

The Inherent Problem in Barth's Theology

PROFESSOR HANS EHRENBERG, Ph.D.

THIS article is a very brief attempt to expound the aim of Barthian theology, the inherent problem involved in this aim, and the significance of this problem. The article falls into four sections.

I

THE AIM OF BARTHIAN THEOLOGY

Barthian theology began as a conscious "correction" of all previous theology. Even though all theologians may be the result of a reaction to previous theologies and hence may be in this measure regarded as correctors, in Barth "correction" is the fundamental purpose and the driving power of his theology; it was the point of departure and to some extent the goal of his theology.

What had to be corrected and *how* was it to be done? Barth set out to correct the self-assurance of theologies, and that is why his theology was called the "Theology of Crisis." For Barth the universal self-assurance of previous theology consisted in its failure to submit itself to the judgment of God; it proclaimed this judgment, but did not apply it to itself. Theology saw itself with the Word of God on the side of the judges, not of the judged. Barth saw that exactly this was the error of all theology and hence sought to dissociate it from that absoluteness God had given to His Word of revelation. It was Barth's work to explain that theology was just as much a work of man as all other works of man. Theology is subject to the truth of the Gospel, to which it testifies.

By this it must not be understood that Barth is dominated by the historical outlook, or that of relativity and scepticism.

No, theology must be subject to the same doubt that controls the conscience of a believing man, who works out his salvation with fear and trembling. Theology too, can only work and teach in fear and trembling. It is always in danger of losing its soul, like the believer. "Corrected" theology will do its theological work with a broken and a contrite conscience. Barth is concerned with a fundamental change in position for theological science; the situation in Germany after the last war was only the outward occasion for it.

Barthian theology wants to give full weight to two things at the same time; the Word of God is to be its sole subject, and yet it is to be completely dominated by its subject and led only by it. Hence practically theology stands *above* the Word of God, but essentially *under* it. Because of this double approach it is of necessity a dialectal (*dialektisch*) theology. It is continually correcting itself.

How is this correction to be carried out? Firstly, Barth took the supremacy of the Word of God absolutely seriously. Theology is valid only in so far as it is carried on under the control of the Word of God, so that the living voice of the Word ever and again casts doubt on the findings of theology. This turning against dogmatic theology is so altogether "anti-liberal" that it must lead to orthodox dogmatics, and, in fact, has done so.

This recognition of the supremacy of the revelation of God is not sufficient to complete the correction, for the subject-matter of theology is also affected by the intention to correct. This may sound hard to understand, but we can do so when we remember Barth's anti-pietistic position. The eschatologists of the nineteenth century, starting with Blumhardt, were Barth's teachers, and so he approaches the subject-matter of theology from a strongly eschatological position. Thus it is that the will to correct without ceasing finds concrete form. For many years the name of Barth's periodical was *Between the Ages (Zwischen den Zeiten)*, i.e. between this world and that which is to come. John the Baptist can be called the sole patron saint of Barth's theological school; for a long time he provided an example for Barth's exegesis, preaching and teaching. At Colmar there is a picture of the crucifixion by Matthias Gruenewald, in which we see the Baptist pointing to the Crucified with an unnaturally elongated forefinger; this used

to typify the significance of the Baptist for Barthian theology, "He must increase, and I must decrease." Amidst the ruins of all theological knowledge, which followed the collapse of the positivist and liberal theological schools, the fact that the Gospel of Christ begins with the preaching of his forerunner became an unshakable rock and citadel.

During his first period Barth interpreted Paul altogether as though the epistles of the Apostle to the Gentiles had been preached by John the Baptist. Barth wanted to take away security from the conclusions of theology, so as to save it from the catastrophe that always overtakes false security. Never anticipated was the truly well-founded warning uttered by the will to correct. The aim of Barth's theology is valid. The fight against Barth's aim was a fight against windmills and was caused by the fear of theologians that they might be robbed of the security their systems had brought them. Barth demands a submission to the Lord and his rule that goes far beyond personal surrender, for it includes the objective submission of theological thought, knowledge and judgment.

So much for Barth's aim. Anyone who cannot understand it will not be helped by the use of more words.

II

UNDERSTANDING AND MISUNDERSTANDING OF BARTHIAN THEOLOGY

Anyone who understands Barth realizes that his theology has no connection with the old antithesis between liberal and orthodox, even though its development has consisted in a new expression of true orthodoxy. He realizes too, that his theology began as "philosophical idealism with the sign changed." He realizes further that his theology had to dismay the liberals, and madden the orthodox, while the Pietists, who would have been so glad to listen to him, were reduced by him to despair. That is why we can find supporters of Barth in every theological movement and school, and in nearly every church. He will realize too, that his true pupils, theologically-minded youth, have often been a source of annoyance even to him, for a "theology of correction" is hardly a suitable theology for youth.

Anyone who misunderstands Barth will interpret the "absolute otherness" of God and the Word of his revelation in a metaphysical-philosophical, and not in an exegetical-homiletical sense. He will persuade himself that Barth is a modern Manichee denying the goodness of the act of creation; he will doubt whether any sound ecclesiastical system could be founded on his theology; he will consider that he sets too much store on objectivity, and will be afraid that his theology must radically depreciate the value of all religious experience and of the personal life of faith of the individual.

Some reject the dialectal element in Barth's theology because they wish to avoid the inner shock, or because they are too indolent for the exacting movements of the spirit, or because they are too obstinate and dogmatic in their theology, which may be orthodox or liberal, to yield themselves unhesitatingly to the radical working of the Word of revelation. We must note though that conversely this dialectal element may be accepted for exactly the same reasons that cause others to reject it. Fear may cling to the shock, indolence may shrink from the cessation of constant motion, someone may wish to remain under the judgment of God to be saved from the danger of self-security. Thus there is also a "Barthian" hardness of heart, derived from dialectal reasoning, against which Barth has often warned us.

Anyone who has understood the aim of Barth's theology will need no further explanation of its character, and will defend Barth against all who misunderstand him, whether they reject or accept him, and against the whole storm of opposition and confusion that has been aroused by Barth's theology. Only when we have undertaken this defence, will that side of his theology where the problem is reveal itself to us.

III

THE PROBLEM

There is a problem inherent in Barthian theology that has quite a different source from those found in other theologies, and it cannot deny that it is there. It is a natural of its development from a "correction-theology" to an expression of theology in terms of dogmatics. Barth

himself has not said whether, or how far, he considers the characteristic of correction in his earlier theology could be a germ of his Dogmatics. I believe that all the serious difficulties caused to the real theologian by Barthian theology have their foundation in this question. I do not doubt, however, that Barth has been entirely successful in tracing his way from his starting point to dogmatics, and the correction element could become the seasoning to make his dogmatics tasty. But it should be no cause of surprise, if along this path there are causes of friction that must lead to a serious examination of Barth's theology.

When I met Barth again in 1925 in Goettingen, I drew him a picture of his theology, as it then was, and he in no way rejected it. I said, that according to Barth, man was swinging half-way between heaven and earth, suspended from heaven by his coat-collar, capable neither of reaching heaven nor of returning to earth, not even able fully to lift up his face to heaven. Once Barth had fully developed his dogmatics, such a picture was hardly applicable, but just because it is not, a question about the meaning of his theology as a whole arises, which could not have been asked earlier. Barth knows better than anyone else what it means to construct a system of dogmatics to-day.

In one of the prefaces to his Dogmatics, Barth says, "The theological questions of the Trinity and the Virgin Birth probe the depths of the mysteries in which the Christian Church has its third dimension." His theology based on dialectal reasoning claims that theology is capable of resisting the storm now sweeping through the world. This does not only mean that dogmatics must have as much profundity as possible, but also that it must have its roots in the whole Church. So we see that this fundamental weight and breadth of theological perception is the goal of a development that started with the determination to correct every form of theology by constantly referring back to revelation. Barth's theological thinking was rather one-dimensional to begin with, now at the last it is not merely two-dimensional, but has reached that third dimension of which Barth speaks. Has Barth with his "correcting" made his way through the whole Church, through its full tradition and entire substance? Has he leavened the whole lump with his "correcting" as with leaven?

Here and there in Barth's Dogmatics we find certain theses, conceptions, assertions and illustrations which force us to attribute a definite aim to him. There follow some quotations to illustrate these peculiarities of Barthian theology. Barth continually uses the three concepts, "Creation," "Reconciliation," and "Redemption," to characterize the three persons of the Trinity. He speaks of "God the Creator," of "God the Reconciler," and of "God the Redeemer." "The reconciliation which is to be believed here and now," he calls, "the redemption which is to be beheld there in the future." He says, "A reconciled world can only be conceived as a supplement (*Nachtrag*) to the existence of Jesus Christ." He explains that "The New Testament is a testimony of the revelation in which God is present to men as God coming." If he conceives of the Old Testament revelation under the conception of "expecting Christ" and of the New Testament under that of "remembering Christ," he is alluding to the fact of Easter, the fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, by which expectation is finally turned into remembrance; and he states that the transfiguration of Jesus on the mount represents a prologue (*Vorspiel*), and Paul's vision on the Damascus road an epilogue (*Nachspiel*) of the Easter story. The New Testament "having Easter as its Archimedean point, which in itself is *not intended to be eschatological*, is in all its other content and meaning intended absolutely and entirely eschatologically." John the Baptist, whose importance for Barth has been mentioned above, is almost equated with the Apostles in this context.

This whole group of ideas has a common denominator, viz. eschatology. In Barth dogmatic theology in the old sense and eschatological theology in the modern sense interpenetrate with the intention of producing a new theology, or rather *the* new theology.

Let us for the moment accept all this without criticism. But one and only one question insists on being answered; has not the essential matter of dogmatics been overshadowed by eschatology in the three concepts decisive for the whole of Barth's dogmatic theology, viz. creation, reconciliation, and redemption. Does the message (*kērugma*) of the New Testament really allow Church teaching to transfer the word redemption from the second to the third section of the

Creed? Barth realizes that he is in danger of over-emphasizing the coming Christ and under-emphasizing the Christ who has come; has he not made a kind of "retrograde step in salvation" by going back behind the consummation of the facts of salvation in Jesus Christ to their beginning? Will not dogmatics thus rounded off lose the balance between the prophetic, the high-priestly and kingly offices of Jesus Christ, a balance that can only be safeguarded by the central facts of salvation, the Cross and Resurrection? Although Barth most certainly wants to give us this guarantee, have we got it, if Easter is to be the "great exception" (*grosse Ausnahme*)? Barth adds this remarkable statement about Easter, "Just in this exception we are dealing with the most important thing of all." Surely it is a most suspicious and untenable statement, through which Barth in some measure betrays himself.

What is to be the relation between Barth's fundamental conceptions and our traditional trinity, Creation, Redemption, and Sanctification? Has Barth substituted Reconciliation for Redemption, and Redemption for Sanctification? Where is Sanctification to find a place, especially as even if the substitution of Redemption for Sanctification is explained by the eschatological concept of Consummation, the latter is never applied in practice? Reconciliation is only a means or instrument for the achievement of Redemption, yet has it not without any justification been inflated to the fact of salvation itself? These are quite definitely fundamental and not merely terminological questions.

If I am right and the true seriousness of Barthian theology and dogmatics can be understood only by one who seeks to apply them to the right preaching of the Gospel, we have to face the question, whether for the true proclamation of the Gospel of Christ the true teaching office of the Church can be established by dogmatics that have rearranged the facts of salvation in such a peculiar way. Do not such dogmatics transport the whole spiritual content of the Church into its porch? Has the subject of dogmatics really remained the same, as it has been since the time of the Apostles? Has a new breach opened here, for which we cannot feel sorry, but which demands healing? I wonder whether Barth has not actually mixed up the first and second Advent, although he keeps them, "the day when the time was fulfilled,"

and "the last day, the day of days at the end of the ages," so far apart that Easter has become for him the "exception." How is the Church of Jesus Christ to know, where she stands, i.e. at what point in the Divine working? And in that case how is she to live? We cannot but put these questions to Barth and to all others who are free from the usual prejudices, misunderstandings and fears concerning Barth. At the same time we owe him undiminished thanks that it is just one question we have to put to him, and that it is one that concerns the full working out of salvation, and the relation between the second and the third section of the Creed.

IV

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROBLEM

During the early years of Barth's theology I expressed my conviction, that its most important result would be a transformation of the study of Old Testament theology, and it has had the result I predicted. Almost overnight previous "Old Testament theology" became out of date and the unity of the Biblical revelation, once so imperilled, was vindicated. This only became possible by a complete transformation of the scientific interpretation of the Old Testament (*alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*). Together with dogmatics "New Testament theology" has also entered on a period of enormous change.

This far-reaching revolution in "Old Testament theology" is one of method, and therefore affects its very principles. Till then, almost all writers on Biblical theology had approached their subject from an evolutionary standpoint; Biblical history had been looked at with the eyes of a secular historian. The change was brought about by eschatology. At first, it too, served only as handmaid of the evolutionary and secular method, but (and this was Barth's doing) it broke through the critical method and conquered it. The secular historian, as he looks at the events of history, sees development upwards or downwards. Eschatology on the contrary culminates in a universal consummation; it promises realization. Its categories are "Promise" and "Fulfillment," and they take one in one swoop right out of the

historical-critical school. In his Dogmatics, Barth has used the simple expressions, "Awaiting Christ," for the Old Testament, and "Remembering Christ," for the New Testament. "Towards Christ" (Old Testament), "From Christ" (New Testament), but the latter bound up with another "Towards Christ"—in his Second Advent—make a unity of the two Testaments. The inner meaning of the Old Testament for revelation is that it is Promise; but just as the New Testament still contains promises and is a Promise so the Old Testament contains fulfilments and is Fulfilment and proclaims Christ. None the less the emphasis of the Old Testament is on promise and that of the New Testament on fulfilment.

The method of Biblical exegesis which sets out to work with promise and fulfilment as its fundamental categories is called "evangelical" (German: *heilsgeschichtlich*, *Heilsgeschichte*, lit. history of salvation), in contradistinction to the "historical-critical" method. It was not discovered by Barth (how could it have been?) but he renewed and purified it, and grasped its fundamental meaning. Only a theologian who followed after the critical-liberal school could have done that.

It is altogether another question whether the way in which Barth uses the "evangelical" method is free from criticism. I have already given some quotations from his Dogmatics, which have aroused that doubt; the reason is more obvious than it might at first have seemed. Barth had above all to exclude evolution from "Biblical theology," and that is why the Old Testament and its connection with the New were the arena of the struggle aroused by his teaching. Let us take the story of Abraham as an example. If the full promise of God is proclaimed in it, the critical question put by the history of religion as to the date of patriarchal religion has become meaningless, for we are concerned with theology and not with the history of religion. The aim is altogether another, but it must free itself from the previous aim, for the latter has denied the validity of this new, genuinely theological aim. Thanks to its eschatological starting point and its evolutionary opponent Barth's theology takes its stand in the light of Biblical promise. This inevitably leads to the way marked by the words "not yet," which have played such an important part in Barthian theology, and

which have transformed themselves in his Dogmatics to that separation of reconciliation and redemption we have already criticized. In order to be able effectively to attack the popular, light-hearted and vain preaching on the fulfilment of salvation, Barth was just forced to proclaim his "not yet." He thus became simultaneously the opponent of evolutionary-critical science and of the uncritical and pleasurable Christianity of the Pietist. Undoubtedly he poured out the babe with the bath-water in both cases, but a certain exaggeration and over-tension do not concern us very much. We need no theological criticism of Barth in order to accuse him of taking up an unduly clear-cut position; it has always been the job of mediocrity to introduce the qualifications which are necessary in the work of great minds. We are concerned with something fundamental.

We would first recognize that Barth has been the source of a salutary and necessary discipline. We may hope that the days of unrealistic and false edification, which only hardened the worldly man, have passed. Now we are dealing with facts, facts of salvation, and not with psychic experiences. Barth's theology is a "theology of facts."

We would ask Barth whether he has himself extended the necessary discipline in exegesis to the facts that have to be interpreted. Has he not wanted to "correct" not only the theologian and the preacher, but also God himself? In other words, has he not so laid the emphasis on promise that we must ask ourselves whether he speaks of a fulfilment which has not only been promised but also accomplished?

Some will say, "That's just what I mean, when I refuse to follow Barth." Perhaps they do mean that (I hope they do), but they do not mean only that. With this reproach against Barth they want to free themselves entirely from his influence and stick to their old theology. Theologians can no longer return to where they were before Barth came. Even if this has been a justified reproach against Barth, we have not answered the question that arose in our critical study of his theology. A clever man once said, "Barth is quite right in the 'situation,' but he is not right in the 'fact'" (*Sache*)—this should be, "not altogether right."

What are we to understand by the words "situation" and "fact"? There is only one way to answer this briefly; let us think of some prophet in the Bible. In his case the

difference between what the historian and the theologian mean by "situation" is quite clearly seen. The historian investigates the circumstances of the time in which his prophecy was delivered; the theologian explains the call to which the prophet is ordained in this world. Both are "situation"; in the former case it is the historical "situation" of world-powers; in the latter it is the "situation" between the revealed will of God and the obedience or disobedience of those to whom the revelation was given. Historically considered there is no difference between a true and a false prophet; prophetically considered there is no difference between a good and a bad historian. Barth may be a bad historian, if you so wish, but he does know something about prophecy, and it is from this standpoint that he is dealing with the "situation." His usual opponents from the so-called scientific ranks may be very good historians, but they really do not understand anything of the prophetic "situation" (even if they have raised the so-called "Religion of the Prophets" to the highest rank among religions).

When scientific historians of the religion of the Bible began to interest themselves in the "situation," as they understood it, and to investigate how the writers of the books of the Bible themselves understood what they had written, there arose others who began to study what were really the objective contents of the Biblical statements. That is how the "situation" in the prophetic sense was discovered—the "situation" between God and the world, viz. God's "situation" face to face with men. One who thinks in this way thinks "evangelically," and of its discoverers the most logical, able, and influential is Karl Barth.

A favourite question is, "Is he then something of a prophet?" That is a silly and most unprophetic question. So much is certain; Barth is a theologian who knows about prophecy, believes in it, and draws knowledge from it, which he has used to build up his theology. I would never call him a prophet, but I would say that his theology is a prophetic theology—but not prophecy. It brings the "situation" between God and the world into theology, makes of it a subject of theology, makes of it a "fact." The very fact that Barth does this is the problem in Barthian theology. The only right critical question that one should ask him is

whether he is justified in so doing, or whether he has done it in the right way.

Is Barth right then in the "situation"? We say, Yes, and the justification for our yes is to be found in the "evangelical" method of God Himself, which we find in the eschatological colouring of all Biblical assertions. Because all statements in the Scriptures refer to the fulfilment which is to take place at the end of the ages by the judgment of God, the "evangelical" "situation" is a real "situation" given by Divine revelation. Thus understood, all and every revelation is eschatological, and all and every theology should be anointed with a drop of prophetic oil. God Himself acts and speaks "evangelically." He sends His only begotten Son, *when* the time is fulfilled. He founds his Church at his appointed hour. He permits the end of all things to take place, *when* the promises concerning the end, which He Himself had given, have been fulfilled. That is *His* plan, *His* plan of salvation. Nevertheless, God always acts and speaks for all times. Nothing is valid only for the moment in which it makes its appearance "evangelically." All that God does and says is God's "fact." The task of a true theology is to find and give expression to the true relationship between God's "situation" and God's "fact." This is both what Barth's theology would do and the cause of our concern about it. He is right in the "situation," i.e., he has understood the signs of the times and has used them correctly as a foundation of his theology. He is incorrect in the "fact," i.e., he has not arranged the working out of the "situation" in the right order.

God's history and the teaching of the Church! The tension between these two great forces controls the path of the Church from the time of the Apostles to that old Church we call Catholic; it controls the relations between the Roman and the Lutheran churches; outside Roman Christianity it controls the relations between Anglicanism and Non-conformity. Recently the same tension has controlled the strife that has begun about Barthian theology.

What connection have all these theological explanations with the German Church struggle? It might seem that there were not much to say about it theologically, or that the Church struggle were only a practical test for Barthian theology. In fact, there was a closer connection. It stands

to reason that during the Church struggle it did not keep us busy, but it seems suitable to reveal it now. The Church struggle was concerned with a peculiar fusion both of the question about *the correct teaching of the Church* and *the right comprehension of God's hour*. The false path of the German Christians was the proclaiming of a false prophecy about God's hour as *the teaching*. It follows that the fight against such false prophecy and the false teaching derived from it was a fight for the right combination of the prophetic and teaching commissions of the Church. The task of the Confessional Church was rightly to combine the "situation" and the "fact" of the Church. In this measure its task was the same as the true problem of Barthian theology. Although Barth was never a real leader of the Confessional Church, and the majority of its leaders never really became his adherents, this circumstance, and this circumstance alone, gave Barthian theology an ascendancy in the Confessional Church.

The admirers of the German Church struggle only rarely understood its real meaning, and no blame to them. Anyone who has not been in the situation in which the struggle began, will find it very hard to get to the heart of matters. The more obvious questions round which the struggle was waged were the unity of the revelation in the Old and New Testaments, the connection between the Church and Israel, and specially the connection between God's history and the truth of the Church's proclamation. In its significance for the whole Church of Christ in the world the Church struggle is truly a full counterpart to the problem of Barthian theology concerning "situation" and "fact." The future theology of all churches will from now on almost automatically concern itself with the taking of the Biblical story of salvation (Biblical "evangelicalism") into the doctrine of the church. That is the result both of the Barthian theology and the German Church struggle.

The problems I have dealt with will stir up many questions anew, but I must stop. This can be continued some other time. What we ask of Barth is that he should submit his teaching to the general "correction" he himself has demanded; we know too, that he will agree. We are living at the beginning of a theological flood, and it was Barth who turned the cock to let the waters flow. That is his merit,

and merit it is, whatever doubts the timid may have. Is there anyone that thinks we can find refuge anywhere from the flood of unbelief? In spite of all book-lined studies there is no dry land left now, and none of us knows the magic word with which to stop the flood of waters. There will be one difference as compared with the Flood in times of old; there will be more than one ark and more than one Noah. But surely it was Karl Barth who was the first to build himself an ark for the coming theological flood.

My object in writing this article is to check the hardness of heart that goes hand in hand with Barthian theology, as it spreads through the churches. That is why I asked the question whether Barth himself bore some of the blame for this hardness, and if so how much and why. There must not be in the future a gulf dividing the Church of Christ with Barthian theology on the one side and, on the other, a regular chaos of theologies united only in the determination to have nothing to do with the correcting influence the Barthian theology is bound to have on them. If that happens, the Spirit will be quenched and grieved.

OUR DUTY TO GOD AND TO THE STATE

By A. D. Lindsay, C.B.E., LL.D. (Lutterworth Press.) 9d. net.

Many will be glad to have the text of the broadcasts by the Master of Balliol which now appears in this valuable little booklet. Matters which press on the minds of many in these days are considered in its four chapters. The author commences with a consideration of "The conflict between universal religion and national religion," in the light of the finality of God's goodness. "Our failure to believe actively in the goodness of God or, if you like, the infinity of goodness, does not come only from intellectual misunderstanding. It comes from our recurring moral failure—our readiness to live on the moral capital others have accumulated" (p. 16). "God and my neighbour" is considered in the light of the New Testament; for, as the author says: "He is our neighbour who most needs the help which we are able to give." The relations of church, State and community, are then considered in turn, also the claims of each on the individual. "Cæsar," to whom we must render his due, is described as "the compulsion of the State"; yet it is freely admitted that "we can't do without Cæsar." However, the author pleads for the leadership of true prophets to see that Cæsar is not given more than his due, and that God has the first place in all life.

E. H.