priority and sovereignty of God and yet takes seriously the place of the ontic.
- (3) The charismatic movement takes many forms and the distinctive charismatic experiences, the 'baptism of the Spirit' and 'spiritual gifts' are variously theologized according to the received confessional framework within which they are known. It is now widely understood that various theological interpretations can be placed on the same phenomena, and that some interpretations are more adequate than others. It is not surprising that Barth's theology should also be regarded as a potential source for theological reflection on charismatic phenomena and this reflection has in part been attempted by a charismatic theologian well grounded in Barthian theology, Thomas A. Smail.⁽¹²⁸⁾

(128) See his books: Reflected Glory (London 1975) esp. pp 62-75 and The Forgotten Father (London 1980). Smail is also the translator of Barth's work Christ and Adam: Man and Humanity in Romans 5 (New York 1957)

(b) Charismatic possibilities in Barth's theology

Of the many possibilities which Barth's theology offers to the reconstruction of theology, several major strands are pertinent to the charismatic movement.

(1) Trinitarianism

Barth's theology is uncompromisingly trinitarian in conception and in structure . The Holy Spirit is presented as one who realises in man the possibility of revelation, as the Redeemer who actualises the work of the Reconciler. This enables the work of the Holy Spirit to find a clear context within the works of God ad intra and ad extra. He is the Spirit of communion. Charismatic renewal may be said to be about realised communion and therefore Barth offers to it a theological context for understanding the Spirit's work whereas charismatic renewal offers to Barth the possibility of bringing the Holy Spirit into greater prominence and greater 'individuality'.

(2) Christology

The centrality of Christ in Barth's theology accords well with the emphases of charismatic renewal, but particular possibilities are suggested by his understanding of the incarnation, of Christ as the Royal Man who assumes fallen flesh to redeem it and exalt it.

Christ's humanity is therefore to be seen in continuity with ours, the possibilities realised in him are potentially realisable in those who are born of the same Spirit. Since Christ is the first born among many brethren, the works of Jesus are not to be viewed as marks of divinity so much as marks of Spirit-filled humanity potentially reproducible in the lives of the regenerate by the same Spirit. Thus a continuity between the humanity of Jesus and his followers is established.

Barth's doctrine of the fallenness of Christ's humanity has parallels with a forerunner of the charismatic movement, the Presbyterian Edward Irving (1792-1834) whose teaching to this effect led directly to the remanifestation of the charismata in the nineteenth century.⁽¹²⁹⁾ It also led to his arraignment on charges of heresy, charges which were inaccurate and would not now be sustained.

(3) Actualism

Barth's sense of the nature of being as act gives to his theology a dynamic quality which lifts it beyond the static conceptions of older theology. This is most fully developed in CD IV although it is present from the beginning in his concept of the Word of God. This

(129) See CD I/2 p.154. See also Gordon Strachan The Pentecostal Theology of Edward Irving (London 1973). H.R. MacKintosh The Person of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh 1913) pp 276-278

is rich ground for a charismatic theology which is anxious to express the eventfulness of the Holy Spirit's coming and the immediacy of his manifestation in spiritual gifts. Whereas Pentecostal theology has conceived of the work of the Spirit in defined and static categories yielding a theology which suggests that the Spirit and his gifts are 'owned' by the believer, Barth's thought suggests a direction whereby the Holy Spirit may be conceived as continually being truly and sovereignly given but never 'possessed'. A similar impulse to this can be discovered in Barth's words, in the context of the place of symbols in worship, 'what we need is the Holy Spirit and His gifts'.(130)

(4) Objectivism

The immediacy of the Spirit's work needs to be balanced with the sense of secure and objective realities which are not subject to man's subjectivity. At this point Barth's emphasis on the objective and universal reality of reconciliation serves the cause well.

(c) Corrective possibilities in Barth's theology

The temptation of any theology which stresses the inner life of spiritual experience is well exposed by Barth's critique of Pietism. The tendency towards a world-ignoring inward religion which becomes

(130) Godsey op cit p.23

a form of spiritual egoism is present in the charismatic movement and needs to be corrected by the kind of critique which Barth offers. On the other hand, a theology which denies or downgrades the crucial importance of the inner life of the Spirit not only cuts itself off from the source of its own life but also deprives the world of a primary agent of social change. The corrective value of Barth's theology lies in its ability to lift the theology of the Holy Spirit to a more profound plane than is usually the case in charismatic theology and its potential for channelling life-giving experience of God out of the narrow channels of the Christian community into the life of the broader community which also has been reconciled to God and needs to be viewed in this light. The witness of the charismatic movement in relation to the theology of Barth is that it further stresses the need for a development of the theology of the Holy Spirit which is neither anthropologically based nor anthropologically wanting as in Barth it tends to be.⁽¹³¹⁾

(131) Rosato op cit p.189

IV The Concept of Nothingness

The problem of evil constitutes a major difficulty for those who believe in the love and omnipotence of God. According to Berkouwer, Barth's contribution to this debate poses the student of his work with one of the most difficult and involved areas of his work.⁽¹⁾ The justification for choosing to focus on this topic, subsumed in his work under the title of 'nothingness', lies in the potential of this theme to illuminate the interface between Barth and evangelicalism in relation to a specific and significant topic in contrast to the more general approach of previous chapters. The question of the nature and origin of evil is one in association with which evangelicalism would almost uniformly wish to assert the objective reality of the powers of darkness in accordance with the biblical witness and this not merely as of some impersonal force of evil but of a personal, intelligent adversary of God.⁽²⁾ Such an issue raises the question of how seriously and how literally the Bible is to be taken as the source and criterion of theology. Because belief in a demonic dimension in the biblical sense does not find easy acceptance in a post-Enlightenment, critical world it is tempting to demythologize the biblical world-view at this point.

(1) Berkouwer op cit p.69

(2) See for instance Frederick S Leahy Satan Cast Out (Edinburgh 1975) p.11, Michael B. Green I Believe in Satan's Downfall (London 1981) pp 15-16, Louis Berkhof Systematic Theology (London 1958) pp 148-149, Charles Hodge Systematic Theology Vol. 1 (London 1960) pp 643-648

Precisely here is a testpoint concerning fidelity to the Word of God. Belief in sinister powers permeates the gospels, so much so that the New Testament is not really intelligible apart from its 'demonic presuppositions'.⁽³⁾ Equally, early Christian understanding of the atonement was dominated by the emphasis on Christ's victory over the powers of evil, even if it was often crudely expressed and understood.⁽⁴⁾ We are obliged, if we wish to do justice to the Bible, either to accept the New Testament world view at this point or to rework it in such a way as to place it in a new context while seeking to maintain continuity with it.⁽⁵⁾ The latter course, however runs the risk of changing the nature of Christ's redeeming work by radically shifting the analysis of the enslavement which afflicts us. It is characteristic of Barth that the willingness to listen to Scripture and draw our theology from it is stressed precisely at that point where it is likely to prove most offensive to modern thought.⁽⁶⁾

(a) The Blumhardt Inheritance

We have already had cause to note the influence of the Blumhardts upon Barth and particularly his contact with Christoph Blumhardt. The abiding significance of this influence is reflected in Barth's

(3) J.S. Whale Victor and Victim (Cambridge 1960) p.27

(4) Gustav Aulen Christus Victor (London 1931) pp 20-23

(5) As is attempted for instance in: John Macquarrie Principles of Christian Theology (London 1966) pp 286-290

(6) CD III/3 p.412

predilection for the phrase 'Jesus is Victor', which he uses extensively.⁽⁷⁾ The incident out of which this declaration came must be considered one of the most unusual theological sources there is since 'the voice of the devil is an unexpected source for modern theology'.⁽⁸⁾ The elder Blumhardt, Johann Christoph, was engaged in a struggle for two years which bore every resemblance to demon possession as described in the New Testament. The victim was Gottliebin Dittus, a parishioner, whose deliverance and healing Blumhardt was later to describe in his Synod report.⁽⁹⁾ After many horrific and difficult experiences Gottliebin was set free on 28th December 1843 at which time the words 'Jesus is Victor' were uttered not by Gottliebin but by her sister, who for a time had become implicated in the affair and not as a saying of her own but as the despairing shriek of a demonic power.⁽¹⁰⁾ Years later Bultmann was to find this tale preposterous. 'No one can use the electric light and the radio or the discoveries of modern medicine and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles'.⁽¹¹⁾ Barth's reponse was different. For him the incident highlighted the reality of the conflict in which we are

(7) CD IV/3:1 pp 168f See also William Nicholls Systematic and Philosophical Theology (London 1969) p.78

(8) James Bentley 'Christoph Blumhardt. Preacher of Hope' in Theology 78 (1975) p.578

(9) Blumhardt's Battle. A Conflict with Satan Translated by Frank S. Boshold (New York 1920) cp CD IV/3:1 pp 168-171

(10) Blumhardt's Battle p.56

(11) Bentley op cit p.578 H.W. Bartsch (ed) Kerygma and Myth (London 1953) p.5

involved.⁽¹²⁾ It was a sign of the power of the Kingdom of God. 'The appearance of Jesus raises not only a question of attitude but a question of power'.⁽¹³⁾

Is it a tolerable theological notion that two thousand years ago the glory of God was proclaimed over the darkness by signs and wonders, while today patient resignation in the power of darkness is to be the last word? For Blumhardt this was intolerable. Jesus Christ the same, yesterday and today. So he takes up the struggle with need in the name of Jesus.⁽¹⁴⁾

We will have opportunity to discuss the Blumhardts' influence on Barth as we progress through this chapter. For the moment it is sufficient to note that he is possessed of a strong sense of the conflict between God and nothingness and of the total victory of Christ over that adversary.

(b) Nothingness

(1) The term 'nothingness' and our knowledge of the subject.

When Barth uses the term 'nothingness' he freely indicates that it is a term he has fashioned himself and is not to be found in the Bible. As such it is to be taken cum grano salis.⁽¹⁵⁾ It is not

(12) CD IV/3:1 p.171

(13) Karl Barth Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century (London 1972) p.649

(14) *ibid*

(15) CD IV 3/1 p.178

without value, however, as an attempt to express briefly, tersely and strongly insights which have been won from the Bible.⁽¹⁶⁾ It is not his intention to suggest that evil does not exist, but that it exists in negativity, repudiated by God, without any right to exist, without any value or positive strength. Its nature is perversion.⁽¹⁷⁾ Our source of knowledge of nothingness is the same as the source of all Christian knowledge, Jesus Christ, although now in a different sense in that it is as the adversary of Christ that it is made known, as that which is opposed primarily and supremely to God himself and yet is comprehended, envisaged and controlled by him.⁽¹⁸⁾ Christ's incarnation is God's answer to the assault by nothingness upon his creatures.⁽¹⁹⁾ By this we perceive that it is not something decreed or posited by God himself. It is the reality which opposes and resists God and which is defeated at the cross by him as the adversary with which he alone can cope.⁽²⁰⁾ It takes form as real death, real devil, real hell and, in its most important form, the real sin of man.⁽²¹⁾ It is in Christ alone that we see ourselves as sinners because it is here that we see God's opposition to nothingness.⁽²²⁾ Yet nothingness is not exhausted in sin.⁽²³⁾

(16) *ibid*

(17) *ibid*

(18) CD III/3 p.302

(19) *ibid*

(20) *ibid* p.305

(21) *ibid*

(22) *ibid* p.307

(23) *ibid* p.310

In Him, i.e. in contradistinction to Him, nothingness is exposed in its entirety as the adversary which can destroy both body and soul in hell, as the evil one which is also the destructive factor of evil and death that stands in sinister conflict against the creature and its creator, not merely as an idea which man may conceive and to which he can and does give allegiance but as the power which invades and subjugates and carries him away captive, so that he is wholly and utterly lost in the face of it.⁽²⁴⁾

Barth reiterates his Christological approach when he replies in CD IV/3:1 to Berkouwer. Berkouwer criticised Barth for making the a priori concept of the triumph of grace the overarching theme of his theology and thereby reducing the significance of the historical process. In Barth's theology the triumph of grace was already settled in the act of creation, according to Berkouwer, needing only to be announced in history.⁽²⁵⁾ Barth demonstrates in his reply how his position on nothingness is directly deduced a posteriori from the self-disclosure of Jesus Christ.

It is not as speculation, but a description which even the veriest child can understand, simply to say of evil in the first instance that it is what God does not will. But to say this is also to say that it is something which He never did nor could will, nor ever will nor can. It is thus that evil is characterised, judged and condemned in the self disclosure of the living person of Jesus Christ. As opposition to God, it is that which is simply opposed to His will, and from eternity, in time and to all eternity negated, rejected, condemned and excluded by His will.⁽²⁶⁾

(24) *ibid* p.312

(25) Berkouwer op cit p.376

(26) CD IV/3:1 p.177

In relation to nothingness Barth therefore follows his declared method of proceeding from the particular to the general.

(2) The origin and nature of nothingness

The term nothingness serves to describe the general category of evil. Where does evil originate in God's universe? Here Barth confronts the problem of evil but is unwilling to take refuge in the traditional free-will defence. If all things have their origin in the will of God and God is altogether good where does evil originate? Barth rejects the concept of pre-mundane angelic fall as 'one of the bad dreams of the older dogmatics'.⁽²⁷⁾ Angels, in Barth's understanding, do not and cannot fall. The demons have never been in heaven. They merely act as if they had. The devil was never an angel but a liar and a murderer from the beginning.⁽²⁸⁾ The verses which seem to point in the direction of an angelic fall are too uncertain and obscure to build upon.⁽²⁹⁾ Nothingness is an alien factor which can be attributed neither to the positive will and work of God nor to the activity of the creature.⁽³⁰⁾ Yet neither can it exist independently of the will of God since this would be to deny his Lordship.⁽³¹⁾ We are posed here with a genuine difficulty of

(27) CD III/3 p.531

(28) *ibid*

(29) *ibid* p.530 with reference to Isaiah 14:12, Genesis 6:1-14, Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4.

(30) CD III/3 p.292

(31) *ibid*

understanding but this difficulty itself is to be attributed to nothingness. It is the broken nature of our relationship with God caused by nothingness that is reflected in the brokenness of all theological thought and utterance and is particularly evident at this point.⁽³²⁾ The task before us must be to report what is understood from the object of theology, which means that the break itself will be reproduced in our knowledge and its representation.⁽³³⁾

On this basis Barth seeks to bring understanding to bear on faith. Nothingness is real. It is not nothing and yet it has nothing in common with God or his creatures. It must therefore exist in a third way peculiar to itself. In this sense only, nothingness 'is'.⁽³⁴⁾ As such the nature of nothingness cannot be known to men but is only known as it is as God is revealed to man as being opposed to it.⁽³⁵⁾ Nothingness exists negatively by virtue of God's elective and creative activity. It is that to which God says No by virtue of his elective Yes. It is that which God rejects, opposes, negates and dismisses in the act of creation.⁽³⁶⁾ It therefore exists by the will of God, but only negatively so, since it is not itself willed by God. It exists on God's left hand since even on his left hand God's activity is powerful.⁽³⁷⁾

(32) *ibid* pp 293-4

(33) *ibid* p.295

(34) *ibid* p.349

(35) *ibid* p.350

(36) *ibid* pp 351-352

(37) *ibid*

Nothingness is that which God does not will. It lives only by the fact that it is that which God does not will. But it does live by this fact. For not only what God wills, but what He does not will, is potent, and must have a real correspondence. What really corresponds to that which God does not will is nothingness.⁽³⁸⁾

The divine non-willing is the ground of the existence of nothingness. It is neither willed by him as though it were a creature nor autonomously existent independent of God. Nor is it a mere semblance. It is evil, an ontic peculiarity.⁽³⁹⁾ In that it is the product of God's non-willing, nothingness is described by Barth as the result of God's opus alienum, as that which is the object of God's jealousy, wrath and judgement, lacking God's grace because it refuses and resists it.⁽⁴⁰⁾ Nothingness is irredeemably evil since it cannot be the object of God's omnipotence in any other way.⁽⁴¹⁾ Yet although not willed by God it does not fall outside the sphere of his will but depends upon it.

Within this sphere, which is itself the only sphere of being, God wills everything. God's willing something can therefore mean that He loves, affirms and confirms it, that He creates, upholds and promotes it out of the fulness of His life. His willing it can also mean that in virtue of the same love He hates, disavows, rejects and opposes it as that which withstands and lacks and denies what is loved, affirmed and confirmed by Him and created, upheld and promoted by him. He still wills it in the sense that He takes it seriously in this

(38) *ibid* p.352

(39) *ibid* p.353

(40) *ibid*

(41) CD II/1 p.544

way and takes up this position over against it. He wills it in so far as He gives it this space, position and function. He does not do so as its author, recognizing it as His creature, approving and confirming and vindicating it. On the contrary He wills it as He denies it His authorship, as He refuses it any standing before Him or right or blessing or promise, as He places it under His prohibition and curse and treats it as that from which he wishes to redeem and liberate His creation. In this way, then, in His turning away from it, He wills what He disavows. It cannot exist without Him. It too is by Him, and is under His control and government.⁽⁴²⁾

Nothingness is an impossible possibility. Paradoxically and absurdly it exists, but does so only per nefas as a revolt which has no positive basis. It has no raison d'être and therefore is baffling to us, inexplicable.⁽⁴³⁾ It is an ontological impossibility and conforms to no law, a reality without possibility.⁽⁴⁴⁾

Exegetically, Barth roots his case in the chaos of Genesis 1:2, the tohu wa-bohu over which the Word of God had not been uttered.⁽⁴⁵⁾ This is the possibility which God ignored and despised in his creative work, the lower sphere which God passed by without a halt and declared to be obsolete by what He chose and accomplished by his Word.⁽⁴⁶⁾ It is the sphere of chaos which behind God's back has assumed the self-contradictory character of reality.⁽⁴⁷⁾

(42) CD II/1 pp 556-7

(43) CD IV/3:1 p.178. CD III/3 p.354

(44) Godsey op cit p.72. CD III/3 p.354

(45) CD III/1 p.108

(46) *ibid*

(47) *ibid*

(3) The reality of nothingness

It is sufficiently clear in what has already been reported that despite its ontological impossibility Barth expresses no doubt as to the reality of nothingness. There is real evil and real death as well as real sin, a real hell and a real devil with his Legions.⁽⁴⁸⁾ The term 'nothingness' is designed not to deny but to characterise the existence of evil.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Nothingness is not nothing⁽⁵⁰⁾ although its nature is not accesible to the creature as an object of natural knowledge.⁽⁵¹⁾ It is only to be known as the object of God's holy activity, as that which is rejected by virtue of his election.⁽⁵²⁾

Under this section it is our intention to include Barth's discussion of the demonic. Although he himself deals with this topic in connection with angelology and not under his section on the reality of nothingness, it suits our purpose to pursue this area in seeking to understand the form which nothingness takes. Despite the fact that Barth denies any common ground or origin between angels and demons he deals with them together because of the 'primitive and fatal association' which has brought them together in traditional theology.⁽⁵³⁾ His treatment of angels is a novel and creative

(48) CD III/3 p.310

(49) CD IV/3:1 pp 177-8

(50) CD III/3 p.349

(51) *ibid* p.350

(52) *ibid* p.351

(53) CD III/3 p.519

attempt to restore to them 'permanent residence visas' in Christian theology.⁽⁵⁴⁾ His intention appears to be to conceive of angels actualistically in such a way as to see them, not as autonomous subjects to be made the theme of independent discussion but as marginal figures.⁽⁵⁵⁾ They are not substitutes for God but witnesses of his activity, subsidiary characters whose function is wholly and exemplarily that of service.⁽⁵⁶⁾ In the realm of angels we are once more in the realm of saga and divinatory imagination.⁽⁵⁷⁾ They represent the mystery of biblical history.⁽⁵⁸⁾ Our understanding of them must be culled exclusively from scripture, unlike Thomas Aquinas who looked in the directions of both theology and philosophy at this point and saw straight in neither.⁽⁵⁹⁾ If we look to Scripture we find a lack of information on much that we would want to know, including the supposed common origin of angels and demons and their subsequent division.⁽⁶⁰⁾ The Bible indicates that angels exist only in the movement from God to man, they exist only incidentally with God and man in the history between them.⁽⁶¹⁾ Since the kingdom of heaven is a movement from heaven to earth we must also say that in heaven there is a concentrated multiplicity, an organisation which has the character of simplicity and

(54) Busch Karl Barth p.365 CD III/3 p.416

(55) CD III/3 p.371

(56) *ibid* p.372

(57) *ibid* p.374

(58) *ibid* p.376

(59) *ibid* pp 403-4

(60) *ibid* p.410

(61) *ibid* p.411

individuality.⁽⁶²⁾ This heavenly but creaturely sphere is the angelic realm. The heavenly entourage of the God who acts from heaven to earth is a concretely operative heavenly collective of concretely operative heavenly individual beings.⁽⁶³⁾ The service of angels is to precede, accompany, surround and follow the coming kingdom of God. This is all we know of them.⁽⁶⁴⁾ They observe the will of God and stand at his disposal as his original witnesses.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Angels 'slip between our fingers'⁽⁶⁶⁾ because their function is to be God's primary, authentic, constant, inflexible and infallible witnesses. They are free from any personal desires for power or lordship⁽⁶⁷⁾ and therefore there can be no question of any special autonomous experience of angels in and for themselves.⁽⁶⁸⁾ They are exclusively where God is.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Lordship and glory belong to God alone, but this lordship and glory is expressed through the ministry of angels.⁽⁷⁰⁾ While earthly creatures belong to God, they may also belong to themselves. This is not true of the heavenly host who belong fully to God and in no sense to themselves.⁽⁷¹⁾ This apparent ontological weakness⁽⁷²⁾ enables them to be pure, transparent

(62) *ibid* pp 448, 450

(63) *ibid* p.451

(64) *ibid*

(65) *ibid* p.452

(66) *ibid* p.456

(67) *ibid* p.463

(68) *ibid* p.477

(69) *ibid*

(70) *ibid* p.479

(71) *ibid* p.480

(72) *ibid* p.484

witnesses.⁽⁷³⁾ With angels, the possibility of deviation does not arise since their creaturely freedom is identical with their obedience.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Their task is not to mediate God, since God mediates himself and needs no assistance.⁽⁷⁵⁾ But where God is present angels will be present as his servants and crown witnesses.⁽⁷⁶⁾

Barth's discussion of angels provides the context for his discussion of demons but only in the sense that demons are the opponents of the ambassadors of God.⁽⁷⁷⁾ The demons are not the poor or disreputable relations of angels.⁽⁷⁸⁾ God and the devil, demons and angels are not to be spoken of in the same breath, they have no common denominator and do not grow from a common root.⁽⁷⁹⁾ Barth's understanding of angels does not allow of the possibility of an angelic fall. The only way devils and demons can be bracketed together is in terms of radical conflict.⁽⁸⁰⁾ Barth's intention is not to linger on this distasteful, sinister subject but to cast 'a momentary glance' at demons. Demons thrive on attention and to contemplate them too intensely raises the imminent danger that we too may become a little demonic. A quick sharp glance is therefore, all that is necessary and legitimate.⁽⁸¹⁾ The demonic sphere, like

(73) *ibid* p.488

(74) *ibid* p.493

(75) *ibid* pp 494-495

(76) *ibid* p.499

(77) *ibid* p.519

(78) *ibid* p.520

(79) *ibid*

(80) *ibid*

(81) *ibid* p.519

the angelic sphere, is derived from God, although in a wholly different way.⁽⁸²⁾ God's hostility to the demonic is unremitting and his sovereignty over it is complete.⁽⁸³⁾ Its final overthrow is assured. We cannot believe in demons in the same way we believe in God and the angels. We cannot ignore the demons but must engage in an act of radical unbelief, in an act of theological exorcism, a demythologisation not in the Bultmannian sense, but in the sense that any positive relationship to them is denied.⁽⁸⁴⁾ Fear of God and the devil are mutually exclusive.⁽⁸⁵⁾ The devil and demons have their origin in nothingness and are themselves always nothingness. They exist as a kingdom, never in repose, always on the march invading and attacking.⁽⁸⁶⁾ As a kingdom there is some similarity to the kingdom of heaven, giving rise to the impulse to co-ordinate the two kingdoms.⁽⁸⁷⁾ But any similarity is based on the nature of nothingness as falsehood, one form of which is the claim by the demons to be angels, another of which is its representation of itself as mere appearance with no genuine reality.⁽⁸⁸⁾ The demonic kingdom is similar to the kingdom of heaven because it is all a mimicry.⁽⁸⁹⁾ In its 'dreadful fifth or sixth dimension of existence' the demonic realm is constantly active anywhere and everywhere 'like

(82) *ibid* p.520-21

(83) *ibid*

(84) *ibid*

(85) *ibid* p.522

(86) *ibid* p.523

(87) *ibid* p.524

(88) *ibid* p.525

(89) *ibid* p.527

the tentacles of an octopus'.⁽⁹⁰⁾ Its power is only that of falsehood but as falsehood it is really powerful.⁽⁹¹⁾ Only the truth of God can expose this falsehood⁽⁹²⁾ and so the church must be 'not a community and Christendom believing in demons but opposing to them in faith that resolute disbelief',⁽⁹³⁾ engaging in an 'act of unbelief which is grounded in faith'.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Barth concludes this section with a brief discussion of the notion of a fall of angels in which he asserts that the biblical texts which suggest a fall of angels are too obscure and uncertain to push us in this direction. The demons have never been in heaven. They merely act as if they had. True and orderly angels do not and cannot fall. The devil was never an angel but a murderer from the beginning and according to John 8:44 a liar and the father of lies.⁽⁹⁵⁾ It is clear however that whatever doubts Barth may cast upon the traditional idea of an angelic fall, he treats the question of the reality of nothingness and of the demonic with the utmost seriousness.

(4) The Shadow

Early in his discussion of nothingness, Barth seeks to remove a misconception from the discussion, namely the serious confusion

(90) *ibid* pp 527-528

(91) *ibid* p.528

(92) *ibid* p.529

(93) *ibid* p.530

(94) *ibid* p.521

(95) *ibid* pp 530-31

which arises when nothingness is identified with what he calls 'the shadow'.⁽⁹⁶⁾ Creatively, existence involves both negative and positive aspects.⁽⁹⁷⁾ Yet the negative aspect of creation is not to be identified with nothingness but exists as part of God's good creation,⁽⁹⁸⁾ although it also functions as a reminder of the threat and corruption which continually confronts creation as it exists on the frontier of nothingness.⁽⁹⁹⁾ The Shadow across creaturely existence includes 'hours, days and years both bright and dark, success and failure, laughter and tears, growth and age, gain and loss, birth and sooner or later its inevitable corollary, death'.⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ The essential goodness of the shadow is clear from the fact that in Christ God has made himself the subject of both aspects of creaturely existence and the parousia will make clear that 'everything created was very good and supremely glorious'.⁽¹⁰¹⁾ In the meantime, the role of the Shadow is to make clear that creatures are simultaneously worthy of their creator and dependent upon him.⁽¹⁰²⁾ The Shadow does not jeopardise the nature of the creation as very good, since God's judgement of the creation as such is a statement that the creation as it is is an appropriate sphere of the divine activity, with man at its heart.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Creaturely being

(96) CD III/3 pp 295-302

(97) *ibid* p.295

(98) *ibid* p.296

(99) *ibid*

(100) *ibid* p.297

(101) *ibid* p.296, CD III/1 p.377

(102) CD III/1 p.378, CD III/3 p.296

(103) CD III/1 p.370

contains two aspects, a Yes and a No, a contradiction, joy and misery, but both have their foundation in the will of God⁽¹⁰⁴⁾ and are reflections of the majesty and lowliness of God himself.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ As such both aspects of creation are to be embraced as good.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ The confusion comes when nothingness uses the shadow as an alibi.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Assuming the Shadow to be nothingness, we ascribe to nothingness a certain goodness and so render it innocuous and tolerable.⁽¹⁰⁸⁾ Nothingness is given a positive relationship to God and the enemy goes unrecognised.⁽¹⁰⁹⁾ In this very act of confusion the presence and nature of nothingness is to be perceived.⁽¹¹⁰⁾ To avoid the misconception it is necessary to abandon our prejudice against the negative side, to confess that even this God has planned and made well.⁽¹¹¹⁾

(5) The victory over nothingness

Nothingness exists as a threat which, if God did not will to preserve the creature, would break in from all sides.⁽¹¹²⁾ Sin is for man an ontological impossibility. Evil does not lie in the

(104) *ibid* p.376

(105) *ibid* p.377

(106) *ibid*

(107) CD III/3 p.299

(108) *ibid* p.300

(109) *ibid* p.301

(110) *ibid*

(111) *ibid*

(112) Dogmatics in Outline p.56

possibilities of the God-created creature since man's freedom is a freedom for obedience, not a freedom which stands neutrally between good and evil.⁽¹¹³⁾ To make a different use of this freedom is to fall into nothingness.⁽¹¹⁴⁾ By the misuse of his freedom man can look back to the past and conjure up the shadow of the chaos rendering it present and future.⁽¹¹⁵⁾ In doing this man loves what God has hated and draws upon himself the wrath instead of the love of God the Creator. The impossible possibility of sin gives access to nothingness to the creation.⁽¹¹⁶⁾ But God will not allow the cosmos to be bewitched, demonised or totally destroyed.⁽¹¹⁷⁾ Man is no match for nothingness. He cannot stand in the face of temptation.⁽¹¹⁸⁾ To resist nothingness apart from the grace of God can lead only to disastrous defeat. Man, who has no capacity for nothingness, has fallen under the insinuation, temptation and power of nothingness by seeking to resist it in his own strength.⁽¹¹⁹⁾ But the free grace of God is revealed in that God has made his own the cause of the creature and was prepared to be offended and humiliated, attacked and injured by nothingness for the sake of the creature.⁽¹²⁰⁾ In Jesus, God puts at the head and in the place of other men the one who has the same power as himself to reject

(113) *ibid*

(114) *ibid* p.57

(115) CD III/1 109

(116) *ibid*

(117) *ibid*

(118) CD II/2 p.122

(119) CD III/3 p.256

(120) CD III/3 pp 256-7

Satan.⁽¹²¹⁾ To him God transfers the rejection, wrath and death under which all men lie and he is appointed to check and defeat Satan on their own behalf.⁽¹²²⁾ Nothingness, the adversary of God, is judged, refuted and done away with by God in Christ.⁽¹²³⁾ This is more than the defeat of the principle of evil by the principle of good. It is the personal, specific and concrete victory of the living Jesus Christ.⁽¹²⁴⁾ By this it is shown that from the very outset, despite the heat of the battle, nothingness has been rejected, negated and excluded by God's will.⁽¹²⁵⁾ Jesus is Victor from the very outset.⁽¹²⁶⁾ This is the only true perspective on the fact of nothingness.⁽¹²⁷⁾

(6) The continuing power of nothingness

As a routed enemy, nothingness possesses no true or ultimate power but only a dangerous semblance of them.⁽¹²⁸⁾ In the light of Jesus Christ it has no objective existence but continues only because of our blinded eyes.⁽¹²⁹⁾ It is now only an echo or shadow of what it once was. It may still have standing and assume significance to the

(121) CD II/2 p.123

(122) *ibid*

(123) CD III/3 p.126

(124) CD IV/3:1 p.173

(125) *ibid* p.177

(126) *ibid* p.173

(127) CD III/3 p.366

(128) *ibid* p.367

(129) CD III/3 p.363

extent that the final revelation of its destruction has yet to come but can do so only under the decree of God. What it now is and does it can be and do only under the hand of God by permission.⁽¹³⁰⁾ The defeated, captured and mastered enemy of God has become his servant, although a strange servant. God takes care that even this servant must work together for good to them that love him.⁽¹³¹⁾ Thus the task of those who desire to live in the obedience of faith is to regard nothingness as finally destroyed and to make a beginning in remembrance of the One who has destroyed it.⁽¹³²⁾ In this there is contained an alternative theodicy. The problem of evil is not to be solved by philosophical abstraction but by attention to the act of salvation in Jesus Christ where the question of the alien factor of evil is seriously raised and seriously answered.⁽¹³³⁾ Nothingness can be understood only in retrospect of the cross and parousia which achieve and manifest its refutation. In the light of this we see that nothingness has no ultimate power and, enemy of God that it is, is forced to serve God until its day is done.⁽¹³⁴⁾

(c) Critique

Having summarised Barth's concepts we turn to an attempt at critique which will give attention successively to strengths and weaknesses.

(130) *ibid* p.367

(131) *ibid* pp 367-8

(132) *ibid* p.364

(133) CD III/3 p.366

(134) *ibid* pp 366-368

(1) Strengths

(i) Originality

There can be no doubt of the originality and imagination behind Barth's work. Recognising the need to give some understanding of evil as pre-existing man's sin he has sought to develop a position which compromises neither the will nor the goodness of God. Nothingness exists by the will of God in a negative way as the reality which he rejects in his act of election. God is therefore, neither the author of evil nor helpless in the face of it since evil exists by and in the sphere of the will of God. Here is a new formulation of the origin of evil. In his concepts of nothingness, the treatment of angels and demons, Barth displays great vigour and energy of thought, avoiding both monism and dualism while seeking to be true to the realities of existence and of revelation.

(ii) The objectivity of evil

Although he has no time for the concept of a pre-mundane angelic fall and regards this as a bad dogmatic dream, it appears that Barth does not wish to deny the reality of the devil and demons. His only concern for demythologisation is in denying the self-importance of demons rather than their irrelevance as relics of a past world view.

His treatment of demons is curious in that it appears to be not only the product of thought but of personal experience at some level. Where does he draw his awareness from that too intense reflection on the demons can render us a little demonic,⁽¹³⁵⁾ or that the demons would like to think that they once were in heaven?⁽¹³⁶⁾ Here there is an instinct at work, a peculiar insight which is more than the product of reflection and possibly results from the influence of the Blumhardts allied with direct involvement in a turbulent and conflict ridden epoch of world history in which irrationality and horror have played a more than usually prominent part.⁽¹³⁷⁾ Barth takes seriously the reality of evil:

In every aspect of human life, in politics, in personal relationships, as sin, falsehood, lust for power, the financial exploitation of sex, as ugliness, natural calamity, accident, cruelty and death, there is evidence of something which Barth is at pains to describe, something which might be called primal or radical evil which is prior to original sin. Indeed the problem of the Nichtige is one of the ultimate problems of existence and is antecedent to that of original sin because the latter is only the manifestation of it on the human level.⁽¹³⁸⁾

Whether or not the concept of 'nothingness' adequately safeguards the reality of evil is a point to which we shall return.

(135) CD III/3 p.519

(136) *ibid* p.531

(137) Godsey *op cit* p.72, A.B. Come *op cit* p.218

(138) Geraint Vaughan Jones "God and Negation." An Exposition of Karl Barth's Kirchliche Dogmatik III/3 para 50 'Gott und das Nichtige' in Scottish Journal of Theology Vol.7 1954 pp 242-3

(iii) The negativity of evil

Barth's evident contempt for evil and the demonic is reflected in his choice of words. Although idiosyncratic there is good reason for the use of the word 'nothingness'. By this is expressed the non-ontology of evil. Evil has no being of its own. It 'is' but 'is' only improperly in a way not planned or purposed by God as that which is abhorred and abhorrent. Existing by negation it can only exist parasitically, as the privatio boni, seeking to draw its energy from that which exists authentically by the will of God. But the word 'nothingness' also takes account of the negation of the principle of negation. Seen in true perspective only from the cross and parousia evil has been rendered and is nothing. Barth's concern appears to be how we may find wholesome and proper ways of speaking of evil to awaken

the Easter joy that even in all its power as sin and evil it is no more than the nothingness which as such is already judged in Jesus Christ and can therefore injure but no longer kill or destroy.⁽¹³⁹⁾

There is the danger either of an uneasy, bleak and sceptical overestimating of its power in relation to God, or of an easy, comfortable and dogmatic underestimation of its power in relation to us. How are we to avoid both an easy pessimism on the one side and a no less easy optimism on the other? How are we to think and speak of God's lordship even over nothingness with the necessary confidence and yet also the required humility, the required humility and yet also the necessary confidence?⁽¹⁴⁰⁾

(139) CD III/3 p.293

(140) *ibid*

Once the objective existence of evil powers is conceded, it becomes vital to find wholesome ways of thinking and speaking of them for precisely the reasons Barth indicates. His understanding of a radical disbelief, a disbelief rooted in belief is profound if it is accepted that the power of a spiritual focus increases in proportion to the amount of faith invested in it. The devil and his demons are not a proper object of faith for this very reason. This problem is intensified when it takes the nature of the devil as falsehood into account. Demons may deceive us by exaggerating or concealing their power.

There is alternation in this matter. If we ignore demons, they deceive us by concealing their power until we are again constrained to respect and fear them as powers. If we absolutise them, respecting and fearing them as true powers, they have deceived us by concealing their character as falsehood, and it will be only a little while before we try to ignore and are thus deceived by them again.⁽¹⁴¹⁾

In using the word 'nothingness' Barth is wrestling with this problem and ultimately urging that all that constitutes nothingness be seen from the perspective of 'Jesus is Victor'. It is only through Christ that true knowledge of this realm can come to us.

(iv) The Shadow

Barth's concept of the shadowside of creation is a helpful and

(141) CD III/3 pp 526-7

illuminating concept which helps us to distinguish between negative and difficult experiences which are nevertheless wholly good in the long term and that which is irreversibly and completely evil. The two must not be confused since once the actual goodness of the shadowside begins to emerge it may lead us to minimize the evilness of evil in the assumption that evil exists by the divine purpose for a beneficent purpose. God thus becomes the actual, although benevolent, author of evil. To do this is to underestimate the horror of evil, which is precisely Barth's criticism of the optimism of Leibniz. The wolf not only lies down with the lamb but actually becomes one.⁽¹⁴²⁾ Barth's concept allows room for an experience of imperfection and impermanence which is part of the world as envisaged by God. It is not clear precisely what he would consider as belonging to the shadowside but it is possible that he includes within this, what is traditionally known as 'metaphysical evil'.⁽¹⁴³⁾ Barth appears to have little room in his theology for any notion of an unfallen world, that is a world free from the destructive power of sin and evil, but the concept of the shadowside leads to the conclusion that even an unfallen world would contain its share of positive and 'negative' experiences designed to be an arena for the 'soul making' process where men and women living in both security and jeopardy learn faith in and dependence upon God. This is consistent with both Scripture, which allows for a history of human growth, discovery and development, and with our personal

(142) CD III/3 p.318

(143) John Hick Evil and the God of Love (London 1966) p.135

experience which indicates that personal growth and depth comes through struggle rather than ease. A wholly good creation is not without conflict and struggle and were it so would lead only to the development of weak, impersonal and non-human beings. But such conflict and struggle as are intended are wholly good in intention and result and wholly other than the senseless evil which 'nothingness' produces.

A significant parallel to Barth is to be found in the work of C.G. Jung as expounded by John Sanford.⁽¹⁴⁴⁾ Building upon insights from Jung, Sanford argues, in distinction from Barth, that to understand evil helps us better to understand God.⁽¹⁴⁵⁾ What we judge evil depends on the perspective from which we speak and the divine perspective would enable us to see the positive role of evil.⁽¹⁴⁶⁾ Evil helps to develop human nature by stimulating its moral, feeling capacity.⁽¹⁴⁷⁾ In discovering individuation, unified personality, evil plays a catalytic role. By opposing wholeness it actually facilitates wholeness. Evil is thus Mephistophelean, 'part of that force which would do evil yet forever works the good'.⁽¹⁴⁸⁾ To recognise the shadow brings release to us, it aids humour and

(144) John A. Sanford Evil, the Shadow Side of Reality (New York 1981)

(145) *ibid* p.3

(146) *ibid* p.9

(147) *ibid* p.10

(148) *ibid* p.40

humility.⁽¹⁴⁹⁾ The Shadow is the archetype for the personality and necessary for its development.⁽¹⁵⁰⁾ Jung criticises the doctrine of privatio boni:

On the practical level the privatio boni doctrine is morally dangerous, because it belittles and unrealizes Evil and thereby weakens the Good, because it deprives it of its necessary opposite; there is no white without black, no right without left, no above without below, no warm without cold, no truth without error, no light without darkness etc. If Evil is an illusion, God is necessarily illusory too. That is the reason why I hold that the privatio boni is illogical, irrational and even nonsense.⁽¹⁵¹⁾

Such thinking thrusts Jung into criticism of the doctrine of the Trinity which he considers lacks the necessary dimension of a dark side. In its place he advocates the concept of Quaternity, the inclusion of the Adversary within the Godhead.⁽¹⁵²⁾

This conclusion is a perfect example of Barth's point that failure to distinguish between the Shadow and nothingness leads to an assimilation of nothingness in such a way as to deprive it of its evil nature. Whereas it has the strength of reflecting the biblical notion of a limited dualism overridden by the umbrella of a far-reaching monotheism⁽¹⁵³⁾ it fails to do justice to the ultimate hostility between God and Evil. Indeed, it leads to the enthronement

(149) *ibid* p.65

(150) *ibid* p.55

(151) C.G. Jung Letter (2) (Princeton 1975) p.61, cited by Sanford op cit p.138

(152) Sanford op cit p.139

(153) *ibid* p.39

of evil.⁽¹⁵⁴⁾ Barth, and Sanford in his critique of Jung,⁽¹⁵⁵⁾ has perceived that the Shadow is to be distinguished from evil, That 'dark' does not necessarily signify 'evil'. The dark side of the self does indeed serve the development of the human personality. But when we speak of evil or nothingness we have to do with something of which nothing good can be said, save that it has been overcome by God and against its own will and nature, will be forced as an unwilling captive to serve the ultimate purposes of God. In treatment of the Shadow, Barth has opened up a major insight and arguably one that is the chief contribution of his discussion on nothingness.⁽¹⁵⁶⁾

(v) Theodicy

Barth offers us a working theodicy which is rooted in the central, historical event of salvation and deliberately avoids the philosophically abstract approach to the problem of evil that has prevailed in orthodoxy. Such philosophising lost itself in academic discussion and proved to be of doubtful value.⁽¹⁵⁷⁾ The Christian response to the alien presence of nothingness in God's world is that it has been attacked and routed by God as his own enemy and is to be viewed from this perspective.⁽¹⁵⁸⁾ Seen in this way, whatever the

(154) H.L. Philp Jung and the Problem of Evil (New York 1959) p.43

(155) Sanford op cit p.143

(156) Hick op cit p.150

(157) CD III/3 p.365-6

(158) ibid p.366

provisional power it may have, evil is deprived of any true or ultimate power. Barth's contribution to the discussion of the problem of evil is to point backward to the cross and resurrection where evil was decisively overcome and forward to the parousia when this will be made unambiguously clear. It is this working, concrete answer that enables us to live with the enigma of evil and to confess faith in both the goodness and omnipotence of God. This approach enables us to affirm the evilness of evil without reduction but to live in the hope that God who is overall is able to cause even his enemies to serve ultimately good purposes, although at infinite cost to himself.

(2) Weakness

(i) The exegetical base

Barth must first be criticised for constructing his edifice of nothingness on a slender, and therefore, unsound foundation. This chiefly centres upon his understanding of the 'chaos' of Genesis 1:2 as nothingness. Taken from myth, chaos is a portrait of the world which was 'negated, rejected, ignored and left behind in His actual creation'.⁽¹⁵⁹⁾ Barth's exegesis must be judged at this point to be idiosyncratic. There is no doubt that the chaos represents formlessness and that this formlessness contains its own threat to everything created. But to extend this to an identification of the

(159) CD III/1 p.108

threat of nothingness is for Barth, to fall into the fallacy against which he warns others of identifying nothingness with the shadow across creaturely existence. The idea of the creatio ex nihilo is certainly present in Genesis 1:1-2⁽¹⁶⁰⁾ but to invest this nihil with a sinister content, as opposed to seeing it as plain non-existence, is an act of eisegesis of a classic kind whereby Barth discovers his own theory of evil in the biblical account of creation.⁽¹⁶¹⁾ Barth is presenting rich ideas but they have nothing to do with the text, instead he is imposing a previously established speculative construction on it.⁽¹⁶²⁾ Barth must also be criticised for his somewhat cavalier rejection of the texts which appear to indicate an angelic fall. Admitting that if the 'bad dogmatic dream' of such a fall is correct, it jeopardises the whole of his insights concerning the nature of angels, he dismisses Jude 6 and 2 Peter 2:4 as being so uncertain and obscure that it is inadvisable to push them in the direction in which they appear to point. Exactly why Barth considers these verses obscure he fails to explain. His failure to deal adequately with these verses must be considered a serious lapse and one which deprives him of the necessary corrective to a concept of nothingness which must be evaluated in biblical terms as a speculation rather than a biblically derived concept. Without fully agreeing with Berkouwer's thesis concerning the triumph of grace it is possible to agree with the estimate of the

(160) Gerhard von Rad Genesis (London 1961) p.51

(161) Hick op cit p.140 n2

(162) A.D.R. Polman Barth (Philadelphia 1968) pp 61-62

corrective value which a closer attention to these and other texts would have afforded Barth.

Had Barth allowed his thinking about the demons to be corrected by the witness of the New Testament, his view of the triumph of grace would have been affected. It would have been affected not in the sense of a weakening or of an attenuation of the triumph of grace, but in the sense of larger appreciation for the relationships in which the Scriptures speak of the triumph of grace. In casting his brief glance at the demons he did not choose to follow this course but continued to oppose the 'bad dream' of dogmatics, namely, the fallen angels. (163)

Bromiley likewise indicates Barth's weakness at this point:

Barth does not expunge the verses that hint at a fall of angels. He simply objects to the way they are expounded. Unfortunately he does not back up the objection with any direct biblical material. His interpretation stands, then, under the shadow cast by these verses. They do indeed suggest an 'angelic catastrophe' as Augustine puts it. Nor would it seem that Barth's understanding is totally compromised if this be their meaning. Yet he takes a firm stand on the issue and in so doing opens himself to criticism at a vital point: Is he really obeying scripture as the criterion of dogmatic purity and truth? When he has done so much to restore angels (and demons) as a theme of serious theological enquiry, it is a pity that the whole discussion should end with so questionable a thesis and procedure. (164)

Bromiley continues this line of criticism at another point:

(163) Berkouwer op cit p.378

(164) Bromiley Introduction p.155

Barth can sometimes be the victim of his own architectonic skill and inventive mind. He escapes systematization in one sense but cannot wholly escape the problems of systematic integration. He flees speculation but some of his more brilliant insights leave the impression that he might be making up what is not actually there... For some of his own theses Barth can produce only the thinnest biblical support. This applies particularly in his discussion of evil. In spite of his vigorous statements in self-defence and notwithstanding his commendable zeal to avoid dualism, he has little biblical backing for his elaborate development of nothingness or for his demonology. Indeed in the matter of fallen angels he deliberately will not accept the fairly plain hints that scripture gives because they do not fit his total picture... Barth speaks bravely about the scripture principle, but like most theologians he can turn a blind eye to scriptures he does not greatly care for. (165)

Exegetically, Barth's concept of nothingness must be considered to be ill-grounded. This criticism of Barth is all the more serious because of his expressed commitment to scripture as the source and criterion of theology.

(ii) Theological inadequacy

Although Barth's theological case for nothingness is no less to be criticised than the exegetical, we begin by defending him against the criticisms of Berkouwer that just as Barth's theology generally is the outworking of the a priori concept of the triumph of grace, so his understanding of historical evil is merely as the extension

(165) *ibid* pp 247-8

into time of the primeval self-differentiation of God from nothingness. In Berkouwer's criticism the real confrontation took place in the rejection of chaos at creation and not in history.⁽¹⁶⁶⁾ Understood in this way, the concept of nothingness is elevated to become the 'basic article and decisive fulcrum' of the triumph of grace.⁽¹⁶⁷⁾ By extension, once the inadequacy of the concept of nothingness is made plain, the whole of Barth's theology is shown to be basically flawed since it hinges on a speculative illusion. In making the basic motif the antithesis between chaos and grace and not that between sin and grace, the whole shape of theology is decisively altered.⁽¹⁶⁸⁾

We have already rejected Berkouwer's basic criticism of Barth on the basis that Barth proceeds inductively from the concrete revelation of God in Christ and not deductively from a priori concepts. The same criticism supports Barth against Berkouwer at this point. The real question is: are the extrapolations which Barth makes from his attention to God's revelation in Christ well-founded, or has he misled himself through speculation? Further, granted Barth's intention to infer his theology from the Christ event, do his concepts assist or hinder him to this end? This and other issues we now seek to appraise.

(166) Berkouwer op cit p.370

(167) CD IV/3:1 p.177

(168) Berkouwer op cit p.381

[a] Barth's use of terms

Barth uses three novel terms in this particular sphere: 'nothingness', 'ontological impossibility' and 'impossible possibility'.⁽¹⁶⁹⁾ By the latter two terms he seeks to express paradoxically the absurd possibility of the absurd and the reality of evil in a form which sets it apart from the positive being of God and his creatures. He has no particular affection for the terms and is clearly surprised that Berkouwer sees things in his use of 'ontological impossibility' which he never intended.⁽¹⁷⁰⁾ Brunner too finds this term problematic on the basis that if sin were an ontological impossibility, it cannot ever have been, cannot now be, and never will be possible for sin to happen.⁽¹⁷¹⁾ Strictly Brunner is correct, but Barth is using language paradoxically and, ⁱⁿ terms of his own definitions consistently.⁽¹⁷²⁾ He is attempting to stretch the limits of language to describe his subject.

Our major concern here is with the concept of nothingness. Barth's use of the term has already been touched upon as a description of the negativity of evil but the coining of this term has wider implications. Traditionally, the origin of evil has been located in a pre-mundane angelic fall, in which man becomes implicated. This

(169) CD IV/3:1 pp 177-178

(170) *ibid*

(171) Emil Brunner 'The New Barth' SJT Vol.IV (1951) p.129

(172) Vernon R. Mallow The Demonic A Selected Theological Study (New York 1983) p.71

belief has proven problematic for modern thinkers and yet the impulse remains to find some transcendent, pre-mundane origin for the cosmic evil of which man's evil is but a part. N.P. Williams, eager to reconcile biblical concepts of the fall with evolutionary explanations of origins, postulates an original calamity, an aberration of the 'life-force' by some inexplicable means precipitating both sub-human suffering and the fall of man.⁽¹⁷³⁾ Although unable to accept the idea of an angelic fall, Barth proposes his own pre-mundane substitute by effectively creating a new myth of nothingness.⁽¹⁷⁴⁾ The coining of a word such as 'nothingness' helps to give the illusion of substance to the myth despite the fact that it corresponds to no use of the idea of nothing contained in scripture⁽¹⁷⁵⁾ and that, theologically, uses of the concept of non-being are extremely precarious. 'The notion of meontic non-being is an example of the inveterate tendency of the human mind to hypostatise or reify language'.⁽¹⁷⁶⁾ In the traditional philosophical debate about a nihil negativum and a nihil ontologicum Barth ends up with a nondescript third possibility between the two.⁽¹⁷⁷⁾ Once postulated, nothingness becomes a something-which-is-nothing and can become the source of all the other things whose existence we are unwilling to ascribe to God or

(173) N.P. Williams The Ideas of the Fall and Original Sin (London 1927) p.526.

(174) Hick op cit p.142

(175) Berkouwer op cit p.244

(176) Hick op cit p.192

(177) H. Berkhof The Christian Faith (Grand Rapids 1979) pp 155-6

identify with his creation - the devil and demons, sin, death and hell. This is a merely verbal concept which corresponds to no reality of which revelation speaks. Had Barth as an alternative spoken generically of evil as that which is opposed to God, instead of seeing evil as contained within nothingness, he would have been on more secure ground biblically and in terms of traditional theology, and at the same time would have been impelled towards a more biblical notion of the origin of evil.

[b] Nothingness and God's Will

By seeing nothingness as that which exists by virtue of God's non-willing Barth seeks both to secure God against responsibility for evil and yet to stress that evil can only exist in some relation to the will of God, as that which is comprehended, envisaged and controlled by him.⁽¹⁷⁸⁾ This view may be criticised as a piece of speculative theorising in contravention of Barth's own theological method but even as such, it is seriously open to doubt once we reflect on the will of God. Was God helpless to prevent his non-willing giving rise to nothingness? If so, we are left with a God who wills to do good but cannot prevent himself from giving rise to evil. God's sovereignty is therefore compromised. To argue that God does not will something and therefore it is created by virtue of his non-willing is surely a verbal illusion existing only in the

(178) CD III/3 p.301

realm of language, and imagination. It makes a nonsense of the will of God and is accurately described as a 'curiously farfetched and concocted notion'.⁽¹⁷⁹⁾ Far from the non-willing of God being powerful it would actually be powerless since it does not achieve its intention. On the other hand to argue that nothingness is willed by God is equally impossible.

Evil (in the sense of das Nichtige) came to 'be' as that which God repudiated when He created His good universe. But Barth does not feel obliged to suppose that it thus came to 'be' either by a necessity independent of the divine will, or by the divine will itself. He not only refuses to choose between these possibilities, but by implication he repudiates both! For both, he would no doubt claim, are ruled out by God's own revelation of Himself.⁽¹⁸⁰⁾

This same process of thought may be applied to the link between nothingness and election. To indicate that God's Yes implies a No is to understand the election of God in a too human way, as if that which God chooses between already has an existence. If God passes by the lower realm of chaos, where does it come from for him to pass it by? To argue that God chooses between possibilities, and that nothingness is all the possibilities to which God says no, and that those possibilities are given existence by God's non-willing must imply that nothingness is infinite since the number of possibilities open to God must be infinite.⁽¹⁸¹⁾ This implies dualism.

(179) Helmut Thielicke Theological Ethics Volume I (Grand Rapids 1979) p.114

(180) Hick op cit p.149

(181) Mallow op cit p.97

[c] Has Barth explained evil?

Berkouwer accuses Barth of saying too much and saying it on a wholly different level from scripture.⁽¹⁸²⁾ Having declared that evil is absurd and inexplicable, Barth proceeds to offer an explanation which deprives sin of its enigmatic nature. Sin has become relatively explicable.⁽¹⁸³⁾ Barth seeks to preserve the enigma of sin with his concept of ontological impossibility but there is point to the criticism. Barth's concept renders sin and evil not so much absurd as inevitable.

[d] The continuing existence of nothingness

Barth is so keen to express the triumph of Jesus Christ that he comes near to underestimating the continuing presence of nothingness.

In the light of Jesus Christ there is no sense in which it can be affirmed that nothingness has any objective existence, that it continues except for our still blinded eyes, that it still has to be feared, that it still counts as a cogent factor, that it still has a future, that it still implies a threat and possesses destructive power.⁽¹⁸⁴⁾

This extends to setting the relationship between Creator and

(182) Berkouwer op cit p.222

(183) ibid p.223

(184) CD III/3 p.363

creature absolutely free from nothingness as a third factor.⁽¹⁸⁵⁾ Berkouwer calls attention to the fact that the New Testament, while reckoning with Christ's victory, also reckons with the real danger of the continuing struggle. The battle is not merely apparent - it is real although joyful.⁽¹⁸⁶⁾ The battle in Heaven has been won but the devil has been cast down to earth to deceive the whole world.⁽¹⁸⁷⁾ Berkouwer's point is well made. Barth's response to it indicates that he is attempting not to deny the fierceness of the conflict but to affirm the certainty of Christ's victory:

Nothing is self-evident, obvious or matter-of-course. The day must be carried against the fiercest opposition. A War is waged against sin, death and the devil. It is in this war that Jesus is Victor, even though He is the almighty Mediator between God and man, and the eternal will of God fulfilled in His faith and obedience is absolutely superior to the contradiction and opposition which are only contemptible nothingness in the face of this towering opponent and the issue is thus certain at the commencement and therefore "from the very outset"... But how can we ever imagine that this is an easy "triumph of grace".⁽¹⁸⁸⁾

We may agree that Barth intends to safeguard this element but need to question whether he has chosen the best way of doing so.

(3) The dogmatic consequences of Barth's view

(i) Barth appears to want to safeguard the objective reality of evil but

(185) *ibid*

(186) Berkouwer *op cit* p.237

(187) Revelation 12:9

(188) CD IV/3:1 p.179

the question must seriously be asked whether this is possible on the basis of the concept of nothingness. Against his apparent intentions the effect of the concept of nothingness is to irrealize the powers of evil. This is to be perceived within Barth himself in the assertion that in the light of the victory of Christ nothingness is deprived of its objective reality and continues only in the power of illusion. Barth protests that this is not his real intention but it is indeed the direction in which his chosen concepts lead him. This is confirmed by A.B. Come's interpretation. Come believes that Barth articulates a theological insight which although nowhere spelled out explicitly in Scripture captures something which lies below the surface of it and is arrived at by an intuition of the whole.⁽¹⁸⁹⁾ Nevertheless the term 'nothingness' is too abstract and static and he prefers to speak of 'the demonic' as a middle term between it and 'the devil' which overpersonalizes and overhypostatizes the reality of evil.⁽¹⁹⁰⁾ Similarly Krötke in his summary of Barth's doctrine characterizes the reality of which Barth speaks as 'antithetically anhypostatic being' (antithetisch anhypostatiches Sein)⁽¹⁹¹⁾ Demons do not exist by themselves but only as the dynamic of nothingness.⁽¹⁹²⁾ My concern here is how far it is possible to go on speaking of the reality of evil while at the same time denying it any form of ontology or hypostasis.⁽¹⁹³⁾ The pull of this form of

(189) A.B.Come op cit p.219

(190) ibid p.218

(191) Wolf Krötke Sünde and Nichtiges bei Karl Barth (Berlin 1983) p.47

(192) ibid p.49

(193) Mallow op cit p.97

thought is towards denying the reality of evil in any meaningful sense. Barth wants to assert a real hell, a real devil, real sin and real death but this becomes unsustainable on the basis of the concept of nothingness. It can only work provided we refuse to focus on it and regard it always as a peripheral element which is never brought to clarity. Notably this is what Barth does when he casts his 'short sharp glance' at the demons. Once we seek for greater clarity as to what it actually is, the concept begins to feel inadequate and elusive in safeguarding the reality of evil. In stripping evil of its power and changing it into nothingness Barth comes perilously close to stripping it of its reality.⁽¹⁹⁴⁾ His tendency to see the devil as hypostatized nothingness⁽¹⁹⁵⁾ risks reducing the devil and the demons to a personal mask which nothingness wears.⁽¹⁹⁶⁾ It comes as no surprise therefore to find Barth in later years agreeing with von Campenhausen in virtually giving up the concept of the devil and demons.⁽¹⁹⁷⁾ Despite his strong protests in favour of its reality,⁽¹⁹⁸⁾ he is thrust by his concept of the devil as non-being in the opposite direction. The implications of this are immense since the reality of evil is the negative presupposition which is at the heart of the Christian

(194) H. Thieliicke The Evangelical Faith Vol.III (Grand Rapids 1982) p.448

(195) CD IV/3:1 p.261

(196) Bloesch Jesus is Victor p.40

(197) Godsey op cit pp 72-73

(198) CD IV/3:1 p.260

doctrine of redemption.(199)

With this we return again to Berkouwer's criticism that Barth deprives the historical drama of redemption of its significance. Our answer to this must now be that while this is not Barth's intention it is certainly the gravitational pull exerted by his concept of nothingness. To this must be added the regular criticism that Barth is more concerned in his theology with epistemology than with soteriology.⁽²⁰⁰⁾ In this he is more representative of liberal theology than of the Reformation with its concern for God's direct confrontation with sin, death and evil. The concept of nothingness leads to a radical undervaluing of the nature of evil and its relentless attempt to thwart God's purposes of salvation being worked out in human history. This line of criticism also links with that of Bloesch concerning the undervaluing of the soteriological (and not merely ethical) nature of man's decision.

We ask whether Barth can treat adequately those passages in the New Testament which speak of the conflict and struggle that characterises the life of the church and the Christian in history. The New Testament regards the dynamic situation of the 'last days' as one of the real confrontation between the ascended Christ and the evil, demonic forces, a confrontation

(199) 'However we may interpret it we must recognise that here we are dealing not with some unessential apocalyptic scaffolding but with the very substance of the faith'. James S. Stewart 'On a neglected emphasis in New Testament Theology' SJT (Vol.IV 1951) p.300

(200) Gustaf Wingren Theology in Conflict: Nygren, Barth, Bultmann (London 1958) pp 27-28. Alister McGrath Iustitia Dei (Cambridge 1986) p.177. See also CD IV/3:1 pp 260-261

in which the Church, confident in the power and authority given unto Christ, enters upon its mission in history. It is the overruling of these forces by the Christ who is risen and ascended rather than the proclamation of the unreality and mere appearance of such forces which is at stake in this area of Christian affirmation.(201)

(4) Summary

Barth's original and creative treatment of nothingness must be judged a failure since by the criteria of his own theology it has failed to follow closely the biblical witness and has intruded constructs which have their origin elsewhere. Since Barth's criteria are the same as those of evangelical theology generally it is inadequate from that viewpoint for the same reason. From the standpoint of Christian theology his concepts do not stand up to analysis. According to John Hick, the concept of nothingness does not represent revealed truth at all but is a product of Barth's own fertile and fascinating mind.(202) But this is not to say that his contribution is without value. In the next section an alternative statement will be attempted which seeks to integrate some of his insights.

(d) Towards an alternative position

Despite his confident expressions in the dogmatics concerning

(201) Daniel L Deegan 'Church Dogmatics by Karl Barth Vol.3 part 3' SJT 15 (1962) p.82

(202) Hick op cit p.149

the doctrine, Barth does in other places recognise that there may be an alternative way of approaching the subject and that it is perhaps even more complicated than he envisaged.⁽²⁰³⁾ In this section we will attempt to develop in a structured way an alternative position.

- (1) Evil is known in its most obvious and concrete form in the behaviour of human beings. The Christian analysis of man is that he is a fallen creature and that there is an immense gulf between what he ought to be and what he is. The Adam saga is an attempt to describe the truth about all and every man and woman in their existence of rebellion against God and failure to rise to obedience in response to God's love and grace. No attempt to describe the origin of sin is valid if it seeks to attenuate the guilt of man and yet it is clear that man is both the perpetrator of sin and its victim.⁽²⁰⁴⁾ As its perpetrator he is the object of the divine wrath and as its victim he is the object of the divine compassion. By himself man is neither clever enough⁽²⁰⁵⁾ nor sufficiently demonic⁽²⁰⁶⁾ to be the originator of evil. He is tempted by a power which is beyond himself. Therefore to gain a clearer view of sin and evil we are directed beyond man to the suprapersonal.

- (2) Man is assailed by powers greater than himself. These are variously

(203) Godsey op cit p.72

(204) Berkhof The Christian Faith p.200

(205) Brunner The Christian Doctrine of Creation and Redemption pp 107-8

(206) Berkhof op,cit p.200

described in the Bible, include the power of sin as a superhuman influence⁽²⁰⁷⁾ and the seductive power of the law⁽²⁰⁸⁾ and extend to the cosmic realm of 'principalities and powers' with which man is in conflict.⁽²⁰⁹⁾ The precise nature of these powers is much debated in recent theology since they provide modern man the opportunity to find in scripture an area which has distinct contemporary relevance, namely the influence of sociological and cultural structures upon the individual. The suggestion has been put forward that whereas the demons of the Gospels are the putative cause of afflictions now treated by physicians and psychiatrists, the 'principalities and powers' correspond to the concerns of politicians and sociologists.⁽²¹⁰⁾ The debate ranges across a spectrum which is inclined at one end to find in the principalities and powers angelic powers and human structures ⁽²¹¹⁾ and at the other end personal and supernatural agencies of a sinister kind.⁽²¹²⁾ Those who stand in the middle find an absence of distinction between the two.⁽²¹³⁾ The references in the New Testament to powers, thrones, authorities and elemental spirits are deemed to be thoroughly ambiguous encompassing human structures and

(207) Romans 6:12-23

(208) Romans 7:5-11

(209) Ephesians 6:12

(210) D.E.H. Whiteley The Theology of St Paul (Oxford 1972) p.19

(211) Wesley Carr Angels and Principalities (Cambridge 1981) pp 175-176

(212) J.R.W. Stott God's New Society (Leicester 1979) pp 267-275

(213) H Berkhof Christ and the Powers (Scottsdale 1962) pp 18-26.

J.H. Yoder The Politics of Jesus (Grand Rapids 1972) pp 142-147.

Oscar Cullmann Christ and Time (London 1971) p.191

a transcendent dimension of spiritual powers of good and evil kinds.⁽²¹⁴⁾ What is expressed verbally in the Pauline theology is to be discerned concretely in the ministry of Jesus which drew forth the malevolence of religious, political and social powers.⁽²¹⁵⁾ In this stage of the argument we are concerned to demonstrate the reality of suprapersonal forces to which man is vulnerable and which include the religious, intellectual, moral and political forces under whose influence men exist.⁽²¹⁶⁾ No analysis of the powers of sin and evil which neglects these can be considered sufficient. Berkhof asserts that in addition to the interpersonal dimensions of sin:

we must distinguish a suprapersonal aspect which is based not so much on the mentality of persons as on the driving force inherent both in the institutions of our established society and in the anonymous powers of current codes of behavior, taboos, traditions or the dictates of fashion. Of course both aspects hang together. First personal sin broadens itself assuming an interpersonal shape and then, continuing, it concentrates or institutionalizes itself in suprapersonal magnitudes. It is the experience of those who manage to wrest themselves loose from being blinded by interpersonal forces, to take up the challenge of love, that individual good will seems to accomplish little or nothing against all those forces which inexorably dictate to individuals a certain pattern of conduct, the business, the interest of the party, the needs of society, custom, fashion, public opinion, the ideology

(214) Eg. 1 Corinthians 2:8, Titus 3:1, Romans 8:38. See Michael Green op cit pp 81-86

(215) Moltmann The Crucified God pp 131-133, pp 136-7. J.S. Stewart op cit p.295

(216) Yoder op cit p.145

(Western or Eastern) etc. One who tries to do something against it is usually thrown aside or gets crushed under the wheels. Very few possess the strength and the courage to take this risk.⁽²¹⁷⁾

(3) The exousiology of the New Testament adds to our understanding of the nature of evil but further clarification is necessary as to how it is that powers which are part of God's good creation⁽²¹⁸⁾ can be distorted. Since the Second World War it has become commonplace to ascribe this to the power of the 'demonic' as an irrational, surd-like power which threatens and distorts existence, an alien power of deceit 'out of which have poured into human existence incredible forces of disintegration and destruction',⁽²¹⁹⁾ creating a 'sense of helplessness in the face of some movements or situations for which no-one seems directly responsible and which no-one seems able to control'.⁽²²⁰⁾

(4) Yet to make sense of the demonic requires a further step. It is congenial to the modern temperament to speak of the demonic in impersonal terms since it enables us to recognise the existence of irrational evil while avoiding the pictorial and mythological language associated with the idea of 'the Devil'. Yet at the core of revelation in the ministry of Christ and at the cross the

(217) Berkhof The Christian Faith pp 208-209

(218) Colossians 1:16

(219) A.B. Come op cit p.220

(220) John Macquarrie Principles of Christian Theology (London 1966) p.241

supra-human power of darkness which is the very presupposition of the cross is represented as 'the Devil' or 'Satan'.⁽²²¹⁾ The theological difficulty we encounter here is that of speaking of the power of darkness in personal and hypostatic terms. It is necessary to recognise the limits and symbolic nature of our language at this point which is used only symbolically, partially and not definitively.⁽²²²⁾ On the other hand the concept of the Devil has a metaphorical and direct force in expressing the relentless power of sin, the overpowering threat to man which if rejected or ~~demythologized~~^{demythologized} would have to be verbalized in another way.⁽²²³⁾ Adequate attempts to do this are in short supply. Further, expressing the personal or quasi-personal nature of sin as pride and rebellion and maintaining the spiritual nature of this adversary serves to capture the biblical insight that the highest reaches of sin are not to do with the body so much as with the spirit, pure defiance, pure arrogance, spontaneous, self-generating sin.⁽²²⁴⁾ We cannot demythologize the Devil without radically shifting the biblical analysis of the human condition and its remedy. Nullus diabolos nullus redemptor. The concept of a personally defined power of sin is problematic and to speak of the devil is linguistically difficult.⁽²²⁵⁾ Yet even Barth found it difficult to avoid speaking

(221) 1 John 3:8, Luke 10:18. See also J.D.G. Dunn and Graham H. Twelftree 'Demon Possession and Exorcism in the N.T.' Churchman (Vol.94 no.3 1980) pp 222-3

(222) Thieliicke The Evangelical Faith Vol.III p.45

(223) Berkhof The Christian Faith pp 201-202

(224) Brunner op cit p.139

(225) Thieliicke op cit pp 448-9

of nothingness in any other terms than those of ontological categories.⁽²²⁶⁾ Such an approach retains a force and a clarity which is otherwise lost in abstraction. Barth wants to maintain the force of the biblical testimony but the concept of nothingness and his insistence on the non-ontology of sin and evil make this a difficult if not impossible task.

(5) The question then poses itself, what is the origin of the Devil and of evil? The danger of this question is that evil might then be made part of a system and therefore given some rationality. But it should be possible to maintain a sense of horror concerning sin while wanting to gain a clearer view of it.⁽²²⁷⁾ The difficulty here is that the Bible itself gives no answer to this question. At best it can be conceived of as giving a few hints. There are various possibilities.

(i) Metaphysical dualism would seek to make the conflict between God and Satan eternal, the forces of discreativity constantly feeding upon and attacking the forces of creativity. This position has been represented in more recent theological debate by Edwin P. Lewis whose pilgrimage took him from liberalism to evangelicalism and then to Zoroastrianism. Lewis conceived of the world being composed of three eternal existents - God (creative), the Adversary (discreative) and the Residue (uncreative) and sought to explain the

(226) Krötke op cit p.27

(227) Berkhof The Christian Faith p.196

phenomena of existence by this means.⁽²²⁸⁾ This position has consistently been rejected by the church as a denial of the Godhood of God and blasphemous in making the Devil into God's 'opposite number'.

(ii) Monism perceives sin to have its origin in God, as in extreme High Calvinism where strict theocentrism perceives all things, including sin, coming from God. To do this makes a nonsense of God's hostility to sin and turns the dialectic of grace and sin into a farce.⁽²²⁹⁾

(iii) A third position would be to deny that it is possible to explain the origin of sin on the basis that Scripture does not speak to this particular issue or if it does, does so only on the outskirts of biblical truth or in apocalyptic or legendary language in a way which makes it impossible to integrate this with the core of biblical revelation. In the Bible, the power of darkness is simply there and we do well not to speculate on that which is left opaque. This position is embraced by Emil Brunner. The existence of the Devil is accepted but left undefined.⁽²³⁰⁾

(iv) Barth is suggesting that evil has to do with the very structure of reality. Evil is there, just as in the revelation of God in Christ evil is factually there as a contrary force where God reveals

(228) Vernon R. Mallow The Demonic: A Selected Theological Study (New York 1983) p.1, pp 40-41

(229) Berkhof The Christian Faith p.198

(230) Brunner op cit p.137, p.143

himself. His doctrine of nothingness is an elaboration of this insight. Nothingness is there in the act of creation as the reverse, shadow side of his positive creative activity. The world in which we live exists as a good world as such, but as one which is threatened as such by nothingness which exists as a negated power.⁽²³¹⁾ To identify evil as part of the very structure of reality is problematic for the reasons which have been previously discussed. Barth's concept is an attempt to thrust into God in the course of which he lands 'in the vacuum of empty speculation'.⁽²³²⁾

- (v) We are left with the possibility of locating evil not in the structure of created reality as such but in the misuse of a creaturely freedom. Krötke sees this as the only viable alternative to Barth.⁽²³³⁾ This is the traditional understanding of the church and has found re-expression in various forms in modern theology in discussing the nature of man as free being. Barth has difficulty with the idea because he dismisses the concept of freedom as a neutral choice between good and evil. Freedom for Barth means not the mechanism of choosing but the content of the choice. The choice to hark back to the nothingness is therefore not a choice for freedom but for bondage. Yet the thrust of the search for an alternative position to Barth has already led us beyond the freedom of man into a transcendent realm and so it is necessary to identify

(231) Berkhof The Christian Faith p.199

(232) ibid

(233) Krötke op cit p.110

a focus of misusable freedom in that dimension. Sin and evil originate in an aberration within the sphere of created reality. Man is not the originator of evil but rather has become implicated in an existing rebellion of a spiritual, suprahuman power which is responsible for purely spontaneous, self-generated sin.

- (6) It is clear that with this postulate we are approaching the doctrine traditionally known as the fall of angels, a pre-mundane, angelic catastrophe. This is a concept which Barth has decisively excluded, despite the fact that he occasionally uses language reminiscent of it.⁽²³⁴⁾ In his doctrine of angels, Barth has conceived of them as being ontologically weak, lacking autonomy and the very possibility of rebellion. Angels are simply a special appearance of God's own action. They are not God but belong to his action without a separate ontology.⁽²³⁵⁾ Rebellion and independent existence are impossible for them. Brunner likewise finds fault with the doctrine seeing no direct scriptural basis for it.⁽²³⁶⁾ The idea of a fall of angels exists for him only on the fringe of the biblical testimony, is a relic of Persian religion and does not belong to the centre of the Christian faith.⁽²³⁷⁾ Moreover, it has proven to be a happy hunting ground in which the mythopoeic imagination can run

(234) Eg. CD II/2 pp 122-124

(235) CD III/3 p.481

(236) Brunner op cit P.137

(237) ibid p.133

riot.⁽²³⁸⁾ None of this is to deny the central place of the powers of darkness, but it is to set a limit to speculation.

The force of these criticisms needs to be felt. In so far as the Bible speaks of an angelic fall it is certainly only obliquely and on the periphery of the canon. All the texts concerned are problematic. The Old Testament passages to which appeal is sometimes made,⁽²³⁹⁾ Ezekiel 28:1-17 and Isaiah 14:12-21, can only be cited in a secondary sense since their direct reference is to identifiable persons. The language is more likely to be derived from a myth of primal man than from references to Satan.⁽²⁴⁰⁾ The New Testament texts, Jude 6 and II Peter 2:4, are more substantial, but even so are both elusive and allusive in character. It is by no means the case that they set forth doctrine to be believed but rather appeal to legendary and apocalyptic material with which the readers would have been acquainted. At best they can serve as pointers to a belief which is not clearly articulated or affirmed.

It is precarious to ground a doctrine of the fall of angels on uncertain exegesis and there is considerable wisdom in retreating into agnosticism at this point. But it is significant that Brunner, while dismissing the doctrine, nevertheless goes on to speak of

(238) *ibid* p.133, p.135

(239) Eg. Green *op cit* pp 33-42

(240) Walter Eichrodt Ezekiel (London 1970) p.392. John Mauchline Isaiah 1-39 (London 1962) p.140

Satan as the point of origin and self-generation of evil.⁽²⁴¹⁾ On theological grounds he is moving towards the position he has already apparently rejected as exegetically ill-grounded.

The value of the concept of an angelic catastrophe is that it locates the origin of evil within the created sphere by a deliberate and rebellious misuse of creaturely freedom initially on a transcendent, spiritual level and then on the human plane. We may agree with Barth that evil has no ontological status, but it does have an ontological ground in the freedom of men and angels.⁽²⁴²⁾ Although this is expressed mythologically in the form of the 'fall of angels' there is in fact no analytical way in which it is possible to speak of events and realities in this sphere. Pictorial and problematic though the language may be, it is the nearest and most accurate formulation we are likely to discover. That even evil has its origin in the created sphere is implied by Colossians 1:16, which understands Christ as the origin of both visible and invisible realities and by Romans 8:38-39 which brackets the principalities and powers which might seek to separate us from the love of God among created things. Evil is thus not an inevitable part of the structure of things but an aberration and a rebellion of an inexcusable kind within the created sphere.

Barth denies the possibility of such a fall on the basis of his

(241) Brunner op cit p.139

(242) Bloesch Jesus is Victor! p.170

angelology. To admit the possibility of such an event would deny the actualistic, quasi-ontological concept of angels he has articulated. Barth's understanding of angels is immensely valuable and rings true with the marginal role angels play in Scripture. But he has no substantial biblical grounds for depriving angels both of ontology and freedom. It is possible to conceive of angelic powers having their own ontology and some degree of autonomy, sufficient for there to have been an aberration. It is also possible to agree with Barth that such an act would deprive angelic powers of their true existence and would cause them to exist only in a negative and chaotic form, feeding parasitically on the good and ordered creation. He suggests as much when he says that an angel which behaved unangelically would closely resemble a demon.

He would be a lying spirit, a demon, a being which deceives both itself and others in respect of its heavenly character, if he were to try to profit from his nature and position, deriving any personal benefit, cutting an individual role, pursuing his own ends and achieving his own results. A true and orderly angel does not do this.

Although he is a creature, and an exemplary and perfect creature, his task as such has simply been to come and then to go again, to pass by. He would be a lying spirit, a demon if he were to tarry, directing attention and love and honour and even perhaps adoration for himself and enticing man to enter into dealings and fellowship with himself instead of through him into dealings with God.⁽²⁴³⁾

(243) CD III/3 p.481

On the basis of Barth's view it is difficult to explain the biblical understanding of the strategy of evil which allows some degree of malevolent creativity in the powers of evil. The concept of an angelic fall would make this intelligible.(244)

- (7) To assert a transcendent origin of evil is in no way to explain evil. How and why such a rebellion should take place is an absurd, bizarre and irrational mystery. Evil cannot be made sense of or incorporated into a rational system. So to clarify its point of origin does not explain or define its existence. It is the nature of evil to be inexplicable, an enigma and a stupidity.
- (8) While dissenting from Barth's concept of nothingness, it does illuminate us in one further step. Evil is inexplicable and yet the possibility of it exists as the negative side of a positive world. It exists by mimicry, contradiction, distortion. It can only exist as a process of discreativity dependent on God's creativity. Although self-generating, evil is not strictly speaking self-creating ex nihilo. The possibility of evil exists by virtue of God's creative work, but as its reverse side and denial, as that which God excludes from his own work. The fact of a possibility does not create a reality corresponding to it but it does allow the possibility that malevolence will arise within the creation and give actuality to the possibility of evil. To the question as to

(244) Bloesch Jesus is Victor! p.41. See Matthew 13:39, Ephesians 6:11, I Peter 5:8, Revelation 20:2 etc.

whether God could have made a creation free of the possibility of evil the answer must be given that if God had made men differently they would not have been human, and if the creation had been made differently it would not be the creation it is. John Hick says:

God can without contradiction be conceived to have so constituted men that they could be guaranteed always freely to act rightly in relation to one another. But he cannot without contradiction be conceived to have so constituted men that they could be guaranteed freely to respond to Himself in authentic faith and love and worship.⁽²⁴⁵⁾

- (9) So God in creating this world made it a risky world with the possibility of aberration for the sake of the freedom of his creatures over against himself. The fact of evil must finally imply the divine permission.

Even the in itself blasphemous idea that God is the author of sin now appears to contain a truth; he has caused us to come forth out of a world in process of becoming as threatened and challenged creatures.⁽²⁴⁶⁾

God is therefore not without responsibility for evil. The significance of the cross is that the one who suffers most because of evil is God himself and that by his own action the power of evil has been overcome.

(245) Hick op cit p.311

(246) Berkhof The Christian Faith p.207

- (10) This is not to deny the continuing conflict with the powers of darkness but it is to assert that, to recall Cullmann's well-worn analogy, the decisive victory which has already been achieved awaits its fulfilment and consummation.

In the time between the resurrection and the Parousia of Christ [the angelic powers] are, so to speak, bound as to a rope which can be more or less lengthened, so that those among them who show tendencies to emancipation can have the illusion that they are releasing themselves from their bond with Christ, while in reality, by this striving which here and there appears, they only show once more the original demonic character; they cannot, however, actually set themselves free. Their power is only apparent. The Church has so much more the duty to stand against them, in view of the fact that it knows that their power is only apparent and that in reality Christ has already conquered all demons. (247)

There is a fierce conflict yet to be waged and the worst of the conflict may yet be to come. But the eschaton will reveal that God's lordship is able to make all things work together for the good of those who love God. It is in that faith and hope that the believer confronts the absurd, irrational and meaningless power of evil in the present.

(247) Cullmann Christ and Time p.198

(V) Conclusions and Programmatic Reflections

(a) Conclusions - in retrospect

The aim of this thesis has been to investigate the relationship between Karl Barth and the evangelical tradition and particularly to do this in relation to Barth's doctrine of nothingness. As we have progressed interim conclusions have been stated and the purpose of this chapter is to gather these together and reflects upon their implications.

The thesis began with an attempt to outline the main contours of Barth's theological thought and his significance for twentieth century theology. According to the perspective gained through this examination, the evangelical nature of his theology is undeniable. Barth's concern and intention is to develop a theology of the Word. His method is to listen attentively to Scripture as the primary authority, to give heed to past theological discussion as a secondary authority and to express in dogmatic form what he believes the witness of Scripture to be. His conclusions are uniformly orthodox, although never a mere repetition or defence of the received position. His theology bears the marks of characteristic evangelical concerns - a commitment to the authority of the Bible, to the objective and historical nature of God's revelation in Christ, to the historic creeds and confessions, to the task of preaching. He is irreducibly opposed to Liberalism. At the same time as restating an essentially conservative theological position, Barth

brings to it his own originality and concerns and in so doing modifies Reformed orthodoxy where he feels this to be appropriate in the service of a closer hearing of the biblical witness to God in Christ.

This leads us to the second chapter in which we investigate a representative sample of evangelical responses to Barth, tracing firstly the progress of that response and then addressing specific issues which would reflect the concerns of evangelicalism. A marked shift is noted from an early note of hostility in which Barth is understood as a ^rdypto-modernist in orthodox guise to one in which he is regarded with appreciation despite being critically flawed, to one in which he is regarded as being fundamentally correct, although needing modification in important regards. The contention of this chapter is that whether consciously or unconsciously, evangelical theology is assimilating itself to Barth and this is being done as he is more fully understood. The period of forty years over which this survey of responses has been conducted marks both major advances in understanding Barth and major changes within the evangelical constituency. A study of Barth serves to disclose the points at which those changes are taking place and also to explain why he has been ambiguously received among evangelicals. Barth accentuates the points at which evangelicalism is in transition or feels itself threatened. He therefore represents the alternative to received evangelical positions which some would want to resist. The thrust of the chapter is to indicate that Barth in fact represents genuine possibilities for the development and improvement of

evangelical thought. The particular discussions which are entered into concerning the frontier with evangelicalism manifest ways in which Barth offers the possibility of improvement in evangelical thought. These latter concern Barth's epistemology (there is a clear shift from the first to the second stage of response to Barth towards his epistemology), his understanding of the fallibility and infallibility of Scripture (there is a discernible shift in Barth's favour from the second to the third stage of response to Barth) and the issue of universalism. The conclusion which is represented at the final stage of the enquiry is that it is precisely here that Barth and evangelicalism are most in tension. Barth is not a universalist if by that apokotastasis is intended. His doctrine is more accurately described as a 'particularism within a universalism' or as a 'universalism of hope' (Donald Bloesch). By this the following is intended: If we begin with God's self-disclosure in Christ, we are pointed to an eternal decree whereby God turns towards sinful man and wills both to give himself to man and to elect man for covenant with himself in the person of his own Son. By his death and resurrection Christ atones for the sins of men, bears their rejection and opens up the possibility of a future for them. This is a universal work and therefore a universal hope. None are excluded from it. There is no such thing as a non-elect man or woman. Election may be improperly resisted but it cannot be abrogated. If there are distinctions between Christians and non-Christians these are relative and not absolute. We may distinguish between the believing and the non-believing but not between the elect and the reprobate. Christ is the only reprobate.

The only distinction we are entitled to make is between the called and the not-yet-called, between those who have realised their election and those who have yet to do so.

It is this concern which is at the heart of Barth's contention with Pietism, which is investigated in chapter three. Barth criticises the subjectivity and individualism of Pietism but in essence it is the narrowness of Pietism, and particularly its desire to divide people into two fixed categories, the saved and the unsaved, which Barth resists. That there are distinctions between the believing and the unbelieving we have already seen. But essentially there is a solidarity between the Christian and the non-Christian in that whereas the Christian has been justified he is still a sinner (simul justus et peccator) and whereas the non-Christian is a sinner he has nevertheless been justified by Christ. Men of all kinds are united in the revelation of their sinfulness and in the expectation that Christ's work applies to all.

What this therefore produces is a difference in attitude. While traditionally evangelicalism has an undercurrent of pessimism concerning the scope of salvation, Barth stands for a hope for all rooted in the elective love of God and the universality of Christ's work. Echoes of the Blumhardts are to be perceived in Barth at this point. As evangelicalism is in process of assimilating Barth at other points, so here to imbibe the positive, hopeful intention of his theology would radically strengthen evangelicalism, freeing it of some of its darker tendencies (to arrogance, self righteousness,

world-negation, legalism and insularity) and affirming its joyful testimony to the possibility of human redemption.

Lest it be considered that Barth holds all the high ground in the theological debate, the thesis argues that in the encounter with evangelicalism the traffic is not all one way. In discussing Pietism it was argued that the emphasis on subjectivity was a wholesome complement to Barth's objectivism. Even here justice must be done to Barth. In the Dogmatics he pays careful attention to the subjective dimension in his understanding of revelation, his doctrine of election and (especially) his doctrine of reconciliation. As with other issues his concern is not to deny the subjective as such but to deny it a place of independent interest. The subjective must be enclosed within the objective and not vice versa. Here again his criticism of Pietism has force in that the subjective realisation of salvation is to the fore and the religious subject is exalted. Nevertheless, just as Barth's theology runs the danger that nature be swallowed up by grace, creation by reconciliation, man's story by God's story, man's decision by God's decision, history by proto-history, so we must assert here that the experience of men and women in receiving the grace of God must be given its proper place within the overarching work of God's grace in Christ.

More seriously, the thesis takes issue with Barth's doctrine of nothingness. Barth's primary concern in this area is to deny evil any place of independent, 'proper' existence within God's world. It is to be characterised paradoxically from beginning to end as

'nothingness', real though it may be. It is a passing reality, and has been from the beginning since it can only exist under the force of God's 'No'. Barth has no time for the concept of fallen angels since this accords to evil an ontology, a prospective possibility of existence. If nothingness is, it is only as an ontological impossibility.

Barth's thought here is remarkably innovative. It bears the marks of a deep concern to find a way of speaking of evil which contains within itself the negation of evil so that from the outset it is recognised that it has been overcome. Finding wholesome yet realistic ways of speaking of sin and evil is a valid concern. Yet the thesis judges Barth to have failed at this point on the grounds that his position can only be maintained by passing over certain biblical texts which point, although haltingly in a different direction and by positing a theological construct which turns out to be highly problematical. As an alternative to this the traditional doctrine of a pre-mundane angelic fall is restated and developed.

In this area, Barth is considered to have fallen short of his own well articulated loyalty to the Scripture principle. In mitigation of his offence however it must be conceded that the biblical witness to an angelic fall occurs on the periphery of the canon. While the fact and reality of evil are centre-stage in the drama of salvation and cannot be denied, re-interpreted or demythologized without serious consequences for the whole structure of Christian doctrine, this cannot be argued about the origin of

evil in the universe, the evidence for which is restrained and oblique though not totally obscure in the biblical witness. To Barth's credit, it is not his purpose to deny the fact and reality of evil (quite the opposite) but to take issue with a specific understanding of its origin. The thesis disagrees with Barth and argues that the concept of nothingness actively militates against a realistic appraisal of evil, but also argues that the lessons learnt from his way of talking about evil need to be incorporated within the traditional doctrine in order to preserve it from any tendency to give 'status' to that which is abhorrent both to God and man. Related to this are pastoral considerations about how evil may be thought and spoken of in healthy Christological perspective.

In the context of the whole of the thesis this chapter serves to indicate that whereas encountering Barth's theology is of immense significance for the progress of evangelical theology, this does not mean or imply that it can be or should be assimilated uncritically. To this extent the thesis as a whole confirms and identifies with the third stage of response to Barth, that of cautious assimilation. It further holds in common with the proponents of this viewpoint that evangelicalism is far from being a fixed and easily definable reality but must be seen as a dynamic and varied movement. This has already emerged in what has been surveyed. The 'older orthodoxy' which has its descendants in van Til, Klooster and Clark was precisely the movement which because of its rationalism gave rise to Pietism. Anabaptism formed a variant (or variants) of evangelicalism outside the Lutheran-Reformed tradition. If in recent years the

evangelical tradition has been thought to be synonymous with 'conservative evangelicalism' it is no surprise that Barth should be denied evangelical credentials. If on the other hand evangelicalism be understood as a wider tradition which contains a variety of schools and emphases with their own interior consistency and validity, then Karl Barth readily and easily takes his place within that tradition.

(b) Programmatic reflections - in prospect

This investigation of Barth and evangelicalism will finish with five programmatic reflections on the future of evangelical theology which draw upon the major themes that have emerged.

(1) The humanity of Scripture

Evangelicalism has been strong in asserting the divine inspiration of Scripture but has been reluctant to concede its full humanity. This parallels docetic tendencies in regard to the humanity of Christ. In so far as liberalism has awakened the church to the humanity of Christ and Scripture it should be gratefully received. Barth points the way to maintaining the Scripture principle and an essential stress on the authority of the Word of God while conceding the liability of the biblical authors in their humanity to err. This is not a contradiction and acts as a liberating influence in doing full justice to Scripture. It has been and is possible to embrace this position and remain fully

evangelical. The influence of this needs to be widely felt in the evangelical world in order truly to liberate the Bible to be the vehicle of the free Word of God.

(2) A new approach to hermeneutics

A high doctrine of Scripture is no guarantee of correct interpretation. Indeed a rigid view of Scriptural authority has often been closely associated with an ability to manipulate its meaning. There is no final guarantee of correct interpretation in a pilgrim and human church. Yet Barth's Christocentric concentration, preceded by the hermeneutical instinct of anabaptism (in its most enduring manifestations) lays the stress on a dynamic approach to hermeneutics which takes Christ, in his historical reality, seriously as the one who fulfils the law. When the Bible is seen as a 'flat' book and its own inner dialectic is not appreciated the door is open for gross misinterpretation. Christ is the canon within the canon, the hermeneutical centre of Scripture. Furthermore faith, prayer, and obedience belong to the hermeneutical process. The significance of this needs to be worked through in evangelical thought particularly in regard to the dynamic of social change and the emancipation which evangelicalism has sometimes retarded by dint of absolutizing the cultural context of biblical revelation and failing to perceive the revelational trajectory of Scripture.

(3) Affirmation of the world and of humanity

It is the conclusion of this work that the quality of hope is one of the major contributions of Barth to evangelicalism articulated supremely in his doctrine of election. Here is potential for transcending the age-old tension between Calvinism and Arminianism which capitulates to neither but captures the concerns of both. Evangelicalism needs this as a remedy for an underlying pessimism consequent upon a restricted view of the scope of salvation. It is this which in the past has produced a ghetto-like mentality of world negation and which must be transformed if evangelicalism is to be, or be again, a genuine expression of God's world-affirming love. It is hope for all and for the whole of life which is the essential link between personal conversion and social transformation.

(4) A fuller doctrine of the Holy Spirit

The questions raised by charismatic renewal extend much further than the debates concerning Christian experience would suggest. In Barth we found a greater need for pneumatological concentration to complement his Christocentricity. This would provide the proper context for a fuller treatment of creation and subjectivity. But this criticism is really directed at the whole of the Western church, including evangelicalism. An understanding of the role of the Spirit in creation, redemption and consummation ought to accompany a fuller exposition of a Spirit Christology and result in a full-bodied Trinitarianism.

(5) A heightened awareness of the spiritual conflict

It will be clear from this thesis that the reality of the spiritual conflict as portrayed in Scripture and supremely in the life, death and resurrection of Christ is regarded as a debatable but not a dispensable biblical theme. The extent of this conflict from the crucial significance of human decision through the awareness of the 'powers' which illuminates so much by offering the possibility of a 'political theology' to the suprahuman reality of in some sense personal, intelligent spiritual agencies of a malevolent and hostile kind has been laid bare at several points of this work. This reflects the conviction that evangelical theology, by its willingness to treat of this dimension with great if unfashionable seriousness, has kept close to a crucial biblical theme. Barth treats this area seriously also, although idiosyncratically, but serves Christian theology well not least in the demand his work makes that this area of reality must be articulated with sophistication and in Christological perspective. Evangelical theology is well equipped to carry this task further.

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