



The Unheard Message of Karl Barth

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I. THE AMERICAN ACCULTURATION OF BARTH

American theology in the twentieth century never knew a Barthian phase. From the beginning, the assimilation of Barth's theology into the American context was made possible only through a tremendous process of cultural translation.¹ When, in 1933, the second edition of his commentary on *Romans* was translated into English, even his most ardent admirers had to confess themselves a bit embarrassed by his (supposedly) one-sided rejection of natural theology and apologetics, his repeated emphasis on the wholly-otherness of God, his strident criticism of religion, and the (alleged) incomprehensibility of his style, colored as it was with images like crisis, paradox, the line of death which separates this world from the world to come, the wisdom of death, and *Futurum resurrectionis* (resurrection future). Barth's theology was quite simply an alien plant which could not flourish on the soil of an American Protestantism long committed to the experiential in religion. And so, the most offensive elements in his thinking were solemnly stripped away, thus making him more amenable to American sensibilities. The cultural translation having been completed, Barth was able to assume a place of honor alongside other luminaries like Emil Brunner and Reinhold Nie-

¹See Richard Roberts, "The Reception of the Theology of Karl Barth in the Anglo-Saxon World: History, Typology, and Prospect," in *Karl Barth: Centenary Essays*, ed. Stephen W. Sykes (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1989) 125, 137.

buhr, as one of the founders of that most typically American of all theological movements: neo-orthodoxy. But of course, Barth was no longer Barth once the process of assimilation was complete. Thus, the Barth who exercised an influence on American theology in the middle decades of this century was not the theologian known to Europeans but a caricature.

Who was Karl Barth really? And what did he want? The origins of Barth's theology are not to be found where they are usually located, in the crisis of August 1914. They lie further back in the theology he learned at the feet of Wilhelm Herrmann in Marburg. Herrmann is customarily described in histories of theology as a Ritschlian. But that is a distortion of the truth. During the years in which Barth studied under him, Herrmann had already broken free of the central tendencies of Ritschl's theology. In Herrmann's view, Ritschl's theology was a typical expression of theological positivism. Far from eliminating the old orthodox conception of faith as the acceptance of doctrinal propositions as true, Ritschl had simply replaced the dogmas which were to be believed with the "teachings of Jesus" as they could be established by historical-critical science. Ritschl was thus seen by Herrmann as the last and greatest

representative of Protestant orthodoxy. Herrmann's theology is best described as a kind of existentialized Schleiermacherianism. It was from Herrmann that Barth first learned to disdain natural theology, to reject apologetics, and to oppose historicism.

After graduation, Barth entered the pastorate. During the years prior to the first world war, Barth's theology underwent significant modification. To be sure, such modifications as occurred did not entail a break with the theological method he had learned from Herrmann. His break with Herrmann came after the outbreak of the war. What did happen prior to the war is that Barth learned to be critical of the religious individualism which was celebrated in Marburg. The occasion for this learning process was Barth's conversion to socialism shortly after his move to Safenwil in July 1911. He gave "socialist speeches" to the local Worker's Union in which he criticized the view of religion which prevailed in Germany—the view according to which religion is to be understood as a matter between God and the soul, the soul and God, and only that. The coming kingdom which Jesus proclaimed, Barth now said, is a kingdom which will make *all things* new—including the network of social and economic relationships in which we live. His sermons now gave prominence to new themes: the judgment of God, the depravity of the human race, the wholly-otherness of God, and the criticism of religion. Most significant of all, perhaps, was the fact that Barth's basic outlook, the ethos out of which he thought and spoke, was now characterized by a sense of disquiet with all possibilities lying ready to hand, a deeply felt longing for a new world, and a fundamentally anti-bourgeois attitude. Thus, the soil was well prepared for the break with liberalism in the aftermath of the events which occurred in the autumn of 1914.

II. BARTH'S BREAK WITH LIBERALISM

As is well known, the catalyst which sparked Barth's break with the theology of his teachers was their public attempt to provide Christian legitimation for the war policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II. That the gospel could be so easily manipulated to support something contrary to it was a signal to Barth that there was something fundamentally wrong with the theology and ethics he had learned at Marburg. Barth's break with liberalism did not come right away. For the first year after the war broke out, his theology was characterized by the tendency to equate the war with divine judgment on Europe and the No of God with the no which he and his friends pronounced on the then reigning theology—a sort of cultural Protestantism in reverse, a counter-cultural Protestantism. The real breakthrough came sometime around August 1915, as a consequence of his growing disenchantment with the Religious Socialist movement in Switzerland. It was then that the realization dawned on him that he could no longer take it for granted that he and his friends represented the kingdom with their protests. The kingdom of God, he now saw, was more "wholly other" than ever he had dreamed. If the kingdom of God means God's judgment on all things human, then surely that includes movements of protest and revolution. Such a view did not lead him to cut his ties with socialism; far from it. It did, however, make him a principled critic of Religious Socialism. While rejecting the Religious Socialist direct equation of work for a socialist future with work for God's kingdom, he now understood socialism as a parable of the kingdom—a sign of the coming of the kingdom—but not the thing itself.

Theologically, Barth's break with Herrmann is best described as a move to a new form of

theological realism (or objectivism). Such a move did not represent a simple rejection of modernity; on the contrary, it would not have been possible had he not continued to build upon a foundation laid by certain crucial elements he retained as part of his modern inheritance. From Hegel and his right-wing follower Philip Marheineke, Barth retained the view that revelation is to be strictly understood as *Self*-revelation. From Kant, he retained the epistemology set forth in the First Critique, and he used it to establish the limits or boundaries of human knowing in order then to locate the being of God beyond those limits. The result was a shift from Herrmann's idealistic theology (which understood God as a necessary postulate for the sake of ethical activity) to a critically realistic theology (which understood God as a Reality complete, whole, and entire in itself, apart from and prior to all human knowledge and therefore not caught in the Kantian subject-object split). However true it may be that Barth's theology contained elements that were entirely new in the history of theology, it is equally true that it contained and was built upon modern elements. His theology thus represented a new stage of development in the history of modern theology, not a break with it. It is easy to lose sight of that in a day when the dominant historiography has reduced the meaning of the "modern" to Ernst Troeltsch and his followers. But it is of the

utmost importance that we do not lose sight of it, if we are going to attain to a proper understanding of the history of nineteenth and twentieth century theology.

III. THE *RÖMERBRIEF*

The document of Barth's break with Herrmannian liberalism was his commentary on Romans. The first edition was published in 1919; the second, heavily revised edition was published in 1922. It is the second edition which was translated into English. I will not enter here into the differences between the two editions. It is sufficient to point out that the positions which are often attributed to the first edition in the scholarly literature represent a caricature of its teachings and that the differences between the two editions are almost universally exaggerated. Nevertheless, it was the second edition which became—in Karl Adam's phrase—the bombshell which fell into the playground of the theologians.

The purpose of the second *Romans* was to clear the ground of errors, to negate every false starting-point and grounding of theology. To this end, Barth drew upon all the tools available to him: the neo-Kantianism of his philosopher brother, Heinrich; Franz Overbeck's philosophy of history; and Søren Kierkegaard's concept of indirect communication, his emphasis upon paradox, and his understanding of revelation as the entrance by God into a "divine incognito." None of these concepts and categories were taken over unchanged, however. All were adapted to Barth's strictly theological purposes. Barth's positive message has never been understood where scholars have sought to interpret it solely in terms of the influence of Kierkegaard et al. He put these categories to use in subverting the reigning theology, but his own positive proposal is not fully described by them.

The positive message of *Romans* is twofold. First and foremost, revelation is never directly given into the hands of human beings. It is not a given. The historicism and psychologism of the liberals on the one side and the biblicism of conservatives on the other are both rejected. Both sides treat revelation as something directly given to human control and

manipulation; both sides are guilty of a profanation of the concept of revelation. Barth's anti-bourgeois attitude here found vivid expression. For him, revelation is never identifiable with something directly given to human cognition (e.g., with a historical magnitude or the content of a religious experience). Revelation is always indirect and hidden. God reveals himself by veiling himself in a creaturely medium. Revelation, so understood, entails unveiling in and through the veil; a gracious divine act in which the veil is made to be transparent to the eyes of faith. In the phase of second *Romans*, the veil of revelation was seen by Barth to consist in the event of the cross—a constriction which he would relax, just three years later, in his Göttingen lectures on dogmatics, through an expanded conception of the localization of revelation in the whole complex of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Still, the second edition of *Romans* already set forth a clear and coherent theological epistemology,² though it

²This has been amply demonstrated by Ingrid Spieckermann, *Gotteserkenntnis: Ein Beitrag zur Grundfrage der neuen Theologie Karl Barths* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1985).

was seldom seen by his critics. Paul Althaus was among the first (but certainly not the last) to see in *Romans* an all-destructive theological skepticism; and in Barth's talk of a "wholly other" God an *a priori* principle or construct, rather than an *a posteriori* conclusion from a fully actualized and received revelation. But such a reading of *Romans* completely misses the point. *Romans* is not the skeptical, pessimistic book it is often alleged to be.

A second, decisive element in Barth's positive vision has to do with the relation of theology to revelation. In Barth's view, a theology based in revelation alone will always be possible only as a divine possibility, never as a human possibility. Humanly speaking, theology is an impossible task. The task of the theologian is to proclaim the word of God, but to proclaim the word of God would mean to say the words "the Word became flesh" as God says them, with the meaning God gives to them. And that is something that human beings have no power, in and of themselves, to do. Therefore, if theology is to succeed in its God-given task of proclaiming the word, it will only be possible on the basis of the self-speaking of God. The whole of Barth's efforts were directed towards getting his contemporaries to see the necessity of the divine self-speaking; to see the necessity of doing theology in such a way that a space is created for God to speak when he is spoken of. All theology is only prolegomena to what God must do if theology is to succeed. Where this is understood, theology will, as the first expression of its faith and obedience, submit itself to the crisis of divine judgment; the crisis in which the witness that theology offers is either taken up by God and used in God's self-attestation or is rejected.

IV. BARTH REMAINS BARTH

Barth never departed from this fundamental viewpoint. That fact is concealed by the paradigm currently used by scholars in interpreting Barth's theological development between *Romans* and the *Church Dogmatics*. According to this paradigm, Barth's development in the twenties is best understood in terms of a "turn from dialectic to analogy," which most scholars associate with the book which Barth wrote on Anselm in 1931. In truth, such a paradigm is deeply flawed. It overlooks the fact that a form of analogy was already at work in *Romans* and co-existed with dialectic throughout the twenties. Thus, all talk of a turn "from...to..." is seriously misleading. Even more important, however, is the fact that this paradigm fails to recognize that

analogy as Barth understood it in the *Church Dogmatics* is an *inherently dialectical* concept. For Barth, an analogy between God's knowledge of himself (the divine self-speaking) and our knowledge of him (theology) only arises as the result of a dialectical movement in which God takes up the language in which humans seek to bear witness to him—a language which in itself is inadequate to bear witness to God—and gives to it, by grace, an adequacy which it would not otherwise possess. In the revelation event, a relationship of correspondence is actualized between the word and human words. That is Barth's doctrine of analogy. The first moment of this conception of analogy, the motor which drives it, is the dialectic of veiling and unveiling of *Romans*. Thus, in

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the *Church Dogmatics* no less than in *Romans*, theology is understood as the impossible possibility. Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But by God's grace, it is possible. What this means, in concrete terms, is that the *Church Dogmatics* have never been rightly understood where they have been interpreted without the lens provided by *Romans*.

In America especially, that has rarely, if ever, been understood. The emergence of the paradigm of a "turn from dialectic to analogy" in the fifties had the effect of cementing in place an already existing tendency to regard Barth's later work in the *Church Dogmatics* positivistically; i.e., as just another positive dogmatic program which had departed from the convictions which governed *Romans*. The neo-orthodox in America could rejoice, because they believed that the sharp dialectics of *Romans* had been left behind. They now had in their hands—or so they thought—a domesticated Barth, one who had finally come around to seeing things their way. The critics of neo-orthodoxy could rejoice as well. For they now had in their hands—or so they thought—proof that Barth was (in the words of Paul Tillich) "attempting to derive every statement directly from the ultimate truth"; that Barth was, in fact, "using a theological method which can be called 'neo-orthodox.'"³ Both sides were wrong. Once again, the message of Karl Barth went unheard.

V. BARTH FOR TODAY

Where do we stand now? The situation in American theology today is far worse than anything Karl Barth confronted in 1914. Historicism, at least, had an element of objectivity in it. The historical given could, in some measure anyway, defend itself against the more willful and arbitrary interpretations of it. Today, however, every last vestige of the objective is steadily being stripped away. The majority of academic theologians in our day follow Sallie McFague in understanding theology as "metaphorical." And metaphors, according to the new definition "are principally adverbial, having to do with how we relate to God rather than defining the nature of God."⁴ Such a definition of theology represents a dramatic departure from the classical liberal tradition; it is Schleiermacher's definition of theology turned on its head. Schleiermacher believed that speech about God takes its rise from modifications in *God's* relating to us. For McFague, on the other hand, theology is not really concerned with God's relating to us but with *our* relating to God. To the obvious question: Is the choice of the metaphors we use to image God then a wholly arbitrary one? McFague would like to respond in the negative. But the means by which she seeks to rescue theology from the subjectivistic swamp into which it seems to have fallen is not the adequacy of our chosen metaphors to speak faithfully and accurately of God. Her

criterion is a purely pragmatic one:

What is the relationship between our constructs of God and *God*, or in our postmodern, deconstructionist era is that distinction even appropriate? That is,

³Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1951) 5.

⁴Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM, 1987) 39.

do our constructions refer to anything, anyone?...[H]ow the metaphor refers we do not know—or, indeed, even if it does. At most one wagers it does and lives as if it does, which means that the main criterion for a “true” theology is pragmatic, preferring those models of God that are most helpful in the praxis of bringing about fulfillment for living beings.⁵

The irony in McFague’s position is that her God is far more “wholly other” than the God of Barth’s commentary on Romans. For her, God is, for all practical purposes, unknowable. Paul Althaus’ final judgement on Barth’s *Romans*—“A theology which lives from skepticism, dies from it”⁶—rested on a misunderstanding where *Romans* was concerned. But it is completely applicable to McFague’s metaphorical theology. For who would be encouraged to work for justice and a more holistic way of being in the world by a theology which asked her to act *as if* God exists and *as if* God had the qualities of a mother, a lover, and a friend. To the secularist already committed to such goals, a theology which offered itself to her as a work of “fiction” could only be a useless distraction—a new opium of the people. To the secularist not committed to such goals, a work of fiction will hardly be inclined to inspire conversion.

What metaphorical theology cannot do (since it does not claim to know God) is to provide an adequate *theological* grounding of the ethical goals it seeks to serve. Even McFague’s description of the world as “God’s body” is not such a grounding. For it too, turns out to be merely a metaphor; just another “as if” game. The only explanation metaphorical theology can offer for why we should conduct ourselves in the world in ways that are non-hierarchical, liberative, etc., is the threat of extinction which hangs over our heads if we do not. Such an explanation will be sufficient for many people (though certainly not all). But it is hardly a theological grounding of ethical obligation. But then, metaphorical theology takes it for granted that those to whom it is addressed will not ask for such a grounding. And that means that it succeeds only where those to whom it is addressed do not ask for theological explanations because they are inclined to be satisfied with themselves and their own self-chosen goals. Metaphorical theology is, thus, a fundamentally bourgeois mode of reflection. It cannot give rise to conversion; at best it can function to make those who belong to movements of protest feel good about themselves.

By contrast, Barth’s anti-bourgeois theology insists ever and again that the real object of theology, that of which it speaks, is God. Such an object—precisely because it is the divine Subject!—can never be brought under human control. Such a subject resists domestication because he never gives himself to be known otherwise than indirectly, in and through a creaturely veil with which he is never directly identified. The dialectic of veiling and unveiling in revelation is the root of Barth’s anti-bourgeois theology. Where that dialectic is lost sight of, there

theologians will inevitably erase the distinction between the divine and the human and

⁵Ibid., 196-96.

⁶Paul Althaus, "Theologie und Geschichte: Zur Auseinandersetzung mit der dialektischen Theologie," *Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie* 1 (1923/24) 753.

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will end up contenting themselves with the human as their object. Where that occurs, theology will have its object securely in its possession; an object that is safe because it is calculable, manipulable, controllable.

Theologians today, by and large, expect little more from theology than that it should provide an adequate symbolic representation of the experience of the angry and alienated self; a vehicle for expressing the frustration of the victim of gender bias, racial prejudice, and economic imperialism and an encouragement for fighting against these evils. But I am convinced that laypeople still expect far more from theology than this. Laypeople want to *know* God. They want to know that God is real; that he will one day usher in the kingdom of God; and that, even now, he is at work in the world, transforming the old sinful humanity and creating a new redeemed humanity, fit for the kingdom when it comes. The needs and hopes of such people will never be satisfied by a theology which understands itself as a work of fiction. For them, only a fundamentally anti-bourgeois theology will do. Now, more than ever, the American churches are in desperate need of hearing the message of Barth's *Romans*. The problem is that the people of God will not hear that message if it is not first heard and understood by their ministers. For how shall they hear without a messenger?

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