

Karl Barth and Christian apologetics

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It is an advantage, when striving to develop our own thought about a subject, to engage a significant thinker like Barth in dialogue on it, because it compels us to deal with the matter at a more serious level than we otherwise might have done. This is particularly true when the ideas of the dialogue partner chosen are significantly at variance with one's own, as in this case.

Karl Barth, over at least five decades of vigorous theological activity, consistently maintained a stance directly antithetical to the concerns of Christian apologetics. Flew does not greatly distort the truth when he cites Barth: 'Belief cannot argue with unbelief: it can only preach to it.'¹ Such a sentiment fairly summarizes Barth's attitude, set forth at length and in numerous publications over the long years of his fruitful career. Barth does not believe it necessary for the evangelist or preacher to defend the basis of his proclamation by the use of arguments or evidences.

The view that truth in religion is finally based on faith rather than on reasoning or evidence is known as 'fideism'. It can appear in both extreme and moderate forms, both of which may be found within Barth's writings. He understands theology to be an autonomous realm of the church's truth, confessed by faith, and not joined to other areas of human knowledge and experience by epistemological bridges. His position is sometimes labelled 'theological positivism' because of its scepticism toward all truth claims other than its own. Whatever we call it, Barth's viewpoint invites us to reconsider the nature of Christian apologetics in the light of his forceful position.

Though unique in its contours and extent, Barth's anti-apologetic theology fits comfortably with a widespread revolt against the use of reason in theology which has deep roots within Protestant

thought and has become a major trend in the twentieth century.² To discover the historical sources of Barth's stance we need only refer to Luther's hostility to the claims of reason, to Kant's restriction of human knowledge to the phenomenal realm, and to the shrill and influential ranting of Kierkegaard's theology of paradox. The stage was well set for irrationalism in theology, and when the twentieth century dawned, bringing with it awesome proof of man's vicious inhumanity and insanity, the time was ripe for a Barth to sally forth with his theology of unreason.³

Barth's rejection of Christian apologetics is, in my judgment at least, one of the most vulnerable points in his whole theological system, and exposes his entire work to repudiation by all who are not yet convinced by the Christian claims. Fideism in theology is not only singularly inappropriate in a pluralistic world with its competing truth claims, but stands opposed, as I hope to show, to the biblical concept of revelation and truth as well.

I Karl Barth's fideistic theology

The over-all effect of Barth's position on Christian apologetics is clear and unmistakable, though its outworking over five decades, involving subtle alterations in expression, makes exposition of it a considerable challenge. The best approach is to examine his view in stages as it developed.

1. The liberal theology out of which Barth emerged treasured the values of reasonableness, tolerance, openness and the critical study of the Bible. In a letter to Barth in 1923, Adolf von Harnack protested at Barth's exaltation of faith over reason because he felt it gave 'a carte blanche to every conceivable fantasy and to every theological dictatorship that dissolves the historical element in our religion and seeks to torture the consciences of others with its own experience.'⁴

² L. Harold DeWolf, *The religious revolt against reason* (New York: Harper, 1949).

³ On the possible sources of Barth's fideism, cf. Sebastian A. Matczak, *Karl Barth on God. The knowledge of the divine existence* (New York: St Paul Publications, 1962), pp. 292-310, and James Richmond, *Theology and metaphysics* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1-21.

⁴ *The beginnings of dialectical theology*, I, edited by James M. Robinson (Richmond: John Knox, 1968), p. 174.

¹ Antony Flew, *God and philosophy* (London: Hutchinson, 1966), p. 9.

From Barth's point of view, of course, liberal so-called 'reason' was simply the tool of a man-centred theology, and he felt compelled to oppose both the instrument and its user together. He did so in such an extreme manner as to suggest that he thought that if reason were granted a role in theology, the result could only be apostasy and unbelief; not a very positive assessment of the rational objectivity of Christian truth!

At the same time, ironically, liberal theology itself, in which Barth trained, was quite ambivalent about the role of reason. The influence of Kantian philosophy upon it had fostered deep opposition to metaphysical apologetics, and religious certainty, in the last analysis, rested on experience rather than reason. It seems likely therefore that Barth inherited a suspicion about reason from liberalism, and intensified his hostility to it due to the irrationalism of existential philosophy stemming from Kierkegaard and Overbeck.⁵ It is important to note that Barth's hostility to rational apologetics, especially to natural theology, is not so much a rejection of his liberal inheritance as continuity with it.

2. In the writings of the twenties, the new note of the 'dialectical' theology began to be sounded, of an abyss between God and man, resulting from both creation and fall, making it impossible for man to attain any knowledge of God by his own thought processes. The great divide could be bridged only by God himself, and this had already been done for man by Jesus Christ. Barth made all this clear in the famous second edition of his commentary on Romans (1922), expressing specific indebtedness to Kierkegaard and his view of the 'infinite qualitative difference' between time and eternity. Nevertheless, the remnant of an apologetic structure based on anthropology can still be detected both in the Romans commentary and in the abortive *Christian dogmatics* (1927). In both works there is the idea of existential questions being correlated to revelational answers, though Barth is careful to insist on the priority of answer to question.⁶ Though even this was not much of an apologetic by traditional standards, Barth was on his way to a much purer and more extreme fideism, and was to eliminate this 'apologetic' element from the successive editions of the Romans commentary, and scrap the *Christian dogmatics* altogether be-

cause of this lingering taint of rational methodology. Thus, in *Church dogmatics* I/1, Barth proudly announces: 'To the best of my ability I have cut out in this second edition of the book everything that in the first issue might give the slightest appearance of giving to theology a basis, support, or even a mere justification in the way of existential philosophy' (p. ix).

3. The summit of purest fideism is reached in Barth's book on Anselm (1931) and the application of it in his first half-volume of the *Church dogmatics* (1932). In his book *Anselm: fides quaerens intellectum*, the familiar themes emerge in bold relief: God makes God known, and faith needs no proofs; knowledge does not lead to faith; faith needs no evidences to rest on, save the divine-human encounter itself. Many doubt that Anselm himself is the actual source of these positions. It seems that the medieval sage believed that his proof of God's existence had universal rational validity even apart from faith. But it is enough for our limited purposes that Barth read him this way, since it is his view and not Anselm's which concerns us here.⁷

The theological method developed in *Fides quaerens intellectum* is applied in *Church dogmatics* I/1. Theology, as the new title suggests, is firmly tied to the believing community, and isolated from the rational checks universally applied in the other sciences (p. 9). God's revelation in Jesus Christ is a 'presupposition' of theology, not needing to be bolstered up by apologetic argumentation of any kind (pp. 29-34). Indeed, the theologian must refuse to discuss the basis of grounding of the biblical claim lest some human certainty or rather uncertainty be mixed with a perfect, inner, divine certainty (pp. 12f.). Even the question why the canon of Scripture is chosen to play so normative a role is not to be answered (pp. 120f.). Barth sums it up: 'The Word of God becomes knowable *by making itself knowable*. The application of what has just been said to the epistemological problem consists in the fact that we hold fast to this statement and not one step beyond do we take' (p. 282).

In the same part-volume, Barth presents a defence and exposition of the doctrine of the trinity which lies at the heart of his understanding of revelation. At least a minor cause of its inclusion at such an early point in the system is the rational offence which it brings. As Tillich says, 'In his system this doctrine falls from heaven, the heaven of an un-

⁵ James D. Smart, *The divided mind of modern theology. Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann, 1908-1933* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), pp. 100-107.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic questions in theology*, II (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), pp. 207f.

⁷ See, for example, D. P. Henry, *The logic of St Anselm* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), pp. 148f., and F. Coplestone, *A history of philosophy*, II/I (New York: Image Books, 1962), pp. 183-185.

mediated biblical and ecclesiastical authority.⁸ To intensify the scandal, Barth devotes a major section to refuting all *vestigia trinitatis*, analogies of the trinity in the natural realm, removing the possibility of adducing any rational support for it from accessible data other than the self-authenticating Scriptures (pp. 383-399). In the treatment that follows, Barth points to Jesus Christ as the sole source of our revelational knowledge, and to the Holy Spirit who alone creates a saving relationship with God in the heart of man.

4. In the works of the thirties, in particular the Gifford lectures on natural theology (1937) and in the first half-volume of *Church dogmatics*, II, Barth launches his famous assault on natural theology, an extension and application of his view that any knowledge of God occurs only in the context of faith and obedience through the work of the Spirit. Considering the fact that the Gifford lectures were established in order to develop natural theology, the choice of Barth to deliver them in 1937 was remarkably inappropriate. According to Barth, God cannot be known by the powers of human reason, but is apprehended solely as a result of his own action and decision. Therefore, natural theology which seeks to debate and even establish the reality of God by means of rational argumentation is simply ruled out. Theology has no use at all for it (*CD*, II/1, p. 168). It lacks any scriptural basis, pursues in reality an alien god, and leads inevitably to theological compromise (pp. 84, 99, 163). Barth cannot say enough in opposition to it.

A sampling of the reasons Barth gives for his implacable opposition to natural theology would include the following. God has acted to reveal himself to man in Christ, and God's being is not to be separated from his act. Barth rejects the traditional notion of a twofold revelation of God (pp. 124, 318). Furthermore, he refuses to distinguish between a theoretical knowledge of God's existence and an effective knowledge of God involved in a whole-hearted saving relationship with him. He will have no part in any idea that the knowledge of God's existence gained apart from the Christian revelation might serve as a stepping-stone on the way to the saving knowledge of God. *Sola gratia* is also an important factor. God gives himself to be known by grace. It is not a work of man's intellect. The possibility of knowing God comes from God, and man must have no credit (pp. 29, 43f., 63).

5. In the writings immediately following the

⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic theology*, III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 285.

second world war, we notice a slight softening of Barth's intransigent attitude toward apologetics, though certainly not a reversal of it. True to his antipathy to general revelation, Barth insists that we know the world to be God's creation solely by faith, and through the biblical narrative (*CD*, III/1, pp. 22f.). Even the nature of man is not discoverable through empirical investigation of things human, but has its source in the knowledge of the man Jesus (*III/2*, p. 3). We should not speak about man in general until we learn the essence of man as seen in Christ, who is *vere homo*. Later on, however, Barth comes back to the general knowledge of man, and admits that what can be found out apart from faith may be a 'symptom' of his true nature and consequently has value, but not, he quickly adds, as evidence to lead us to the true knowledge of man (pp. 200-202). Giving with one hand and removing with the other is typical of Barth when he strays into moderate fideism.

The closest Barth ever gets in the *Church dogmatics* to adducing actual evidences in support of the biblical truth claim comes in III/3 (pp. 198-238). In the course of human history, the sphere of God's government, Barth detects certain phenomena which call attention to God's rule over the world: for example, the Scriptures, the Jewish people, the Christian church, the limits of life. Very cautiously, Barth points to these riddles in history as 'standing, permanent, objective reminders' that God indeed is King (p. 200). One might suppose that Barth has had a change of mind concerning apologetics, were it not for two factors. First, in referring to this section in a later volume, Barth indicates that these very signs are discernible and meaningful only to those who are already believers (*CD*, IV/3(2), pp. 714f.). Second, in his *Dogmatics in outline*, delivered as a series of lectures in 1946, and roughly contemporaneous with III/3, Barth registers an extremely fideistic position once again (pp. 23f.). Clearly, Barth zig-zags from extreme to moderate fideism, but never adopts a really non-fideistic stance.

6. Considering the emphasis placed on the resurrection of Jesus by the New Testament, as an event validating and confirming his claim to divine authority, one might expect to find at least a hint of sympathy in Barth for an apologetic based on history. But this is not the case. As is generally known, Barth shifted from an earlier position on the resurrection shared with Bultmann in which he maintained it to be an event tangential to history and not strictly part of it, to an emphasis on its objectivity, historicity, and actuality, in decisive opposition to Bultmann who carried on the ad-

vocacy of Barth's earlier stance without wavering (III/2, pp. 439ff.).⁹ Though evangelical critics have doubted it, I see no reason to doubt that the later Barth did in fact come to espouse and defend the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the empty tomb, although he will have nothing to do with verifying the event by means of historical evidences. For some reason Barth does not believe that calling an event objective implies the possibility of its verification. He insists on the one hand that the resurrection is a physical event and on the other hand that the historian can determine nothing about it. Although I can appreciate why some resolve this ambiguity by charging that Barth's 'resurrection' is not actually historical at all, I attribute the strange dialectic between objectivity and unverifiability simply to his *fideism*. He cannot bear to think for a moment that Jesus might need a mortal man to validate or authorize his resurrection and his claim to be the Son of God, which is the work of the Spirit alone (IV/3(1), p. 75). Therefore, he *must* insist that the resurrection, though historical, is inaccessible to scholarly research.

7. In works from the last period of Barth's life, we encounter a few slight concessions in the direction of Christian apologetics. In the *Shorter commentary on Romans* (1959), for example, Barth acknowledges what he may always have believed concerning general revelation, though loathe to admit it earlier, that there is a witness to God in the world to which all people have access, though they have not profited from it (p. 28). This suggests a notional acquaintance with the being of God apart from the knowledge of Jesus Christ, which qualifies the earlier invective against natural theology more than a little.

Also in 1959, *CD*, IV/3 appeared in German, and in the midst of a lengthy discussion there on the finality of Christ as the light of the world, Barth makes reference to other lights which exist in the cosmos (pp. 137, 139, 151). Has Barth changed his mind, and abandoned his fideism? Probably not, seeing that his only purpose in referring to them is to exalt the finality of the revelation in Christ which they cannot rival and need not support. Far from aiming now to establish an independent source of revelation, Barth wishes only to insist that all the other 'lights' in the world are subsumed under the light of Christ, and that without that great light there is no light (pp. 154-165).

Toward the end of *CD*, IV/3, Barth discusses the

ministry of the community, and deals with the duty of explaining the gospel it has proclaimed and making it intelligible (pp. 846ff.). But lest he be thought to have drifted into apologetics, Barth immediately adds that the only 'explanation' that can be permitted is one which does not go beyond Christian presuppositionalism. The church should not feel compelled to measure her explanation by worldly standards of evidence or logic (p. 849). Although Christians should keep the world's questions and concerns in view at all times, they are not to bow to the world's standards of truth and verification. In the last analysis, Barth's pretended apologetic is nothing more than dogmatics again. If the world does not understand the gospel the first time, repeat it. As Barth says, 'Good dogmatics is always the best and basically the only possible apologetics' (p. 882).

In summary, it seems plain that Barth is a theological fideist of great consistency. The only rationality for which he contends, and he does contend for it strongly, is an internal rationality, an inner consistency within the presuppositions of the faith, but not a rationality which can address those of another theological or intellectual persuasion. Throughout his writings, Barth is remarkably consistent in holding to the view that theological knowledge is independent of the rules which govern knowledge in other fields of investigation. Although he will occasionally soften his resistance to apologetic activity, and refer fleetingly to evidences of the truth, he never abandons his basic fideism, and never allows apologetic arguments any positive role in communicating the gospel. God speaks to man directly, and the existential event is not debatable or subject to rational checks of any kind. He utterly rejects the demand for verification or confirmation of the message.¹⁰

II Evaluation and critique

1. In appreciation of Barth's approach, we can applaud his deep admiration for the gracious initiative of God in revealing himself to man, and his profound conviction about the intrinsic truthfulness and power of the gospel itself unaided by human explanation. It is unfortunate that these excellent commitments could not have been integrated into a manner of presenting the truth which would have served the biblical message better than

¹⁰ Though Barth has few thorough-going followers, Helmut Gollwitzer takes up Barth's view in *The existence of God as confessed by faith* (London: SCM, 1965), and, although not linked to Barth ideologically, members of the school of Dutch Calvinism such as Berkouwer, Runia and Van Til can always be counted on to fly his presuppositional banner.

⁹ *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 30, 222.

fideism. After all, if the Spirit is able to create faith through the preaching of the Word, could he not do the same through the agency of apologetic activity in service of that same Word? As it is, Barth has made it virtually impossible for those who reject the gospel, or have intellectual difficulty in believing it, to be confronted with the claims of Christ, because of his negative attitude toward Christian apologetics.

2. Curiously enough, Barth's motive behind his fideism is itself at least in part apologetic. Indeed the entire *Church dogmatics* has been interpreted as one massive answer to Feuerbach's reduction of theology to anthropology. The only way Barth saw to counter effectively the charge that religion is merely a projection of man's inner life was to insist on the self-authenticating nature of revelation. Any apologetic tie-in to latent human qualities, for example, would just play into Feuerbach's hands, and provide him with the evidence for his projection theory. Revelation must be rooted solely in the free decision of God, and not in man's inherent possibilities. If, indeed, as Ritschl had argued before Barth, non-Christians have no knowledge of God, atheism can be claimed as confirmation of the exclusiveness of revelation in Christ. In a certain sense, Barth builds on the atheism of Feuerbach, much as traditional orthodoxy built on natural revelation.¹¹

Though providing a consistent alternative to Feuerbach, it is difficult to see how Barth has settled the truth question. The theologian and the atheist are engaged in a shouting match: one says, 'Religion is man's invention!', the other 'No, it's not!' Barth offers us no help in resolving the question of who is right. Though hoping to enlist Feuerbach on the side of theological positivism against liberalism, Barth fails to show why his own position is not equally threatened by the philosopher's criticisms. Why should Barth's 'revelation' not be regarded as just another example of man projecting himself into deity? So long as apologetics is ignored, the question has no answer.¹²

3. Barth's fideistic theology is authoritarian, a form of theological imperialism. Other religions and philosophies are declared human inventions, *à la* Feuerbach, on the strength of a self-authenticating revelation claim. Surely the day is past when we can expect the authority of the Christian tradition

to be accepted uncritically, as if a mere claim for it could somehow guarantee the truth of its contents. The result of such a procedure is not really to exalt God and put him first, as Barth supposes, but to make the believer himself the centre of attention and the ultimate ground of faith. For if the revelation comes with no credentials of its own, it can only be accepted by man acting to sacrifice his intellect. Wingren was correct to call Barth's so-called theocentricity into question. The result of fideism is to make man the centre, and to make revelation the private property of a privileged society of those willing to suspend their reasoning.¹³ Avoiding the authoritarian posture, the church ought to subject her theology to the canons of rationality operating in the wider human community, grounding the message on public evidences, not on a subjective decision alone. Only in this way can a person see the difference between 'I am telling you' and 'Thus says the Lord'. The confirmation, accreditation, and justification of religious assertions is imperative. Objections to the Christian revelation cannot be warded off by claiming that it is self-authenticating. There are many religious commitments that would claim as much. In addition to expounding the content of revelation, the theologian is obliged also to justify his claim that this revelation is indeed from God. The biblical message, though not Barth's rendering of it, enables us to do just that.

4. Barth's theological epistemology differs from the biblical view of revelation and its epistemology. The *locus* of divine revelation according to Scripture is not the self-authenticating gnostic word, but rather the open, public, verifiable historical event. Pannenberg is on firmer biblical ground when he describes revelation as occurring at the end of history in its fullness, but proleptically appearing in advance in the mighty acts of God in history.¹⁴ Revelation is not an arcane, hidden communication with the select few. The biblical writers go to considerable lengths to declare the exact opposite. God has given evidence to all men of his redemptive activity in history (Acts 17: 31). Luke composed a two-volume work in order to show Theophilus the historical foundations on which the proclamation surely rests (Luke 1: 1-4). Jesus granted many infallible proofs to the disciples after his resurrection to convince them beyond doubt of his victory over death (Acts 1: 3). Barth's emphasis on the hiddenness of revelation from all except believers

¹¹ W. Pannenberg, *Basic questions in theology*, III (London: SCM, 1973), p. 100.

¹² Cf. Mark Noll, 'Feuerbach: his thought and influence upon religion', *Themelios* (old series) 10 (1974), section 3, pp. 8-24.

¹³ Gustaf Wingren, *Theology in conflict* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1958).

¹⁴ Wolfart Pannenberg, *Revelation as history* (New York: MacMillan, 1969), pp. 125-158.

is attractive only because it preys upon the fear many Christians have of intellectual confrontation over the basics of their faith. It confirms their intellectual timidity which ought rather to be dealt with as a weakness and eliminated. Worst of all, it changes the gospel of the objective activity of God on behalf of all sinners into a faith free from criticism because it is a faith cut off from the reality of its own historical substance.

5. Barth is also mistaken when it comes to general revelation. For centuries it has been accepted that, alongside the special revelation actualized in the history of Israel and the Christ event, there was a divine disclosure to all men through the light that illumines every man and makes itself evident in the creation and in universal history. Almost all earlier theologians would have been astounded by Barth's attempt to eliminate general revelation. Even apart from clear scriptural evidence, how could the world be God's creation if it did not bear the imprint of his will and purpose at least to some extent? It is not necessary, in making the valid point that sinners resist the light given to them, to deny the reality and objectivity of the light itself. Nor is it necessary, having admitted it, for general revelation to pose a threat to God's revelation in Jesus Christ, unless for some reason it is placed on a par with it. Though less forceful in debate, and probably also less theologically capable, it seems that Brunner, so harshly treated by Barth, really had the sounder and more biblical position, when he defended the reality and importance of general revelation.¹⁵

6. Because of his refusal to allow reason a place in validating the Christian claim, Barth has been accused of inconsistency. How can he disparage the ability of man's reason to arrive at truth, and at the same time engage in subtle argumentation himself? But the criticism is not valid because, although he rules out the use of reason for justifying the objects of faith, he insists on employing it in the theological elaboration of the Word. Barth's theology is a kind of language game, operating with rational consistency in terms of its own presuppositions, but standing apart from the evaluating standards of other language games such as science or history. Reason may be used in theology, but not in apologetics.

But is this satisfactory? Surely it is important to be able to show where the theological language game touches reality and what would verify it as being objectively true. Without such verification, theology is a subjectivist balloon, floating free, indistinguishable from fantasy and dream, on the

¹⁵ Emil Brunner, *Revelation and reason* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946), pp. 58-80.

same level as any fanaticism which claims, 'I have a revelation!'

We are touching on the heart of the difficulty with Barth's fideistic theology. Though it is rational within itself, there is no indication where it touches reality, and so it is impossible to distinguish true revelation from false. Therefore, the theologian is left incapable of helping the unbeliever to sort out the options and to see the rationality of the Christian position. There is no way to discuss faith with the neighbour, nor any basis for persuading him to accept the gospel. Between Christian and non-Christian there is only a great gulf fixed, and no way to settle the question whether the believer has received a genuine revelation or not. Barth's attempt to remove religious convictions from the realm of rational discussion is deeply disturbing and dangerous. Furthermore, Barth offers no assistance whatsoever to the believer with questions or doubts about his faith. Although Barth claims that the true knowledge God gives is unassailable, without anxiety or doubt, we know it is not so (*CD*, II/1, p. 7). It is a common experience of Christians to ask about the 'why' of this or that. And it does not help at all just to be told in a louder tone of voice to believe, when believing is exactly the problem.

God made man a thinking creature, intending that he should engage in critical thought and reflection. We cannot allow Barth, in the name of revelation, to nullify this gift, opening up the spectre of subjectivity and confusion. Reason has a noble place, both in the establishment and in the exposition of religious truth, in dependence on the Spirit of God.

Conclusion

Evangelicals ought not to imitate the fideistic theology of Karl Barth. To retreat as he has done into the ghetto of the self-authenticating Word amounts to notifying the world that we no longer believe the gospel to be rationally defensible and do not expect those who respect human intelligence to be found within the Christian ranks. The challenge of this study should be to place our minds at the disposal of God in the service of the gospel. There are so many important tasks for dedicated minds to do: to persuade non-Christians of the truth, to frame our doctrines in language meaningful to our day, to apply biblical principles to the complexities of modern life. There is so much that we can learn from Barth even in these areas. But his basic refusal to understand the essential Christian commitment itself as intelligibly defensible is unacceptable, and should be rejected.