

BARTHIANISM

By Rev. G.R. Procee

1. INTRODUCTION

The term "Barthianism" is derived from the name of a Swiss theologian called Karl Barth (1886 - 1968), who exercised great influence on churches of our day and age.

We live in a rapidly changing age. Society as a whole is undergoing great changes. Politics, religious perceptions, theology in general, and social views are all involved in a dynamic process of transformation. Many influences are causing these changes. In this lecture we are by no means able to list these various influences. There are many scholars who put their stamp on politics, social issues, ethics, theology and on society in general. Old philosophies as well as new ones are heavily influencing society in our day.

If we only limit ourselves to the realm of theology, we can say that there are various theologians from Germany, Switzerland, England, the United States, and the Netherlands who have placed a personal stamp on the theological convictions and beliefs of many people. Theologians with their understanding of Scripture, are not merely influencing universities or seminaries. They are also moulding the common man. Theologians are moulding churches, synods, ministers, office bearers and members of churches. Common man is unaware that his beliefs are often moulded by theologians. He does not even know the names of these theologians, but these theologians do subtly influence them.

A very influential man within churches all over the world in the 20th century was Karl Barth. He has been called the most influential theologian of 20th century protestantism. He has been regarded as the great prophet of the 20th century.¹ He has been referred to as the church father of the 20th century.² He influenced many professors of theology, especially within the Reformed churches. Reformed clergymen from all over the world have adopted his views. He exercised a significant influence on views churches have adopted concerning the interpretation of Scripture, preaching, mission work, the view of man, God, etc.

2. DIALECTIC THEOLOGY

Karl Barth's way of thinking is very difficult to grasp. He calls himself a dialectic theologian. He adhered to what he called dialectic theology. What is dialectic theology? It means two things:

¹See Cornelius Van Til, Preface of: Christianity and Barthianism, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. Phillipsburg, New Jersey.

²Prof. Dr. G.C. Van Niftrik, quoted in J.G. Feenstra, Barth of Dordt, Kampen, The Netherlands 1954. Page 7.

1. "Dia" is a Greek word which means: "at a distance". "Lectic" is derived from the Greek word for "speaking", so that dia-lectic means "speaking at a distance". Barth emphasizes that our knowledge of God is very limited. We can only speak about God from a great distance. God is at a distance from man because He is transcendent. That means God is above all things. He is far above this world. He is above our existence. So when man speaks about God, he can only do so at a distance. We cannot know God, Barth says, because God is in heaven and we are on earth. There is a great gap, an enormous distance between God and man. We can only speak in a dialectic manner about God. However in doing so, the dialectic theologian constructs a false contrast between God and man. The dialectic theologian overemphasizes the contrast between time and eternity, between Creator and creation. The dialectic theologian minimizes the sure and clear revelation that of God's Word. Due to their strong emphasis on God's transcendency they eliminate His immanency. This has as a consequence that the relevancy and the authority of God's Word are undermined. His clear commandments and precepts do not apply to our daily life, but on the contrary they fade away in the abyss of eternity for man does not know God's will anyhow.

2. In connection with this first meaning we can also say that "dia-lectic" means "speaking in two ways", or "speaking with two words". Those two words are: Yes and no. In practice this will lead to the conclusion that we can never know the truth. The result is that when one wants to find out the truth, he will always be jumping between yes and no. On the one hand, man will make a positive, a yes statement and on the other hand, man will also make a negative, a no statement. The truth is always somewhere in between. So the dialectic theologians are continually jumping to and fro between yes and no, therefore it is very difficult to grasp their thoughts.

Dialectic theologians say that the truth is yes and it is at the same time no. For instance they reason that there is love and anger with God. There is condemnation and salvation. There is justice and compassion. The burning bush, that Moses saw, burns and yet it was not consumed. There is fire and yet there is no fire. Therefore the conclusion: it is yes and no. In Revelation 5:6, we read: "There stood a Lamb as it had been slain." The Lamb stands and yet it is slain. There again is a yes and a no statement. We are sinners and justified. Guilty and delivered. Yes and no. Paul says "when I am weak then I am strong". Paul is at the same time weak and strong. Yes and no. Christ especially is, according to dialectic theologians, the great paradox: He is God and man. He dies and He overcomes.

However God's Word is not yes and no. It is either yes or no. This whole dialectic approach undermines truth. God's Word is very clear. It is not uncertain. All these examples show nothing. God is not yes and no. But He is yea and amen in Christ Jesus. The Lord Jesus Christ says: "I am the truth." By their reasoning dialectic theologians are undermining the validity as well as the clarity of God's Word.

3. BIOGRAPHY

Karl Barth was born in the Swiss city of Basel on May 10, 1886. His father Fritz Barth was a Reformed minister in Basel and in 1889 Fritz Barth was appointed as professor of New Testament in Bern, Switzerland, the city where Karl Barth was raised. After Karl Barth completed his secondary education, he studied theology at the local university and at various other universities in Germany. At that time Barth adhered to liberal theology.

Liberal theology was very critical of Scriptures. Its contention was to remove all human notions which were perceived to be present in the Bible. Every human projection had to be ejected. The quest was to find the Word of God in the Bible. The outcome of this Bible criticism was that only a very small portion of the Bible

is relevant to man. The preaching of liberal theologians was and is very humanistic. Initially Karl Barth was in agreement with this liberal theology. He became a liberal pastor.

In 1909 Barth became an assistant pastor of the Reformed Church of Geneva. He preached often from the same pulpit from which centuries ago John Calvin had preached. Barth was appalled at the lack of knowledge in Geneva. There were hardly any men in church. Only some women attended worship services. The youth received catechism instruction for a total of only six months. That was all and their knowledge was therefore very limited. When Barth asked his catechism students to give some names of old Testament prophets the response was: "Abraham and Eve!" To improve this Barth held adult Bible classes every Wednesday evening.

In 1911 Karl Barth received a call to be a fully installed minister of the Reformed church in the Swiss village of Safenwil. Here he would stay for 10 years. During this period of his life major changes took place. It was here that his theological thinking was going to change. In Safenwil Barth had to study hard to prepare his sermons and his catechism lessons. In spite of his labours there was hardly any response to his sermons and church attendance was poor. Barth emphasized especially the teaching of catechism classes. He even arranged through his consistory that he would teach catechism classes three times a week. He liked the youth and took them out during the summers for hikes and in the winter he would play snow ball fights with them. Here in March 1913 he married Nelly Hoffmann, who was from Geneva.

In Safenwil Barth witnessed the hard life of the labourers. They worked in wool factories and in saw mills. He realized how little they were paid for the work they did. This caused Barth to join up with the socialist movement. He would often speak for party propaganda evenings and would help the workers in their struggle against the owners of the factories. Barth considered the socialist demands to be a practical application of the Gospel.³ He began to look for more practical implications of the Gospel. Because of his socialist ideas, Barth alienated himself from the liberal theology in which he was instructed.

A great change in Barth was wrought by means of World War I. He too was called up to defend the borders of Switzerland. He kept preaching in his village. He was so involved in the matters of the war that he often let the theme of war rage through his sermons, until after some time a woman paid him a visit and requested if he could please preach on something else.

Barth was very dismayed when a group of 93 intellectuals from Germany stated in a manifest that they fully supported the politics of Kaiser Wilhelm II. He saw on that long list of supporters also the names of the professors in theology who had instructed him. He found it terrible how theologians, as he worded it, "could equate their theology with 42 cm cannons". If they could propagate war then that was proof for Barth, that their whole liberal theology was a farce.

These developments caused Barth to claim that the entire dogmatic, exegetic and ethical view points of liberal theology were not correct. He started to rethink theology.

³See Eberhard Busch, Karl Barth, Nijkerk, Netherlands, 1978, page 69.

There was also another disillusionment. He had his hopes set on socialism. Before the war the socialists of all nations had convened in Basel and had unanimously declared that they would be against war and that they would resist outbreak of war at all costs. But what happened? The war ideology overflowed these socialists. Then Barth, to his dismay, saw how socialists of France and Germany were fighting against one another and were killing each other. He found that appalling. That showed him also that his hopes could not be placed on socialism. But he still continued to aim his socialist criticism at society. He joined the socialist party. He became concerned about what the Kingdom of God really was all about in today's society.⁴

The combination of these factors caused a change in the thinking of Karl Barth. The reflection of these changing ideas about religion and theology were laid down in a book that he casually wrote in 1916: "A commentary on the Book of Romans." To his own estimation he had discovered the Bible for himself.

The point he brings across is that there is such a great distance between God and man. Man is always at work trying to connect God to his own ideas. The German intellectuals wanted to link God to the war policy of Germany. The same happened in France. Man wants to make his point of view equal to God's point of view. But all mankind has to be in solidarity together in responsibility towards God. Barth makes all human differences relative over against God. He reasoned that we all together are far away from God. We cannot grasp God. We cannot say that we know God. We cannot say that we have God's Word or the truth. We cannot even say with the liberals, who have eliminatinated much from the Bible, to have God's Word. No, God is high and in heaven.

When the book was finished, there was hardly a publisher which wanted to publish the manuscript. Finally, with financial help from friends, Barth found a publisher who was willing to do it. In 1919 Barth was invited to speak at a German theological conference at Tamberg and the impact was overwhelming. His speech was received with much enthusiasm. By means of this speech, the door of Germany's theological world was opened for him. It was then that his book was quickly sold out and a German publisher in Munich bought the copyright.

In 1921 Barth rewrote his commentary on Romans. This revised edition was very well received. This second edition caused Barth to become famous for many years. He wanted to awaken the people who were dreaming of their self made God and making their fantasies of how they might grasp God. Theology had become far too humanistic, Barth thought. The border line between God and man had become very vague. There was no distinction left. Barth was annoyed that man was exalted at the expense of God. Barth stated that God is completely independent of man. He exclaimed: "God! We don't know what we mean by that. Those who believe know that they don't know".⁵

He heavily emphasized the difference between God and man. There is a great difference between God's Kingdom and our kingdom, between hell and heaven, death and life. Barth says that we are as tramps, wandering around but we are all on our way to the unknown new future and the new life.⁶

⁴See Eberhard Busch, o.c. page 90.

⁵See Eberhard Busch, o.c. page 111.

⁶Eberhard Busch, o.c. page 114.

Barth criticized the notion of the 19th century that man has a natural ability to know God and to understand God. The liberal theologians of the 19th century had taught that man has natural capacities to grasp God. Man can, by his own reasoning, come to a certain understanding of the truth. This is what is called natural theology. Man, by his own nature, can climb up to know God. Barth totally repudiated this concept. There is no natural theology. God is in heaven and we are on earth.

By saying these things, Barth wanted to awaken the theologians. Late one night, when climbing the church tower of the Swiss village of Prattlen, he reached out and inadvertently caught the rope, causing the church bells to ring. He woke up the entire village in the middle of the night! Something similar happened here in response to this second edition of his Commentary to the Book of Romans. Barth attempted to awaken theologians from their self-satisfied slumber, in which they thought they could grasp Scripture, as well as the God of Scripture.

Around this time Barth was invited to become professor at Gottingen, Germany, where he started to lecture in 1921. At first he lectured on the Heidelberg Catechism and afterwards in dogmatics. Until that time Barth had never even read the Heidelberg Catechism or any of the other Reformed creeds and he did not even own a copy of this booklet. He had however previously studied Calvin's Institutes. Through these lectures, Barth began to consider himself more and more to be a Reformed theologian. But at the same time, he developed and propagated his dialectic theology. In September 1925 Barth was appointed professor in Munster, Germany. Here he taught dogmatics and lectured on the Institutes of John Calvin and on the Gospel according to John.

In the meantime, something rather disturbing took place in the life of Karl Barth. During a vacation in Switzerland he met a young nurse called Charlotte von Kirschbaum. He established contacts with her and an intimate relationship developed. From that point on, he made trips with her and spent vacations in Switzerland with her. She became his personal secretary and helped him with the writing of his numerous books and articles. She would accompany him on journeys and work visits and take care of the necessary correspondence. There was a deep relationship of trust between the two of them. Barth found in Charlotte von Kirschbaum a help meet. She would help him in periods when he needed to take rest. She even lived throughout the year in the same house as Barth. This all was very difficult for Barth's wife, for Barth was married and had a family. Good friends criticized Barth about this. His wife did not want to leave him but there was a considerable distance between her and Barth. The children also suffered because of these difficulties. Barth's wife continued to take care of her husband and family. The fact that these three people lived together was difficult. Barth did not hesitate to accept guilt and responsibility for this situation, but the fact continued. Often Barth and Charlotte von Kirschbaum would spend the summer vacations together in Switzerland and Mrs. Barth with the children would remain at home or go elsewhere for a vacation.

From 1930 to 1935 Barth was professor of theology in Bonn. It was here that Barth started with the publication of his life work: The Church Dogmatics. It was also here that Barth heavily criticized the Nazi's who were gaining power in Germany. The German churches had been brought under the supervision of the Nazi's. It was the fact of human domination of the church that caused Barth to protest against this supervision. Barth also heavily denounced the discrimination and persecution of the Jews.

Barth's criticism of Nazism became apparent at the synod of Barmen. In May of 1934 a national synod of the evangelical churches of Germany was organized in the German city of Barmen. The aim was to protest against the Nazi's. Barth with two others prepared this synod. The result of this ecclesiastical gathering was that an official statement was drawn up and adopted. This declaration was called: "The Barmer Statements"

and was actually written by Barth himself. The Barmer Statements were a great protest against the totalitarian views of the German Nazi government. In the summer of 1935 Barth was fired from the university of Bonn because of his anti Nazi propaganda. He was accompanied by a member of Hitler's Gestapo and brought to the Swiss border. Immediately Barth received an invitation to be professor in Basel.

From 1935 until 1962, Barth was professor in Basel. He travelled much before the war had broken out. He was obviously not allowed to enter Germany. But he travelled extensively throughout the rest of Europe lecturing and writing, etc. After World War II, Barth reacted against anti communist policy. He was not anti communist. He did not agree with the atrocities committed by communism in Russia, but overall he was quite favourably disposed towards this social system. Barth considered the anti communist movement a greater evil than communism.⁷ Throughout the years, numerous lectures were given and an extensive correspondence was upheld. He continued to work on his opus magnum: *The Church Dogmatics*. Karl Barth died on December 10, 1968 and was buried in Basel on December 13.

4. THE THEOLOGY OF KARL BARTH.

The theology of Karl Barth is very extensive and broad. It is therefore impossible to deal with this matter in an exhaustive way. We will try to highlight certain aspects of his theology.

4.1. **The Bible.**

How does Karl Barth view God's Word? Barth's beloved slogan was: "God is in heaven and we are on the earth."⁸ Barth wants to underline the great distinction between God and man. God does not give Himself to man. There is always a distinction. There is a demarcation line between God's existence and our world. We are unable to cross that line. God never gives Himself away. He never gives His Word away. He never gives His truth away.⁹

Therefore we cannot really know the truth. We can only talk about the truth in a dialectic way. We can only jump to and fro from yes to no. That is the key to approximate the truth and then still we cannot say for sure what the truth is. Seeking to know God's Word is a guess, just as preaching is a guess. We can never be sure that we have brought God's Word. God does not reveal Himself. He gives revelations. This is not a continual line of revelation in which the Lord reveals more and more of Himself. All of a sudden God's Word can come to me. That can occur when I read the Bible. It can also take place when I study Russian communism. God's Word can come to me when I see, for instance, a dead dog or a blossoming bush.¹⁰ God's Word is not static, it is dynamic. Inspiration and revelation are no closed matters. It still goes on. It continues now.

⁷See Eberhard Busch, o.c. page 343.

⁸"Gott ist im Himmel und du auf Erden. Die Beziehung dieses Menschen zu diesem Gott ist für mich das Thema der Bibel und Summe der Philosophie in einem." This is taken from the preface to Barth's second edition of his commentary on the epistle to the Romans.

⁹See Otto Weber, *Karl Barths Kirchliche Dogmatik. Ein einführender Bericht*, Neukirchener Verlag, 1975, pages 40 -52.

¹⁰See A.D.R. Polman, *Denkers van deze Tijd*, Barth, Wever, Franeker, The Netherlands.

According to Barth, the Bible is a very subjective book. It gives a human reflection of Divine matters. It is a book full of errors. Whether matters and events really happened or not makes no difference. The historicity is not relevant. Therefore Barth introduces a new kind of understanding of history. He distinguishes between, what he calls, two kinds of history. Some vague supra history idea called "Geschichte", and our common history, which is studied by historians.¹¹ The events of the Bible can be supra historical, or they can be truly historical, but really Barth says, this makes no difference. From this perspective Barth, for instance, does not consider Genesis 1-3 to be truly historical. Even the Bible as such is, according to Barth, not the Word of God. Barth says that God's Word is contained in the Bible. The texts of the Bible have to become God's Word, and this happens when a text hits me like a bolt of lightning. Then I know it is God's Word. The Bible is not the revelation of God. It is only the witness of God's revelation. Barth also reasons that there is no verbal inspiration, for then God would deliver Himself up unto man. The Bible is God's Word as far as God lets it be His Word, in a specific actual situation. The historicity of Adam is not important. But what is important is what God has to say to us through this Adam. But in this way there is really little left of the inspiration and authority of God's Word. Let us critique some of these theories.

1. It sounds very pious to say, that God has to let His Word become real to us. It sounds even experiential, to say that a text of Scripture is applied; but this is something totally different than what Barth tries to say. By saying that the Bible is not God's Word, but has to become God's Word, one is completely undermining the authority of Scripture. It sounds pious to say that God is high and great and that He, therefore, will never give His Word away, but this betrays a wrong view of the relationship between Word and Spirit. The Holy Spirit inspires God's Word. That Word is true and objective. It remains for ever. The Lord is the truth and He speaks the truth.

Now, it can be that God's Word at times speaks more to us than on other occasions, and it can be that the Holy Spirit enlightens us more on one occasion than on the other, but this is something totally different from what Barth is referring to. The issue here is the foundation of Christian faith: God's Word, the Bible. God is with us, with His Word and Spirit. That is an absolute and true matter.

The result of Barth's theory is that no general appeal on God's Word is possible. For the whole Bible becomes so relative. It is no longer the absolute declaration of God's will, but it remains a guess for man. Barth says: We don't know. However, the apostle Paul says: We know...

According to Barth, God's Word is not absolute. For instance, in 1932 the Reformed theologian Wilhelm Kolffhaus protested against the fact that in Germany a woman was installed as a minister. Kolffhaus based his protest on 1 Corinthians 14 and 1 Timothy 2. Barth wrote an open letter in response; in it he criticized Kolffhaus and rebuked him for turning passages of God's Word into general admonitions and rules. For, Barth said, God has to remain free. But if that is so, everything the Bible says becomes relative and, therefore, not

¹¹"Offenbarung heisst nicht, dass irgendeine steinerne tafel vom Himmel herunterfällt, worauf die Wahrheit steht. Vielmehr, offenbarung ist eine Geschichte zwischen diesem Iemand und uns Anderen, uns Menschen." Revelation does not mean that some stone tables fall down from heaven, upon which we find the truth. But rather revelation is a history between someone and someone else, us people. See Letzte Zeugnisse 1969, Page. 37.

relevant, and can therefore be easily be laid aside.¹²

2. Barth is critical of God Word. Genesis 1-3 is a legend. But he goes much further than that. The whole distinction of history and "Geschichte" is very arbitrary and is not in agreement to the Bible's own testimony. For instance Barth has no problem referring to the resurrection of Christ as being "Geschichte", that is supra history. But this is contrary to the testimony of the New Testament which clearly reveals that Christ is risen. There are many facts mentioned in Scripture to explain and to demonstrate the actual historical fact of the resurrection. For instance, the sweat bands, the open grave, the testimony of people, all the circumstances, the testimony of 1 Corinthians 15, etc.

Likewise Barth states that many events of the Old and New Testament are not real history, they are just projections of believing people. They are manifestations of the truth. Obviously this goes against Scripture's own testimony. The Lord Jesus accepted the events of the Old Testament as fully true.

3. The fact that Barth refers to the great distinction which exists between God and man is not scriptural. It sounds pious but this distinction is not in agreement with Scripture. According to God's own testimony, God is not far away and neither is His Word far away. We can refer to several passages of Scripture: Romans 10:8-10, "But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? that is, to bring Christ down from above: Or, Who shall descend into the deep? that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead." Deut 30:11-14, "For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it." 2 Peter 1:19, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts."

We have received God's Word. That Word is not a vague history and supra history. God's Word is not yes and at the same time no, so that nobody really knows what is going on anymore and whereby all the practical commandments of God just become hazy and vague, but we have the true Word of God which is yes and yes. Or it is no and no. But never at the same time yes and no. That is calling evil good and good evil. Christ tells us to search the Scriptures, for they testify of Him. He opened the Scriptures to the travellers to Emmaus so that they understood the Scriptures.

4.2. **The doctrine of the Trinity.**

¹²See A.G. Knevel, editor, *Visie op Karl Barth*, Kampen, The Netherlands, 1987, page 31.

Karl Barth has his own idea's concerning the Trinity. The Christian Church has always confessed that there is one God and three Persons. Barth has actually a heretical view when he states there is one God and one person. This one person reveals Himself in various ways. The Father, is nothing else than a different mode of existence of the same Person.¹³ According to Barth, the Holy Spirit is not a third Divine being. In an interview Barth was asked: "When Jesus prayed to the Father, and spoke of the Spirit, do you hold that God was talking to Himself?" Barth: "Yes. In the nature of God the difference between subject and object disappears."¹⁴ This is however totally against Gods's Word. God reveals Himself to us in three distinct Persons. That is what the Athanasian Creed stands for. Likewise the Heidelberg Catechism in answer 25 and Belgic Confession article 9.

4.3. The doctrine of election.

Karl Barth has a typical dialectic approach to election. We confess double predestination. That means the Lord has chosen the elect and they shall be saved and be led to heaven, while the Lord in His justice leaves others in the misery into which they have thrust themselves. But Barth comments that the mystery of double predestination is not the mystery of certain individuals. It is the mystery of man. Barth says that predestination makes no distinction between man and man, but predestination binds man together. Over against God we are all on one line. In Romans 9 we read: "Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated." Barth comments then in his commentary on Romans: Jacob is the invisible Esau and Esau the invisible Jacob!¹⁵

Election and reprobation for Barth mean grace and judgment. It is not a stable situation. It is the everlasting victory of grace over judgment. Love overcomes hate; life overcomes death. Barth does not believe in a certain number of elect people or of reprobate people. Predestination is heavily focussed on Christ. In essence, Christ is the great Reprobate. In Christ we are all elect. The church has to say to all people that they are elect, because Christ took the reprobation on Himself. An individual cannot be a reprobate, according to Barth. Christ is the elect Man and He is the reprobate Man. All are included in Christ. He is the reprobate man and bears reprobation, hate, death, judgment for all. Therefore all are elect in Christ. The only eternal decision of God is Jesus Christ. Christ has taken reprobation upon Himself and so we do not have to deal with it anymore. This links up to Barth's great emphasis in his theology on the person of Christ. Christ is the centre of Barth's whole theology and this is evidently shown here in Barth's doctrine of election.¹⁶ Barth in a dialectic way says that people like Saul and Judas demonstrate the no of God in reprobation in Christ. But Barth argues that the yes of Gods election surpasses, by far, the no, also for Judas and Saul.

We must conclude that what Barth is teaching here is not based on Scriptural testimony, but on his own speculations. He bases his theology on his own presuppositions. His doctrine of election is universalistic. Barth says that all are elect. The consequence of this doctrine is that all people will be saved.

One of the criticisms against Barth was that he taught that all people will actually be saved, but they don't know it yet. Someone compared it to a storm on a sea and people think they are going to drown, but in reality they are in very shallow water and they cannot drown, but they don't know it yet. Barth goes even so far as to

¹³Barth is Christo-monistic in his approach of God. "Die Trinitatslehre ist nichts Anderes als die Entfaltung der Erkenntnis, dass Jesus der Christus oder der Herr ist". The doctrine of the Trinity is nothing else than the unfolding of the acknowledgement that Jesus is the Christ the Lord. see Church Dogmatics, I, 1, page 353.

¹⁴Christian Beacon, XV, 38 of 2 November 1950.

¹⁵See J. Van Genderen in: A.G. Knevel, Visie op Karl Barth, page 41.

¹⁶See Friedrich Wilhelm Kantzenbach, Programma der Theologie, Claudius Verlag, Munchen, 1984, pages 192-195. For a discussion on Barth's doctrine of election see further A.D.R. Polman, Barth, in: Denkers van deze tijd, page 137-167.

say that unbelief is an ontological impossibility.¹⁷ Unbelief is impossible because the fact of man's election is the only reality.

Scripture however portrays quite a different view: Romans 9 says very clearly that salvation is not dependent on man. God draws and God saves, God condemns and God saves. It is all His free sovereign work. The names of the elect are in the book of life, see Daniel 12:1; Hebrews 12:23; Philipians 4:3. In Acts we read that as many as were ordained to eternal life, believed. We read in Ephesians 1 that these Ephesian believers were elected of God from before the foundation of the earth, in Christ.

4.4. **Justification.**

Here again we find Barth's universalistic approach. He teaches that the great work of salvation accomplished by Christ realizes salvation for all. The death and resurrection of Christ are the foundation of a changed relationship between God and man. Man of all ages are no longer God's enemies. They are His friends and His children. They are no longer really sinners, but righteous. They are not perishing, but they are saved. Not all people hear this proclamation of salvation and not all respond to this proclamation. Some are disobedient to it, but in reality the situation of all is changed by Christ. But everyone does not know it yet, or does not believe it yet. By faith we may know, Barth says, that we are in Christ, but likewise this counts for others as well, it counts for all. By means of the overwhelming power of grace our sins have disappeared in Christ and we are no longer sinners! God's work of reconciliation is objective and counts for all.

But when we ask: "What is the function of faith in this all?" Barth would answer: "None at all. Faith or unbelief doesn't change anything in this new relationship which exists between God and man through Jesus Christ. The no of man is powerless over against the almighty yes of God."

Again we see that the consequence of this notion is that, in the end, all will be saved. Barth's ideas are leading to universal redemption. Faith as we find it portrayed in Scripture is not considered at its proper value. We find the applicatory work of the Holy Spirit lacking in this whole theory of Barth.

¹⁷See J.van Genderen, *De Leer van de Verkiezing bij Karl Barth*, in: A.G. Knevel, *Visie op Karl Barth*, Kampen, Netherlands, page 44.

Barth contends with the idea that man's salvation is dependent on man's choice, as we find it in liberal and other circles. Barth also wants to go against the idea that man's salvation is dependent on the church and the sacraments as we find that in the Roman Catholic Church. It is as such praiseworthy to deny these two errors. But in his own theories Barth contradicts Scripture. He disallows the Scriptural fact that faith is involved. The sacraments are no longer needed for the strengthening of faith, for faith, as such, is not even relevant.¹⁸

4.5 Doctrine of Creation.

In his doctrine concerning creation, Barth states that Genesis 1-3 are just legends. Man was created with sinfulness in him. There never was a falling away from God. So man is not accountable to God. Man is not guilty before God. Man is a prey of powers. In Christ, God delivers man from these powers.

In fact creation is redemption. In the beginning there were the powers of chaos, sin, and ugliness. When God created, He already saved. Creation is redemption according to Barth. In creation the focus and foundation is on Christ. Barth wants to see the creation story founded in Christ. His doctrine of creation is Christologically concentrated. God is gracious towards His creatures. God has even justified His creatures, according to Barth.

But, in this way, we do not do justice to the Scriptural fact of the accountability of man, the guilt of man, the grace which is applied through the Lord Jesus Christ in the way of faith and repentance. Barth bypasses Romans 5:19, which clearly explains that sin came into the world through Adam. The doctrine of Barth on creation is speculative.

In connection with this, we see that Barth has no concern for a structural creation order in society. Christ was despised on the cross, and therefore, Christ has special concern for the weak and the outcasts of society. Therefore Barth has no concern about social structures in general. Christ stands up for the poor and for the weak. Here we find how Barth is very critical of society, but positive about Russian communism. Barth says that Christ chooses for the poor and Christ is the great Revolutionary.

4.6. The doctrine of infant baptism.

Barth denies the validity of infant baptism. He does this by using his Christological way of reasoning matters. He said that the Lord Jesus Christ was baptized in the Jordan river on behalf of all people. When the Lord Jesus arose from the dead He did this also for all people. Christ arose not for some people but for all men. God has turned Himself to man.

Barth distinguishes between water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The baptism of the Holy Spirit takes place when the Spirit makes Christ's baptism real to us, in such a way that what occurred in Christ Jesus also happens to us. Man becomes a partaker of the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus by means of the Holy Spirit. This is the baptism with the Holy Spirit.

¹⁸See J. van Genderen, *Gerechtigheid als Geschenk*, Kampen Netherlands, page 47-49.

Barth tries to underline these ideas by referring to, for instance, Mark 1:8, "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost.", and to John 1:33, where Christ baptizes with the Holy Spirit, and also to Acts 19:2, where Paul asks whether the disciples of John have received the Holy Spirit.¹⁹

But overall this is a very weak exegetical basis for such a profound matter. Barth makes a contrast between water baptism and this baptism of the Spirit. He draws the conclusion that water baptism is a human answer to this baptism of the Holy Spirit. Therefore this cannot be administered to children but to adults who can receive this baptism of God's Spirit. Water baptism, Barth contends, is nothing but the human resolution to walk in faith, hope and love. Barth bypasses Biblical truths such as: Acts 2:39, 1 Corinthians 7:14, Mark 9:36, the texts referring to the baptism of entire households. Barth also diminishes the covenant as the ground for baptism. We are to baptize all who belong to the covenant of grace. The Lord erects His covenant with the believers and their children. From the very beginning of Christianity infant baptism was a fact.

The whole distinction between water baptism and baptism of the Holy Spirit is not correct. According to Barth, faith and personal engagement with Christ takes place when the baptism with the Holy Spirit takes place. The key text for Barth is what happened on the day of Pentecost. One hundred and twenty disciples received the baptism with the Holy Spirit. But we can ask: Was that the beginning of their faith? No, for according to Barth, they had been drawn long before this to the Lord Jesus Christ. They had faith already. They walked in love faith and hope. They already were true disciples.

Barth confuses matters here. The contrast between water baptism and baptism with the Holy Spirit is not Biblical. We can say that the baptism with the Holy Spirit is the application of God's grace in the hearts of sinners, and this grace was offered and promised unto them in the covenant of grace.

According to Barth, God has elected every man to salvation. The Holy Spirit makes this known to man, and as a response to that, man lets himself be baptized. In this way the sacraments have no function to strengthen faith.

4.7. Ethical consequences.

Barth is very much opposed to the idea that laws and commandments of God are general and applicable to all. The commandments of God have to be made concrete and real in life. It is all dependent on the situation in which man is. This links up to Barth's idea about the relationship between law and Gospel. Law and Gospel are two contradictory matters. For Barth there is in reality no law. God comes with his overwhelming grace and yes towards man. There is only grace, only gospel. When God comes with His commandments, these are no harsh binding rules, but demonstrations of his love and gospel. These laws are not binding and are not dominating man, but they have to be applied in the various situations in which man finds himself; but it is all under the banner of grace.

God is according to Barth not the sovereign Ruler and Legislator of heaven and earth. The commandments of God become flexible, and easy. Barth stresses terms as flexibility, liberty and actualization of God's

¹⁹See W, van't Spijker a.o. *Rondom de Doopvont*, Goudriaan Netherlands, 1983, page 500.

commandments. Barth tells us that the ten commandments do not give us strict commandments or rules. At best, they give us some vague border lines. We have to pray that God will teach us what to do in certain situations.

The outcome of this all is, in fact, evangelical anarchy. Barth has little concern for the authority of the Creator. He has little respect for God's Laws. He does not esteem cultural and social order.

5. CONCLUSIONS.

The heart of the problem with Karl Barth is nothing new: it is man wanting to exercise authority over God's Word. Therefore, Barth comes with all kinds of strange conclusions, which are not new at all. They were propagated at one time or another in the history of the church.

His views on the Trinity were present in the early church. Aspects of his views on baptism were regarded by the Anabaptists. His views on justification were taught in the early church by Origen.

His views on election have always been echoed and heard before him, by Pelagius, Arminians, etc. His ethical consequences were voiced earlier by the libertines in Calvin's day.

The issues are not new. The way they are packaged is new. The strong emphasis on God's grace and the impossibility of unbelief and the matter of stressing Jesus Christ as God's great yes, indeed appear all to be new. But in essence they are not new.

Barth denies the authority of Scripture. He calls himself Reformed, but he does not agree with the Reformed confessions. Therefore he cannot be considered a Reformed theologian. He is making fantasies in a very intelligent way, but it is fantasy, man's wisdom over against the authority of God's Word. In this context the "thus saith the Lord" has no value. Essential matters become arbitrary by the philosophical and unbiblical distinction between history and "geschichte".

The Biblical emphasis on faith and repentance evaporates. The stress to urge people to seek the Lord and be saved disappears. People are deceived for ever by these teachings of Karl Barth. But it sounds so interesting, because he emphasizes the greatness of God and he goes against all human attempts to grasp God and to place God in our logical schemes. He refers to Calvin and to terminology which sounds familiar but he changes the content of these expressions in such a way that by using the same words, he comes to a completely different meaning.

God's Word is clear. The doctrines of truth are clear. Barth is not clear. He is vague. His theology is transparent. We find that in his own life. For consider what happened in his own life. Did God's laws appeal to him. Barth never speaks about his own spiritual life. He never bows in adoration for the majesty of God's Word. He, in the practice of his own life, lived according to the principle that God's laws are vague. Think of that dark cloud which hung over his life. I refer to his relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum. This was a very painful matter. We would think that more light on this matter would be shed when the complete correspondence between Barth and his life long best friend, Eduard Thurneysen, was published. But this is not the case. On purpose, many parts of his letters were left out. Many sentences were erased, because they belonged to his intimate life. Any person with common sense can understand how painful this relationship must have been for Barth's wife. But if God's commandments are vague, then you have the liberty to behave yourself in this way. Nowhere do we find any explanation for this relationship with Charlotte von Kirschbaum. One is plagued with the question: How can this lifestyle and theology be compatible. Where were the fruits in his own life? The Lord Jesus said: "By their fruit ye shall know them."

We may consider Barth's doctrines, his teachings and his personal lifestyle as far as we are informed about it. Then we must conclude that Barth was contrary to God's Word. Did the matter of diminishing the validity of God's law result from his own lifestyle? Was he himself running away from the guilt which pursued him? These are painful questions.

The influence of Barth has been enormous. Modern mission work has changed into only giving aid and assistance, because people are saved anyway. There is contact possible with other religions, for all are saved anyway. Unbelief is impossible, so there is no need for a Word mission; provide a deed mission instead. In following Barth, people exclaim that Christ is the great revolutionary. There is salvation in delivering people from social structures. This revolutionary theology was influenced and instigated by Barth.

The fact that preaching has come into a crisis and does no longer call for faith and repentance is also due to Barth. The fact that God's commandments are made relative is because of Barth. There are other contributing factors and other theologians who have had their influences, but a profound thinker, with such a dominating influence as Karl Barth, has not risen in the 20th century.

Barth wanted to deliver churches from a false theology, but in fact he made things only worse. God's Word became more relative and irrelevant. People are lulled into a false sleep. We have to think of what 2 Peter 2: 1 says: "But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, even denying the Lord that bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction."

We have no biblical warrant to call Karl Barth a doctrinally sound teacher. We do have however a Biblical warrant to say that what Barth taught and lectured was not in agreement to the sound doctrine of God's Word. We must conclude that Barth was a false prophet, who caused much confusion and led churches, theologians and ministers away from the pure revelation of God's Word.

How we should listen to God's Word in 2 Peter 1: 19, "We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts"!

May we be faithful and diligent students of God's Word, and may we be watchful and cleave to sound doctrine. How beautiful is the Reformed doctrine. It is very balanced, very practical, and very Scriptural. Let this be our prayer (Psalm 86:11): "Teach me Thy way, O LORD; I will walk in Thy truth: unite my heart to fear Thy Name."