



Does the Gospel have a Future? Barth's *Romans* Revisited ¹

GERHARD O. FORDE

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

The title, as you can guess, has a double entendre. On the one hand, is there a future *for* the gospel in the “modern” or “post-modern” world or whatever version of “this evil and adulterous generation” we are currently mucking about in? And on the other hand, is there a future *in* the gospel for us? Does the gospel give us a future? As we put it in common parlance, “Is there any future in it?”

I. WHY REVISIT *ROMANS*?

My purpose in this paper is to reflect a bit on these questions in the light of Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. I choose Barth's *Romans* for a couple of reasons. The first, not necessarily in importance, is just that I like Barth's *Romans*. In some ways I like it better than the *Church Dogmatics*. It is always so deliciously nasty and fresh and exciting. When I teach Barth, I always begin with *Romans* simply because it is, for one thing, so much fun.

Furthermore, one must surely say that *Romans* is still the theological classic of the twentieth century, the hallmark over against which all have to define themselves, even the later Barth himself. I soon get suspicious of theologians who worry overmuch about whether Barth might have gone too far in his relentless attacks on every sacred oak in sight. *Romans* is still the great thunderhead that looms over us

¹This article is a slightly revised form of a lecture presented at a conference on Barth's theology (“Christian Hope and the Human Future”) sponsored by the Institute for Mission in the U.S.A. at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, June 22-24, 1992.

all, threatening ever and again to blast our fine and flimsy theological constructions with divine lightning and awesome thunder. Barth himself, while grudgingly admitting that *Romans* was a bit heavy handed, generally argued that it was at least more right than its critics!² Of course, the point is that most of the thunder is certainly not just Barth but at bottom Paul himself. Paul's *Romans* has always been the explosive that fires reformation in the history of the church and will, God willing, be so again. Barth's *Romans* gave Paul voice once again in the twentieth century, after he had been buried by the searchers for the historical Jesus and the history of religions savants who put him in the trash heap of “Hellenism.” The conversations back and forth in the prefaces to the several editions are a telltale indication of how these professional practitioners attempted to reduce Paul to a domesticated house pet. And the reactions since are an indication of how the same game continues. The explosion has gone off, and we have spent the time ever since trying to clean up the mess and making sure it doesn't happen again. Perhaps that

is already to hint at an answer to our question. Does the gospel have a future? Just wait and see what happens when someone has the temerity to preach it without qualification!

Another reason to revisit Barth's *Romans* is that it might be timely to do so. Barth's understanding of the gospel, particularly the sharpness and finality with which it is put in *Romans*, has been roundly criticized by our theological futurists, the so-called theologians of hope and the liberationists of one sort or another. Barth's eschatology was attacked, particularly by Moltmann in his *Theology of Hope*, as being too transcendental, too much of a completed gift to faith.³ Since everything promised is already there to faith, nothing, supposedly, remains for the actual or real future of the world. Doesn't the gospel mean something for the actual improvement of the world? Must there not be real hope for better things to come? Are we stuck with just the much denigrated "pie in the sky, by-and-by"? Or can we have it—spiritually only—but not eat it? So the questions go.

But just when and how does the gospel give hope for this alleged "real" future? Just what is our "real" future? Such are the counter-questions inevitably raised by the charges against Barth. Is the futurist rhetoric that flooded the world after Barth just a repetition of the post-reformation arguments about progress in sanctification and the third use of the law, now in more social and political dress? How *does* the gospel affect or effect a future? Always, always, it seems, someone worries that the gospel is going to spoil the human venture. So one has to fix it, call in the theological bomb squad to defuse it, or make sure that it doesn't have the last word. Does one have to back off a bit on its eschatological givenness and completeness in order to goad its hearers into interest in the future of the earth? Is that not just too much like holding back a bit on grace to make room for at least some human effort? Yes, the gospel is the end of the law, but don't we have to have the

²Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) 120. Cited hereafter in the text as "Busch."

³Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967) 50f. Cited hereafter in the text as "Moltmann."

third use nevertheless so people won't get the idea that they are actually free? More recently, fugitives from the thunder and lightning seem to propose that we find a shelter from the thunder and lightning in the church. Isn't the church somehow a bit of the eschaton, in some way a realization in history of that which is to come? Isn't the church, so to speak, a kind of vestibule to the kingdom of God?

Generally speaking, to remedy things, to get some future in the gospel, our theological futurists borrowed a page or two from itinerant Marxists, particularly Ernst Bloch and *Vas Princip Hoffnung*. What did this amount to, in the end? Was it just another—this time social—third use of the law? But as with all attempts to fix up a human future for the gospel, it hasn't worked. The Marxist enterprise seems pretty much to have collapsed. What are we to say about the future now? One could say that the theological world today is beginning to sound more and more like that world against which Barth's blast in *Romans* was originally directed. The future we are being offered is not much different from the future nineteenth-century liberalism served up: a little bit of progress for our troubles, only perhaps now more individualistic; self esteem; feeling good about oneself; spirituality—all provided and coddled by the church, your local support group. There is talk of the new age, but it turns out to be mostly a rehash of very,

very old things. And tragically, judging from what goes on in the churches today, theologians seem to have decided that there is little future either for or in the gospel itself. Given all that, would it not be well to go back and listen once again to the thunder? Could it be that even the later Barth himself, the professor, might have forgotten some of the things Barth the preacher was worried about?

II. CRISES IN BARTH'S DEVELOPMENT

There were, I think we can say, two major crises in Barth's theological development. The first was the crisis of the preacher, the second the crisis of the professor. Both were crises in what to say. Barth the preacher found himself with nothing to say when the liberalism in which he was educated collapsed. Barth the professor found himself hard pressed to know what to say after the devastating negations of his own *Romans* commentary. For our revisitation of the *Romans* commentary, the crisis of Barth the preacher will be the more important.

The crisis of Barth the preacher was that in the wake of World War I and its devastation, spiritual as well as physical, he found himself with nothing to say. He was supposed to preach, but he had nothing to say. He once said he felt like a trumpeter puffing out his cheeks and blowing as hard as he could, but nothing came out. And he had nothing to say, to make a long story short, because what he had been saying had no future any more. To begin with, as an assistant pastor in Geneva, he believed there was a future in the gospel. Indeed you might even say that like so many theologians of those days he believed that the future envisaged by liberalism, by the Herrmanns, the Harnacks, the Troeltschs, et al., that that future *was* the gospel. The kingdom of God was among us, in us, inspiring us to work for the future it promised.

Barth's sermons in those days are not much different in content from the sort

of drivel one can hear these days—although they are much more scholarly. He said things like: “The greatest thing is what takes place in our hearts; to each man goes out the call to be true to himself, namely to model the best that anyone can become.” He exhorted the congregation to “try to become valuable”—perhaps these days we would say, “You're special.” He even attacked the christology of Chalcedon, and said instead, “If Christ begins to live in us...that is the beginning of the Christian faith” (Busch, 54). In his confirmation instruction he held that “instruction cannot be merely teaching and learning; we must discover each other personally and become good friends” (Busch, 65). Change the vocabulary a bit and it sounds like current gospels of mutual affirmation through personal encounter in your local support group.

But when he was called to be a pastor in Safenwil (1911-21) his attention shifted somewhat from the more personal and individualistic gospel he had heard from Herrmann to the more social and economic problems posed by the working classes in his congregation. He found, perhaps we can say, another gospel of the future. He flirted with socialism and talked a good deal about the future, about bringing in the kingdom of God, the future of Christianity, and theology, working for the kingdom and such familiar niceties. He talked about how the church for 1800 years had failed to deal with social needs, and how Jesus was the partisan of the poor, who believed in the one God in solidarity with society, and allowed as how true socialism is the true Christianity for our time (Busch, 70). It is well for us to remember all this because it shows that Barth had already been where we are today. Could it be that in some ways we are only just now

ready for his *Romans* commentary?

But then came the crisis, the crisis of the preacher. Though there were already, no doubt, theological influences at work, the crisis was precipitated by the outbreak of the first world war. Most shocking to Barth was the fact that ninety-three German intellectuals, including his theological teachers, issued a manifesto identifying themselves with the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. The professors, you might say, deserted the preacher. “For me,” Barth said, “it was almost worse than the violation of Belgian neutrality. And to my dismay, among the signatories I discovered the names of almost all my German teachers...It was like the twilight of the gods when I saw the reaction of Harnack [who actually wrote speeches for Kaiser Wilhelm!], Herrmann, Rade, Eucken and company to the new situation” (Busch,81).

All of a sudden the gospel he had learned had no future—or even worse, had contributed to a terrifying future. He was dismayed, he said, to discover “how religion and scholarship could be changed completely, into intellectual 42 cm cannons” (Busch, 81). A whole world came to an end for Barth. The ethical failure, as he called it, of his teachers, indicated that “their exegetical and dogmatic presuppositions could not be in order” (Busch, 81). The entire enterprise of exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which he had hitherto held to be essentially trustworthy, was shaken to the foundations. The promised future was swept away. The house had been built on sand.

III. BARTH'S RESURRECTION FUTURE

What was the preacher to say now—now that what he had learned from his professors had no future? Barth found the answer in the “Strange New World within the Bible,” as he put it in one of his essays,⁴ particularly in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. The preacher had to retire to his study to rediscover the word of God for himself after the human word had failed him. The result was two editions of *The Epistle to the Romans*,⁵ the bombshell that rocked the theological world so that it has never been the same. Barth's well known characterization of what happened bears repeating: It was, he said, like the time when he had grasped the bell-rope by mistake to steady himself in climbing up the church tower in Pratteln, attracting all sorts of unexpected and unwanted attention. He did it unwittingly, he said, and had no intention of doing it again! (Busch, 121). Unwitting or not, the world heard the bell and could not ignore it. It woke everybody up. The tolling of the bell which startled the theological world was the summons of a radical eschatology, the end breaking in through the New Testament gospel, and particularly the Pauline message. The glaring omission of the fine scholarship of the nineteenth century had been eschatology. Now Barth announced that if Christianity be not altogether restless eschatology, there remains in it no relationship whatever with Christ (*Romans*, 314). Such eschatology, for Barth, simply erases from the ledger every claim, every promontory, every attempt to identify progress and human dreams of the future with the Christian message. The preacher not only turned away from his professors, he destroyed whatever was left of their dreams.

In this regard it is interesting to note the difference between the two editions of *Romans* (1919 and 1921). In the first edition, according to Moltmann, Barth was much more friendly towards dynamic and cosmic perspectives on progress and the future. These, however, drastically retreat into the background in the more well-known second edition (Moltmann, 51). This is an important observation for our questions about the future of the gospel because it demonstrates

that in the early Barth, already between the first and second editions of *Romans*, there was a move away from any direct identification between the gospel and human dreams or efforts for the future. The gospel is not in any direct sense empowerment for human schemes. If there is a future in the gospel, it must first be the crisis and end of all human futures.

The gospel is the announcement of a “wholly other” future, the future which Barth liked to call the *futurum resurrectionis*, the resurrection future. Because this future is an absolute gift, all other futures come under crisis, under judgment. The *futurum resurrectionis* signals a halt to all human future building. Human futures are thrown under judgment because fallen humanity has already stepped over the eschatological line. Human futures are already evidence of transgression and titanism. They are evidence of a fundamental mistaking of the human situation. As

⁴Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957) 28-50.

⁵Citations in the text (“*Romans*”) are from the English translation by Edwyn C. Hoskyns (Oxford University Press, 1933).

humans we should have known that we cannot know the invisible God. But we did not stop at the barrier, we stepped across. And so arises the fog or porridge of religion, a “middle realm” between us and God, between time and eternity, between the here and the there. A fundamental mistaking of the *II* no-god,” our idols, for God perverts everything (*Romans*, 49-50). It is precisely in religion, humanity’s highest achievement, that the hubris, the presumption and arrogance of humankind bursts into full bloom. It is in religion that sin comes most clearly to light. What we call religious life is nothing but romantic unbelief, a refusal to halt at the barrier. To see this clearly is to see with Paul that “there is none righteous, no, not one,” that *II* all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.” The *futurum resurrectionis* allows none of the prominences and monuments of the religion of this age to stand. The judgment, the negation must be absolute and total. You can open Barth’s *Romans* to almost any page and find that negation hammering away with relentless and breathtaking abandon.

We can’t revisit *Romans* without at least sampling some of these. Speaking to *Romans* 2:14-15:

What is pleasing to God comes into being when all human righteousness is gone, irretrievably gone, when men are uncertain and lost, when they have abandoned all ethical and religious illusions, and when they have renounced every hope in this world and in this heaven. Beyond every concrete visible thing, beyond everything in the law of which those who possess it approve—the ‘ethical kernel’, the ‘idealistic background’, the ‘religious feeling’—beyond all that is valued in western European ‘conduct’, ‘poise’, ‘race’, ‘personality’, ‘delicacy of taste’, ‘spirituality’, ‘force of character’—beyond all these things is set that which men have to lay before God, and which He will *render* (ii.6) with eternal life. There may perhaps be no more than a quite unconscious feeling for religion in no way derived from the Church; perhaps no more than the last stage of human nakedness (Dostoevsky!); perhaps no more than confusion, misery, and destitution; perhaps no more than some last terror before the mystery of death, some final disgusted

rejection of the inevitability of the world by a man when he leaves his busy life protesting against its futility. But more than any of these, and better and more beautiful, is that the *rendering* of God—depends upon—nothing at all! There is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance. But what is Repentance? Not the last and noblest and most refined achievement of the righteousness of men in the service of God, but the first elemental act of the righteousness of God in the service of men; the work that God has written in their hearts, and which, because it is from God and not from men, occasions joy in heaven; that looking forward to God and to Him only which is recognized only by God and by God Himself. (*Romans*, 68)

Or this, perhaps pertinent in a day in which religion has once again become so popular:

In religion the supreme competence of human possibility attains its consummation and final realization. Under the scrutiny of law men become sinners (vii.7-13); for in the end human passion derives its living energy from that passionate desire: *Eritis sicut Deus* ["you will be like God"]! In religion this final passion becomes conscious and recognizable as experience and event. Can there be any affirmation of passion that outstrips the passion with which Prometheus robs Zeus of his fire and uses it for his own advantage? And yet, is it not perfectly obvious that such stolen fire is not the all-consuming fire of God, but only a

furnace from which a very peculiar kind of smoke pours forth? Many gases and different kinds of smoke, many fumes, spread over the broad plain of human life. Smoke from the fire of Zeus may penetrate farther than other fumes, it may display greater variety, but it does not differ in kind. In any case, it is not by the possession of such fire that we pass from death to life, or put an end to human passions. Rather it is the crowning of all other passions with the passion of eternity, the endowment of what is finite with infinity, the most exalted consecration of the passions of men, and their most secure establishment. If then, by the consciousness of religion we make human thought and will and act to be the thought and will and act of God, does not human behaviour become supremely impressive, significant, necessary, and inevitable? Does not human behaviour then cease to be subjective, and become objective? A man mayor may not act religiously; but if he does so act, it is widely supposed that he does well, and is thereby justified and established and secure. In fact, however, he merely establishes himself, rests upon his own competence, and treats his own ambitions as adequate and satisfactory. Religion, then, so far from dissolving men existentially, so far from rolling them out and pressing them against the wall, so far from overwhelming them and transforming them, acts upon them like a drug which has been extremely skilfully administered. Instead of counteracting human illusions, it does no more than introduce an alternative condition of pleasurable emotion. Thus it is that the possibility of religion enables the existentially godless

man to attain the full maturity of his godlessness by bringing forth a rich and most conspicuous harvest of *fruit unto death*. (*Romans*, 236)

Thus it is quite clear for the Barth of *Romans*, if there is to be any real future for the gospel, the futures which humans construct for themselves—particularly their religious aspirations, presumptions, and accomplishments—must first be blasted by the divine negation. If there is to be a *futurum resurrectionis* there must first be a death. The divine judgment, the crisis, redraws the line over which we have stepped, or to use Barth's terms, it shuts us in, imprisons us. The *sola* in the *sola gratia* functions over against us in the first instance as an absolute no. It negates every attempt to engineer a future on our own terms, i.e., on the basis of the law or works—the only resource we have available.

IV. BEYOND NEGATION

Again, one might be tempted to say that there is no future then. If the negation shuts us in, what future is there? Now it is just here that I believe most of the theological world failed to understand Barth—just as, one can say, it has failed to understand Paul and his more astute interpreters. It has to do with a fundamental perception of what grace is all about. Through the negation, just because it is complete and absolute (it is, after all, *SOLA gratia!*), comes a corresponding and, for want of a better word, dialectically related positive: As Paul put it, “Do we by this faith abolish the law, by no means, we establish it.” Or as Barth put it, what shuts us in for the time being is not a mere negative, it is *the new country*, what bars us in is the place of exit, what dissolves the whole world and its wisdom is precisely what also establishes it as a created order. It is indeed a future: but not one we can engineer, it is the *futurum resurrectionis*.

The Resurrection, which is the place of exit, also bars us in, for it is both barrier and exit. Nevertheless, the ‘No’ which we encounter is the ‘No’—of God. And

page 74

therefore our veritable deprivation is our veritable comfort in distress. The barrier marks the frontier of a new country, and what dissolves the whole wisdom of the world also establishes it. Precisely because the ‘No’ of God is all-embracing, it is also His ‘Yes’. We have therefore, in the power of God, a look-out, a door, a hope; and even in this world we have the possibility of following the narrow path of taking each little step with a ‘despair which has its own consolation’ (Luther). The prisoner becomes a watchman. Bound to his post as firmly as a prisoner in his cell, he watches for the dawning of the day: *I will stand upon my watch, and set me upon the tower and will look forth to see what he will speak with me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. And the Lord answered me, and said, Write the vision, and make it plain upon tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for the appointed time, and it hasteth toward the end, and shall not lie; though it tarry wait for it; because it will surely come, it will not delay* (Hab. ii:1-3). (*Romans*, 38)

There is, therefore, a future in the gospel. Indeed, the gospel alone bears the future. Precisely

because it is the absolute negation of all mistaken human futures, it places before us the true hope, the *futurum resurrectionis*. The prisoner becomes a watchman. No doubt this seems drastically modest over against some of the more elaborate futurist rhetoric we have enjoyed of late. But the question it puts to us is whether it is not more accurate biblically and in its own way more hopeful. Indeed there is an unmistakable forward cast to the whole of Barth's *Romans* that is too often missed. We see what we can see, we live and move in the light of "the coming day" (*Romans*, 149ff.). Everything, like the watchman, faces forward towards and is understood in terms of that light. Unfortunately, most people never got beyond the mighty negations, and so never saw the light. They read *Romans* to mean, "Turn out the light, the party's over." However, the message behind it all was really, "The light of the coming day is dawning, the party is about to begin!" But, as always, perhaps, darkness was preferred to the light—how does it go?—"because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19).

So once again we seem to have sunk back down into the night, as Barth called it in the opening chapters. The night of religion, the mist, the fog, has rolled in once again. The "No" was too much, and so also the "Yes" could not be heard.

What shuts us in for the time being is the new country, the *futurum resurrectionis*. That is the dialectic of *Romans* which we could well afford to heed again today. To be sure it may in Barth's *Romans* have been cast, as Moltmann and others complained, in much too transcendental a form, but we should not let that frighten us overmuch. Indeed, take away the Kantianism and even the Kierkegaardianism of Barth's *Romans* and the dialectic is certainly going to become more devastating not less. After all, who is more devastating for our religious dreams about the future, Kant or the crucified Messiah? The question before the house, I take it, is just how the gospel affects or effects the human future. What Barth's *Romans* proposes is that we consider seriously the Pauline claim that the gospel of the end of the law does not abolish or render the law of no effect, but rather establishes it. It is precisely this dialectic, this mystery, if one can call it that, that holds the key to the door of the gospel's future. It is a claim which seems always to elude us, we never quite grasp what it means, or never quite believe it.

The gospel seems always to us to make a shambles of our engineering, and we set about desperately trying to make repairs.

What dissolves the whole world and its wisdom is precisely what also establishes it; our veritable deprivation is our veritable comfort. How can we understand that? And how does it give us hope? The point is precisely that because the *futurum* is an absolute given which negates all humanly contrived futures, precisely because we are judged to be dead in trespasses and sins and nevertheless forgiven, we are turned back absolutely into the world of creation to know ourselves as creatures and to take care. Because we behold at the barrier a place of exit, we halt and are turned back for the time being into the world. We are restored as creatures, we become historical because we "have time" for the world and for the other. If we were not turned back absolutely, if there were some little leak or breach in the barrier, we would not have time for the world. Time would have us. We would have to spend it all devising ways to get through the barrier.

V. LIVING ON WATCH

This, I take it is the point of the metaphor of the prisoner. No doubt that worries us. But note that the prisoner becomes a watchman, yet not an escapee, not even a would-be escapee. She watches for the dawning of the day and so is not seduced by false futures. "Bound to his post as firmly as a prisoner in his cell, he watches for the dawning of the day." The metaphor may not be the most ingratiating, but the point is clear. One is held in this world precisely by the light of the coming day.

Here the point is that if we are to answer our questions about the way Christian hope affects or effects the human future in the light of Barth's *Romans* commentary we would have to say that humanity will have a genuine future to the degree that it finds its false hopes dissolved by the absolute givenness of the gospel and is thus turned back into the world to be creatures, to take care of creation in the freedom and spontaneity which the gospel gives. It will have a future to the degree that it is dissolved and thus established by the gospel. It will have a future to the degree that the prisoner becomes not a would-be escapee, but a watchman.

Such a position is surely much more modest and therefore hopeful than the rather inflated rhetoric about the future that we have been subjected to of late. Barth has important things to say about the way the prisoner-become-watchman would act in this world for the time being. We haven't the time here to go into that, but the reader would do well to look once again. A couple of things, however, can be pointed out. After the inflated rhetoric one hears about the church these days, it is refreshing to hear the church described as a "lost post, which nevertheless must be occupied." The prisoner-become-watchman is of course aware of the tremendous disparity between the church and the gospel, aware even that the church is living proof of the failure of the gospel. Yet bound as surely as a prisoner to his cell, she will not seek to escape. She will realize that she too stands under that absolute dissolution, and only so is established. "We must not," Barth says, "because we are fully aware of the eternal opposition between the Gospel and the Church, hold

ourselves aloof from the Church or break up its solidarity; but rather, participating in its responsibility and sharing the guilt of its inevitable failure, we should accept it and cling to it" (*Romans*, 334). One who hears and proclaims the gospel

sees the inadequacy of the Church growing apace, not because of its weakness and lack of influence, not because it is out of touch with the world; but, on the contrary, because of the pluck and force of wholly utilitarian and hedonistic illusions, because of its very great success and because of the skill with which it trims its sails to the changing fashions of the world. He recognizes that, precisely when the Church attains the goal of service rendered by men to men, the purpose of God has been obscured, and judgment knocks at the door. The more the Church is the Church, he stands within it, miserable, hesitating, questioning, terrified. But he does stand within the Church, not outside as a spectator. His possibility is the possibility of the Church, and the Church's impossibility is also his. Its embarrassment is his, and so too is its tribulation. He is one with the solidarity of the Church, because it is the lack of the glory of God which creates fellowship and

solidarity among men. (*Romans*, 335)

So the gospel hearer and preacher does not leave or separate from the church in the name of some supposed purity to be found elsewhere.

He must occupy this position, though he lose his soul thereby, though he may seem to be untrue to himself, and though he be exposed to abuse as a dishonest opportunist. And the position is a lost position. Yes, a lost post, which must nevertheless remain occupied. All posts which men occupy as men are lost posts. It is this that must be made evident. (*Romans*, 335)

Somehow there is much more realism in all of that, a realism which speaks hope precisely because it has no pretensions and is genuinely able to effect a future that eludes our inflated rhetoric.

The ethical life of the prisoner-become-watchman also stands under the mark of the dissolution which alone establishes it. We are to present our bodies a living sacrifice (so Paul). But sacrifice, for Barth, is really sacrifice, not claiming anything for oneself.

Sacrifice is not a human action whereby the will of God is fulfilled, if 'fulfillment' means that he who makes the sacrifice becomes thereby an instrument of God. Sacrifice is, rather, a demonstration demanded by God for His glory....God remains God even when confronted by the greatest sacrifice; and after the sacrifice His will goes its own way as it did before....There is no such thing as the 'building up' by men of an adequate ethical life, not even if the quality of their moral behaviour were so sublime that it might be claimed that the will of God had been united with the human will, or that the human will had been absorbed into the divine, or that the divine will had been fulfilled in the human will. (*Romans*, 431-2)

Barth likes to use the idea in *Romans* that the proper attitude towards ethical actions is to regard them, as already indicated in the question of sacrifice, simply as demonstrations.

All human duties and virtues and good deeds are set upon the edge of a knife. They hang on a single thread. Is the man who practises them and cherishes them really prepared to sacrifice them; really prepared to see in them no more than demonstrations, and thus to give glory to God? What is more than this is of the evil one—even if it be the holiness and purity of a martyred virgin. Does a man

suppose that thereby God shows Himself to be too harsh a master? Is he unwilling to offer him this *veritable service*? Then let him turn back, for he has too many possessions! (*Romans*, 433)

And so it goes. Eschewing all Titanism, the prisoner-become-watchman lives in this world with

no pretensions.

VI. EPILOGUE

Enough has been said to make the point. The recent futurist rhetoric has failed us. The church has fallen over backwards to deny or down-play the *futurum resurrectionis*. It has called it just “pie in the sky by and by,” or fallen for the Marxist idea that it is the opium of the people. It seems to have failed to realize how such hope really functions. We still hear people, now and then, trying to get mileage out of the “pie in the sky” charge. It is a cheap shot. The best reply is another cheap shot: “What’s the matter, don’t you like pie?” But perhaps it is not just a cheap shot. Perhaps it is hope for “pie” that keeps us going, and will really change the world! Maybe what we ought to be doing is just yelling, “Free pie, free pie!” and then see what happens.

In this regard, one has to like Barth’s *Romans*. One might even be forgiven for liking it better than the *Church Dogmatics*. To be sure, it has its problems. But it is precisely the recklessness and abandon with which Barth goes at the task that is so hopeful. It is still one of the few theological books since Luther that is really fun.

The fact with which we are left is that much language about the future didn’t really give us one. That raises for us the real question. What kind of speaking actually will deliver a future? Now the curious thing is that Barth’s *Romans* did create a future in spite of the fact that it was roundly criticized for not being able to do so. What are we to make of this? Is it not simply another indication that we need to watch not merely what the words are about, but what they actually do? That when the gospel is preached to the degree that it actually dissolves and cuts off all false hope, then there is real hope for the future? Does it not mean that a theology of hope doesn’t necessarily give either hope or a future, precisely because it presumes to “add something more” to the gospel? Is that not just another chapter in the dreary business about the third use of the law? There is hope for the human race to the degree that the gospel stops our attempts to escape and turns us back into the world to take up the cause of the genuine care of creation. Important about Barth’s *Romans* is that it didn’t only talk about the future, it actually made one. Perhaps the secret is precisely in the recklessness. After all, what more is a preacher to do?

GERHARD O. FORDE, Professor of Systematic Theology, has spoken and published extensively on issues related to reformation theology. His most recent book is *Theology Is for Proclamation*.