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# Barth's Conception of the Authority of the Bible

By THOMAS COATES

**T**HE Barthian theology has often been defined as a "theology of the Word of God." The Word of God is indeed central in Barth's theological system, and to understand his conception of the Word of God is to hold the key which opens the door to all his theological thinking. Is this conception something new in the realm of Christian thought, or is it merely a repristination of the Reformation doctrine? Does the Barthian doctrine remain within the mainstream of the Christian tradition, or does it meander off into the slough of a new and disguised rationalism and empty itself at last in the morass of an utter subjectivism? Specifically, how does the Bible fit into the pattern of Barth's doctrine of the Word of God? What authority does he ascribe to the Biblical word? In how far does he lay himself open to the charge of "Biblicism"? These are some of the issues to which we wish to address ourselves, and in the process we hope to gain a better understanding of what the Bible means to Barth.

Barth came to recognize early in the course of his ministry—in the years of postwar disillusionment—that the failure of the modern Church in large measure was to be ascribed to her departure from the true and only source of her authority—the eternal Word, from which alone she could draw new strength and new insights for her perennial task of reviving the souls of men. Barth, accordingly, was no longer concerned about the "historical Jesus." His concern was rather with the Christ who is "the Word made flesh," and with the Gospel, which is eternally valid—no less for the modern Church than for the men of the first century. It was this Gospel, then, as set forth in the Scriptural record, that determined his idea of God and his Christology.

Barth's friend Thurneysen tells it in this way: "We read the Bible in a new way. We read it more respectfully, more as an eternal Word addressed to us and to our time. We criticized it less. We read it with the eyes of shipwrecked people whose all had gone

overboard. The Bible appeared in a new light. Beyond all interpretations, its genuine Word began to speak again; the word of forgiveness, the Gospel of the coming Kingdom. . . . The Bible led us back to the Reformation, and the Bible and the Reformation have held our attention through the years."

This appreciation of the place of the Bible in the life of the Church, and this concern with its message, accordingly, is a dominant characteristic of the Barthian theology. The Bible, says Barth, has supreme value for the Christian faith today. This value, however, does not lie in its moral teachings, or in its literary excellence, or in its historical records—although, to be sure, its value in regard to all these matters is beyond dispute. Its supreme worth derives from the fact that in it we have the word of a "speaking God," a divine revelation. That God who is "totally other," self-revealing, has chosen to employ the human words of the Bible to address Himself to man.

Thus the Bible is not the expression of man's spiritual aspirations, not a record of man's religious development through the centuries, not a presentation of man's own spiritual insights, not the embodiment of the best and highest thoughts of men about God. On the contrary, says Barth, "it is not the right human thoughts about God which form the real content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about man. The Bible tells us not how we are to speak to God, but how God has spoken to us; not how we find a way to God, but how He has sought and found a way to us." It is not man's cry to God, but God's answer to that cry. "Thou hadst not sought Me hadst thou not already found Me."

According to Barth, the concepts of "Word of God" and "Scripture" are not to be entirely identified. Rather he presents his doctrine of Scripture as part of the wider doctrine of the Word of God. The Word of God, Barth teaches, is threefold in form: In its oral form it is church proclamation; in its written form it is the Holy Scriptures; in its fundamental, original form it is *revelation*—the eternal utterance of God. In this respect, then, he sets forth the authority and norm of Scripture as the witness to divine revelation and as the basis of church proclamation.

This Word of God is the free, purposive expression of His will. It is a Word that we do not and could not speak to ourselves.

It must come from Another. It always tells us something new, which otherwise we could not hear. It is a Word which aims at, and touches us in, our very existence as the Word of the Creator to His creatures. It is a Word by means of which we attain the renewal of our original relationship with God; it is a Word of Reconciliation. It is a Word in which He announces Himself to man, in which He meets man on the way—the Word of our Redeemer. It is this Word by which He speaks to man. He might equally well speak to us “through Russian communism or a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub or a dead dog,”<sup>1</sup> and if He did, we would be constrained to listen. It is through His Word, however, that He has chosen to address us and reveal to us His will—a Word which is authoritative and final as no word of man could ever be.

Revelation has already taken place. The Word of God has already been spoken, and in recollection of that revelation we speak in church proclamation. What is the meaning of this recollection? It might conceivably be the actualization of a revealedness of God originally immanent in the existence of every man. Recollection would thus involve a discovery and fresh appropriation of something esoteric, forgotten, something of man's relationship to the eternal or absolute. This would accord with Augustine's conception of *memoria*, in the Platonic tradition. From the standpoint of God's freedom and power there is no reason why it could not be so. But the fact remains that God has not chosen to use His freedom and power in this way.

The Church need not resort to self-reflection in order to recapture the divine revelation. She does not seek or obtain the commission to proclaim in any hidden depth of her own existence. Over against proclamation in the Church there stands an entity which is “the concrete form of the reason why the recollection upon the basis of which we expect God's revelation cannot be recollection of a timeless essence of the Church herself.”<sup>2</sup> This entity is Holy Scripture.

“The Bible is the concrete medium by which the Church recalls God's revelation in the past, is called to expect revelation in the future, and is thereby challenged, empowered, and guided to proclaim.”<sup>3</sup> The Bible, in the Barthian conception, is not itself

God's revelation; rather, the Bible, serving as the channel of the Word of God, *attests* the past revelation of God. This attestation really makes it the Word of God. It is upon this attestation that church proclamation depends for its authority and its promise. Hence, Barth makes the attestation of revelation by the Bible decisive for the message of the Church.

It must be clear from this observation, says Barth, that the Bible and revelation are in no wise to be identified. We must rather hold that revelation and the Bible are one in fact only where the Word of God is an event — i.e., when and where the Bible becomes God's Word, viz., "when and where John's finger points not in vain but really pointedly, when and where by means of its Word we also succeed in seeing and hearing what he saw and heard."

He holds that revelation is the primary principle, the Bible subordinate. It is the function of the Bible to reproduce, in human thoughts and expressions, the Word of God in definite human situations. The line which exists between the two is that which exists between *Deus dixit* and *Paulus dixit*. The two merge into one when the Word of God becomes an event.

Revelation, to use Barth's expression, "engenders" the Scriptures which attest it, as the event of inspiration in which they convey the Word of God to man. Thus it serves both as judge and as guarantor of the truth of what they say. That which happened to the holy writers — "journeymen" of the revelation — was not something subjective, something for which they themselves were responsible. It was the *Deus dixit*. They claim no authority for themselves, and yet it has befallen them to speak with the highest authority in proclaiming the transcendent fact of the Word made flesh in the fullness of time, "Immanuel" — "God with us."

"What we have in the Bible is *witness* to the Word of God . . . 'a word concerning the Word' and not the perfect divine Word itself. For when God speaks His Word to the prophet, the prophet first of all speaks the Word to himself. It meets and strikes him, in his opposition, as the Word of Another and becomes broken like a ray of light in a prism. . . . For it is not inerrancy, or any other human virtue, which makes witnesses for God, but the light of divine truth itself shining in the witness of erring and only partially good men."<sup>4</sup>

Through revelation the Bible is elevated in a threefold way: It is made *visible*, knowable, in that the Bible attests the event of revelation. It is made *relative*, in that revelation delimits the scope and authority of the Bible. It is made *secure*, in that revelation confirms and preserves that to which the Bible attests. This revelation — "which does not differ from the Person of Jesus Christ" — is the only source and foundation of the Biblical witness.

It is true, says Barth, that we know the revealed Word of God only from Scripture. But this does not mean that the power reposes in the Bible itself to make it true that the *Deus dixit* of the Church is present in any given time or situation. On the contrary, it is true *where it is true*, that is to say, "where and when, by having spoken, once for all, God willed to have it true according to His eternal counsels, where and when He lets it come true through His manifestation, preservation, and fulfillment of the Word in the Bible and in preaching."<sup>5</sup>

Barth harks back to Luther for support of his threefold conception of the Word of God, in the interrelationship of revelation, Scripture, and proclamation. He cites, for example, the passage in the *Kirchenpostille*, in which Luther describes the "three ways in which the truth may be revealed" as "Scripture, word, thought: the Scripture through the books, the word through the mouth, the thought through the heart." Barth then declares with complete assurance: "The last one, which Luther here calls 'thought,' is of course nothing else than what we as the first have named revelation." The brave attempt to make a sixteenth-century Barthian out of Luther is somewhat less than convincing.

But now, just what *is* this Bible which lays claim to being the vehicle for the Word of God? By whose warrant have those sixty-six books been dignified as *the* Scriptures? Who has decreed that they are to be the repository of sacred truth? Barth's answer would be: The Bible constitutes itself the canon. "The Bible is the canon just because it is so." The Biblical books imposed themselves as canonical upon the mind of the Church. It is not for us to question *why* this is so. In that case we would establish ourselves as arbiters over the sacred Word. This questioning would amount to engaging in a self-dialog on our part.

The canon was formed, over the course of the years, through

the consensus of the Church — under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and as an act of faith, to be sure. "Believers, listening through the centuries for the divine Word, heard it in those books, and what the Church did was to register a conviction which had already been reached within the Fellowship."<sup>6</sup>

Barth writes in this connection: "By recognizing the existence of a canon, the Church declares that particularly in her proclamation she is aware of not being left alone, that the commission on the basis of which she proclaims, the object which she proclaims, the judgment to which her proclamation is liable, the nature of real proclamation as an event must come from *another* source, from without, and concretely from without, in the complete externality of her concrete canon — as an *imperative*, categorical yet utterly historical, becoming articulate in time. And by acknowledging that this canon is actually identical with the Bible of the Old and New Testaments, with the Word of the Prophets and Apostles, she declares that this connection of her proclamation with something concrete and external is not a general principle or a mere determination of form."<sup>7</sup> To the contrary, "this bit of past happening composed of definite texts" constitutes the marching orders of the Church.

The integrity of the written Word is intimately bound up with the very existence of the Church. On the *written* nature of the canon depend both its autonomy and its independence. Were the canon simply in the form of an unwritten, spiritual-oral tradition, then its definite authority would be missing, and then, in the end, the Church would be left to concentrate upon her own aliveness, and to engage in a dialog with herself.

While revelation is originally and immediately God's Word, the Bible is such only derivatively and mediately. It can lay no *a priori* dogmatic claim to special attention. "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be His Word, so far as God speaks through it."<sup>8</sup> That is to say, not in itself, but when He avails Himself of it: *ubi et quando visum est Deo*. Revelation remains the ground and the limit of the Bible in its capacity as the Word of God.

Barth maintains that at no time is the whole Bible the Word of God to us, but that particular word which strikes us at a given moment, in some concrete situation, is for us the Word of God.

The Biblical word is historically conditioned, and we must approach it with this factor in mind. Barth inveighs against a doctrinaire conception of the Word of God in the Bible. It does not lie in the Bible in any static form. It is not, as the Old Protestants believed, "a fixed total of revealed propositions," systematized like the sections of a law book. Nor should its verbal form be used for the purpose of erecting upon it a human system. This would make us appear as masters of His Word, who take it into our own hands and use it to our own ends. This, says Barth, would be gross unfaithfulness to Him and would work to our own detriment. The Bible cannot be abstracted from the free activity of God, by whose power it indeed becomes His Word. And this Word is to be found in revelation, i.e., in the Person of Jesus Christ, His Son. Cp. John 1:1 ff. This personification of the Word of God in no way lessens its verbal character. Precisely in His Word God is a Person. He is the Lord of the verbal character of His Word. He is not bound to it, but it is bound to Him.

This Word is not merely something objective. It is *the* objective, because it is *the* subjective, namely, God's subjective. "God always utters a *concretissimum*. . . . What God utters is never in any way known and true in abstraction from God Himself. It is known and true for no other reason than that He Himself says it, that He in person is in and accompanies what is said by Him."<sup>9</sup>

This Word, Barth contends, is not susceptible of any proof. It is self-authenticating, mediated and guaranteed by the Holy Spirit. The Bible is God's Word not on the basis of human judgment, but we rather subject our judgment to the fact, which is exempt from all human judgment, that God speaks. "This is a conviction which needs no proof . . . an experience which derives from revelation and from nowhere else. . . . The Bible is *known* as God's Word because it *is* God's Word."

The faith of the individual Christian can in no wise be appealed to by way of proof for the integrity and authority of the Word. One cannot say: "Because I believe and because for me as a believer the Bible is the Word of God, therefore and to that extent it *is* God's Word." This would be subjectivism of the worst kind. This would set the individual above the Word, whereas he should submit himself to the Word. Then the Bible would no longer be



the free, supreme criterion of Church proclamation. And this approach might well prove a boomerang, for what we believe to be our faith might in reality be "God-forsaken unbelief," in which case the consequences would be dire.

And so something new has come upon the scene: something that is different, not quantitatively but qualitatively, not superficially but radically, from everything which man can know in and of himself. That is the Word of God. And the man who hears this Word in such a way that he grasps its promise and says "yea" to it, believes. This, in its true form, is the faith of the Church.

The Word of God, accordingly, is the sole authority in and for the Church. This Word is attested to by Scripture. And the testimony of Scripture is the testimony of the Holy Spirit, who alone makes it effectual. Through Him Scripture becomes the medium of revelation, presents Jesus Christ, and gives expression to the Word of God—albeit in the form of human words. Whoever hears the Scriptural word, hears the Holy Spirit. This is the evangelical Scriptural principle. And this fact imparts authority to Scripture in determining the faith and life of the Church. Scripture, accordingly, possesses a unique, lofty, pre-ordained authority in the Church.

This Scriptural authority, to be sure, is mediate, relative, and formal. It is *mediate*, for it is couched in human language and is subject to the pre-eminent authority of the Word of divine revelation. It is *relative*, for it *represents* the original, divine authority. It is *formal*, for it is essentially only a witness. But the fact remains that the Church cannot by-pass Scripture and appeal directly and immediately to God. Scripture looms up before her as the channel of divine revelation, wherein that revelation assumes concrete form. Scripture, accordingly, provides the arena for the divine-human encounter.

There is an authority in the Church, says Barth, which at the same time is an authority *over* the Church: an authority which is the foundation of all Church authority. This authority limits and determines the authority of the Church, establishes and passes judgment upon it. The authority by which the Church speaks can in no wise be separated from this supreme authority.

The very existence of the Church, which possesses and exercises

authority, is in itself an act of obedience, of subordination to a higher authority. In this act of obedience the Church is in reality the Church, ἐκκλησία, *evocatio*. Apart from this act she loses her true nature; for example, when she sets up an authority of her own, an authority immanent in herself. This "obedience" is in effect self-rule (*Selbstregierung*). But here the Church is arrogating to herself a prerogative of God. This, Barth charges, is the heresy both of Roman Catholicism and of neo-Protestantism. For the Church is no longer the Church when she acknowledges no higher authority than her own and when she establishes a regime of self-rule, even though she seeks to camouflage "self-rule" by calling it "obedience." Under these circumstances the Church will inevitably lose her authority. She can no longer be the bearer of the Word of God. She can no longer function as the communion of saints. She cannot command an audience to listen respectfully to her witness.

If the Church is to renounce all self-rule and follow a course of true obedience, she will not rely on her own being, her own resources. At every turn she will see herself in confrontation with her Lord, who, in His transcendent authority, is ever present with her. Her Lord is Jesus Christ, whose relationship to her is that of the head to the body. To Him alone (with the Father and the Holy Spirit) belongs both glory and authority in the Church. The relationship of Head and members, however, does not destroy the essential difference of authority between Christ and the Church. On the contrary, just in this antithesis (*Entgegenstellung*) the unity between Christ and the Church is to be found. While she lives as His Church and as such as her own authority, she lives in obedience toward Him, and obedience which can never — either openly or subtly — be perverted into self-rule.

But, asks Barth, should we not reckon with the possibility that the authority and glory of Jesus Christ, her Lord, can actually be appropriated by the Church and become her own? Can the Church not perhaps identify herself with the fact of revelation and thus with Jesus Christ Himself? Can the claim of authority advanced by Roman Catholicism and by neo-Protestantism not be admitted? Specifically, how is it to be refuted? Barth answers by saying that the refutation of this claim lies in the fact that it is raised at all.

The Church that is truly obedient to her Lord, in whom the Word of God is truly alive and present, would never presume to advance such a claim. And by that very fact — the fact that she arrogates no authority to herself — she becomes the bearer of the Word and thus — in the relationship of earthly body to celestial head — at one with Jesus Christ Himself.

The authority and the glory of the Church thus becomes a predicate of the divine authority and glory; but the authority and the glory of God do not thereby become a predicate of the Church. This realization on the part of the Church will save her from falling into the trap of pride and presumption in which Roman Catholicism and neo-Protestantism have become ensnared. She will rather receive with thankfulness that which is given her by virtue of the divine glory and authority. She will give it free course, and she will shine in its borrowed radiance.

The Word of God is not an idea, which, after it has once illumined the Church and been appropriated by the Church, henceforth becomes the idea of the Church itself. The authority of His Word cannot be assimilated by the Church, thence to emerge as the authority of the Church itself. On the contrary, when God gives His Word to the Church, it still remains *His* Word: the Word which she is to hear, proclaim, and serve; the Word of whose life she partakes and in whom her security is rooted; the Word which is self-sufficient and eternally new. The appearance of the Word in the form of Scripture — the words of the Apostles and Prophets — guarantees its self-sufficiency and its newness. It is thereby clothed in a sort of *beilsame Fremdheit* which is necessary in order that it may be declared to the Church at all times as the Word of her Lord.

The Biblical witnesses stand in a unique and authoritative relationship over against the Church in every age of her existence. They are not merely the first of a long series of Christian witnesses; they have been called and ordained by Christ Himself to proclaim His Word to the Church — and to proclaim it in such a way as the Church could never possibly proclaim it of or to herself. She can proclaim it to herself and to the world only by repeating their word. Their word alone is the foundation upon which the Church can be built (Eph. 2:20; 3:5). On this foundation alone can she

enter into union with her Lord: when she recognizes and clings to their word as His Word.

"If the Church believes it has *heard* God in the testimonies of these persons, it must also believe that God has *spoken* in them. To be sure, men have spoken, but in the echo of their voices which we hear, God Himself speaks. This alone is the foundation of the respect that the Church bestows upon these witnesses."

It was the task of the Reformation not to evolve a new authority or a new word, but to restore the Word of God and its authority of the Church and to rediscover the evangelical principle that this Word and authority could nowhere be found but in the word of the Biblical witnesses. It is their word by which the message and the authority of the Church must be measured and judged. This is the meaning of the Reformers' thesis that Holy Scripture alone has divine authority in the Church.

It was not the intention of the Reformers, says Barth, to ascribe divine authority to the Book as book or to the Letter as letter. They rather wished to have Jesus Christ acknowledged as the Lord of the Church, whose revelation would not have become revelation, had it not been accomplished through the Apostles and Prophets, and which to this day cannot be revelation to the Church apart from their Word. But this sign of revelation, to be sure, has the form of a book, the form of a letter, in which the Apostles and Prophets live on in and for the Church and in which form they, as concrete authority, can ever and again encounter her.

"The fact that the first sign of the revelation for the Church, the existence of the Prophets and Apostles, is in the form of book and letters does not affect its power as a witness. When the Book is opened and read and its letters are understood, there stand forth the Prophets and Apostles and, in them, He of whom they testify, to meet the Church in a live confrontation. Not the book and letters, but the voice of the men whom we perceive through the book and letters, and in their voice the voice of Him who first commanded them to speak — *this is the authority* in the Church."<sup>10</sup>

The fact that this authority is embodied in a book does not mean that we must regard it as a *dead* authority. Why, exclaims Barth, just as if this authority had not proved itself to be vital and dynamic down through the centuries of Christian history! The

written character of the witness of the Apostles and Prophets in no way impairs its effectiveness. It is just as valid for the Church of today as was their living testimony to the Church of their own day. The fact that this message appears in written form preserves it unchangeable in the face of all the misunderstandings and false interpretations to which it is subjected. It is in itself the court of appeal in all matters of interpretation, for all these are subject to its control and correction. Its written character insures its freedom over against the Church and at the same time provides freedom to the Church in and for itself. And even though the possibility of error and of misunderstanding exists, as far as this message is concerned, yet, by virtue of its written character, the possibility likewise remains for it to summon itself back to the truth—the possibility of reformation for a Church that has perhaps fallen into misunderstanding and error. This could never be accomplished through a mere oral, unwritten tradition in the Church. Nor would it be possible if the testimony of Christ and the Apostles were stifled through a rigid and arbitrary interpretation. Then she would divest herself of any possibility of reformation, for she would be thrown back entirely upon her own resources. But if, beyond all the oral tradition in the Church, there exists a body of Scripture, and if this Holy Scripture as such is recognized as the criterion by which all church tradition must be judged, and to which every authority in the Church must listen, then the Church will *not* be thrown back upon her own resources. Then the source of her renewal will be open, and she herself will have the potentiality of renovation and of reformation.

The Reformers quite understandably attached great significance to the written character of the testimony of the Apostles and Prophets, so long hidden under the mass of tradition and superstition. Hence they expound the evangelical doctrine of the authority of Christ over against the self-appointed authority of the Church under the general heading of *De sacra Scriptura*. This does not mean that they simply exchanged the infallibility of the Church for the infallibility of the Book. To the Reformers all Scripture in its substance was the Word of God, but its authoritative character belonged primarily to it as the Word of God, and only

secondarily as Scripture; for Christ is Master of Scripture, not vice versa.

The Church reads the Scriptures in order to hear the message of the Apostles and Prophets, not for their own sakes, but to see Christ portrayed in them and thus to confront the authority—foreordained, immediate, and absolute—on which its own authority depends. It is quite impossible, of course, to make a fine distinction between "seeing Jesus Christ," "hearing the Apostles and Prophets," and "reading the Scriptures." All of this really forms one unit, one element of which cannot be separated from another. If, therefore, the Church would see Jesus Christ, she must turn to the Scriptures. And if the Church surrenders the authority of the Word, and ceases to draw her life from the wellspring of Holy Scripture, the Church dies.

By virtue of its written character the Prophetic-Apostolic witness could step directly into the arena under its own power, there to be appealed to directly both as witness and judge. By virtue of its written character it emerges as the criterion of all the human interpretations and all the conflicting opinions which have arisen concerning it. According to its written character it asserts, over against the Church, the newness, otherness, and superiority of a higher authority.

The Word of God, accordingly, which finds expression in the Biblical witness, is a concrete, independent, absolute criterion. This criterion is a *datum*: it has been given to, not chosen by, the Church. If the Church surrenders this criterion—as modern Protestantism has done—she is left to herself and dependent upon herself. The Bible is authoritative by being free—not as interpreted dogmatically or historically by Pope or professor—but free in the face of all interpretation. Being free, it in no wise permits translation into a word of man. Being free, it will not be imprisoned or bracketed by the Church. With this Word the Church "cannot sing a duet, but . . . simply has to listen to it in its complete and unique solo voice."<sup>11</sup> The Bible possesses not relative, but absolute, validity in speaking the Word of God, as the genuine, supreme criterion of Church proclamation and of dogmatics.

This validity requires no proof on our part. "There is no sense or manner in which we have to answer for the Bible really being

God's Word. The Bible can answer for itself. . . . It is true by being true."

Someone will now immediately object: "But that assertion is arbitrary, doctrinaire! It is supremely oblivious of every historical and scientific consideration! It is—well, out of this world!" To which Barth would answer: "Precisely. Would you have it otherwise?" And we suspect that he might also say: "If you would really try reading the Bible, you wouldn't argue in that way."

And so Barth goes on to show that we discern the Word of God in the Biblical word not on the basis of any external proof, but only when the Holy Spirit opens our ears so that we can hear His voice in the words of the Apostles and when He thus brings home to us the truth of Christ. He puts it in this way: "The statement 'The Bible is God's Word' is a confession of faith, a statement made by the faith that hears God Himself speak in the human word of the Bible. . . . This is . . . the faith which . . . sees and reaches beyond itself . . . to the act of God, namely, to the fact that this act of God upon man has become an event, therefore not to the fact that man has reached out to the Bible, but to the fact that the Bible has reached out to man. The Bible therefore *becomes* God's Word in this event, and it is to its *being* in this becoming that the tiny word 'is' relates, in the statement that the Bible *is* God's Word. It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith . . . but we confess (its being the Word of God) as true only in faith."<sup>12</sup> This faith, to be sure, is a "daring venture," but it remains the only way by which we can hear the Bible's message. We cannot hear it by approaching the Bible like a spectator; we hear it only if we surrender to it.

And this hearing happens through the inner operation of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always the correlative of the Word. To hold to the Word without the Spirit would land us in bibliolatry and dead orthodoxy. On the other hand, to hold to the Spirit without the Word would lead us to mysticism and sheer individualism. Through the Spirit the Bible is ever new and fresh; its letter comes alive and confronts us as the very Word of God.

Scripture is not to be judged, says Barth, by the verdict of an historical and critical science. This would set up a norm over the norm, and would leave the ultimate control as to the interpretation

of the Bible in the hands of the Church. While exegesis has an important place, it must not be made the medium for "the confiscation of the Bible by the Church." The ever-present danger of exegesis is that it may become an *imposition* instead of an *exposition*, resulting in a dialog of the Church with herself. "Bible exegesis," Barth concludes, "should rather be left open on all sides, not as this demand was put by Liberalism, for the sake of free *thinking*, but for the sake of a free Bible."

Barth has no patience with the orthodox doctrine of the verbal inspiration of Scripture. "We do the Bible poor honor," he writes, "and one unwelcome to itself, when we directly identify it with this 'Something Else,' with revelation itself. . . . The mechanical doctrine of Verbal Inspiration . . . (stands) for the means by which man at the Renaissance claimed to control the Bible and so set up barriers against its control over him, which is its perquisite."<sup>13</sup> And again: "God's Word cannot be otherwise given us than in hiddenness, not in a prompted or dictated form, but in a true human word." "It is not a work which has been dictated from heaven, but a witness to God conditioned by man, for whom there can be no claim for inerrancy."<sup>14</sup> The Bible is not free, Barth maintains, from minor errors and contradictions; but this does not detract from its authority as the Word of God when it speaks to him who hears the Word in faith.

This doctrine of Inspiration, he charges, "was the beginning of the end." It served to freeze and harden the relation between Scripture and revelation and made for a rigid objectivity of the Bible. The Word of God, which is "quick and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword," cannot be bound in morocco or divinity circuit. He calls this doctrine a "superfluous idol of orthodoxy,"<sup>15</sup> a flimsy idol, at that, which crashed to the earth under the attacks of Modernism. This doctrine makes him angry.

But at the same time Barth at times seems to open the door to Verbal Inspiration, as when he says: "Every part of Scripture is in itself complete Word of God." This does not seem to jibe with many other expressions of his. Whether this confusion actually exists in Barth's mind or is simply a matter of his terminology, we cannot say. But the result is that one finds himself asking, in the end, "Just exactly what *does* he mean?" Barth, we think,



protests too much. The Greeks had a word for it: "Simple is the word of truth" ( $\acute{\alpha}\pi\lambda\omicron\upsilon\varsigma \acute{\omicron} \mu\upsilon\theta\omicron\varsigma \tau\eta\varsigma \acute{\alpha}\lambda\eta\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\alpha\varsigma$ ).

It would seem difficult for Barth, too, in this connection, to avoid the pitfall of the subjectivism which is so abhorrent to him. If the Biblical word is not *eo ipso* the Word of God, but becomes so only in the event, when it speaks directly to us—does this statement not ultimately place the burden of decision upon man, as subject? Does it not boil down, in the end, to man's subjective impressions of God's specific address? Barth may shout *Nein!* a thousand times, but protest as he will, it cannot be denied that he at least leaves ajar the door to that very subjectivism against which he has tried to make his theological fortress impregnable.

It remains for us briefly to set the Barthian conception of the Bible into the framework of contemporary Christianity.

Passing reference has already been made to Barth's strictures upon the Roman Catholic doctrine. In making the authority of the Church pre-eminent, in establishing the Church through its teaching office as the arbiter of the Word, Rome assumes for herself a prerogative of God. By this fact the Church in reality "unchurches" herself. It matters not how much she decorates herself with symbols of authority or with professions of piety. "Kirche ist nicht mehr Kirche, wo sie tatsächlich keine höhere Autorität kennt als ihre eigene und keinen andern Gehorsam als einen solchen, der tatsächlich darin besteht, dass sie sich selbst regiert."<sup>16</sup> This is the ultimate heresy.

The same accusation is to be leveled against neo-Protestantism, except that here the individual self-consciousness (*Selbstbewusstsein*) is allowed to pass judgment upon the Word. The intention is no less reprehensible, and the consequence no less drastic, namely, that neo-Protestantism, too, can no longer speak with any authority. This argument is Barth's *tour de force* in his conflict with Modernism, and, in our opinion, he carries off the honors. When the Word is surrendered, the authority is gone.

Barth also attacks the modern Protestant idea of an evolution of the Scriptures. It does not represent a religious development reaching its culmination in Jesus Christ. The Bible does not present history in the accepted sense, but rather is the result of movements

which came down from God. It portrays "a breaking into the world of something beyond, something new and other."

Barth's break with modern theology is decisive. "Modern theology has sought to break down the uniqueness of revelation in the Bible. The Prophets have been presented as different in degrees, but not in kind, from the spiritual seers of other religions. The bearer of the Word of God has been turned into a religious genius. Christianity has been fitted into its place in a philosophy of religion. It contains more truth than the other religions. It is the best religion that we have. But the absolute nature of Christianity is denied. . . . In such a scheme the Bible fits into a place of honor that differs only in degree from the honor ascribed to the sacred books of other religions."<sup>17</sup> Against this caricature of historic Christianity, Barth, with all his vigor, takes up the cudgels.

For a philosophy of religion he substitutes theology. For reason he substitutes faith. For the relative he substitutes the absolute. For autonomy he substitutes theonomy. And he falls back always upon the Biblical authority.

Does this now mean that Barth must be placed into the category of the orthodox? The answer is "No." To be sure, there is an affinity between Barthianism and orthodoxy. They agree in resting the authority of Scripture upon the testimony of the Holy Spirit. But just what is that testimony? Orthodoxy believes that the Holy Spirit affirms the whole Bible to be the infallible Word of God. Barth ascribes infallibility only to the Word as an event, i.e., to the message which the Holy Spirit brings directly home to the believer. Barth agrees with the orthodox theology in rejecting the idea of progressive revelation. He breaks with orthodoxy, however, in admitting the possibility of error on the part of the Prophet—due to imperfect reception—in bearing testimony to the Word.

Barth objects to the doctrine of Lutheran orthodoxy that a divine power belongs to the Word of God proclaimed and written, whatever its effect upon the hearer or reader might be. According to this view, the Word of God is not an *actio*, but a *vis*, a *potentia*, which has inherent efficacy. We must choose, Barth says, between the concepts "Word of God" (who is a Person) and *vis hyperphysica*.

Orthodoxy—much more truly than Barth—sets forth the ob-

jective authority of the Word of God as given in the Scriptures. This is the *principium cognoscendi*, and by adhering to this principle orthodoxy is far more consistent than Barth in renouncing all subjectivism.

Does Barthianism represent a return to the Reformation? Again the answer is "No." True enough, Barth stands in principle for the same cause as the Reformers — the authority of Scripture. But Barth's authority is not the Biblical word, but the "Word" in the words of the Bible.

How do the Reformers stand on this issue? Luther writes: "Wherefore let us learn to advance and extol the majesty and authority of God's Word. For it is no small trifle . . . but *every tittle thereof is greater than heaven and earth*. Wherefore, in this respect, we have no regard of Christian charity or concord, but sit, as it were, on the judgment seat; that is to say, we curse and condemn all men who in the least point deface or corrupt the majesty of God's Word: 'for a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump.' But if they leave us God's Word entire and sound, we are not only ready to keep charity and peace with them, but we also offer ourselves to be their servants and to do for them whatsoever we are able; if not, let them perish and be cast down to hell; and not only they, but even the whole world also, so that God and His true Word do remain."<sup>18</sup> And Calvin declares, somewhat more calmly: "But since we are not favored with daily oracles from heaven, and since only in the Scriptures has God been pleased to preserve His truth in perpetual remembrance, it obtains the same complete credit and authority with believers, when they are satisfied of its divine origin, as if they had heard the very words pronounced by God Himself."<sup>19</sup>

These quotations serve to point out the fundamental difference between the Reformers and Barth in their approach to the authority of the Bible. This difference may be partially explained in terms of the historical background against which, respectively, Barth and the Reformers were projected. The question of the integrity and authority of Scripture was not the burning issue at the Reformers' time that it was when Barth confronted the problem.

Moreover, Barth's doctrine of the authority of the *Word* in distinction to the Biblical witness is really an inevitable outgrowth

and correlative of his philosophical presupposition concerning the total qualitative distinction between God and man—God as the "totally other." This is the core of his theology. Logically, then, he was forced into this conception of authority. But does not this very factor give rise to the haunting suspicion that Barth may be caught in the same rationalism which he so vigorously rejects?

McConnachie has a trenchant statement in his book, *The Barthian Theology*: "The present crisis in the world arises from the fact that there is no longer any accepted authority in matters of faith. People are content to take their guidance from the churches, from writers of books, from the press, from the wireless, being swept hither and thither by currents of thought, of whose existence they hardly know. But the question of authority, with its correlative of obedience, is becoming more urgent, and not until we again acknowledge the authority of the Word of God, as communicated through the Church, shall we be able to speak on questions of faith with any authority. For true authority can never be authority of a man, or of a society; true authority must always be a divine authority. Let the Church once more take its stand on the Word of God, and become the Church of the Word, and it will speak again with authority, not with the mere authority of a mere institution, but with the authority of God Himself."<sup>20</sup>

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#### FOOTNOTES

1. Barth, *Doctrine*, I (3), 1, p. 60.
2. *Ibid.*, I (4), 2, p. 113.
3. *Ibid.*, I (4), 3, pp. 124—25.
4. McConnachie, p. 106.
5. Barth, I (4), 3, p. 135.
6. McConnachie, p. 120.
7. Barth, I (4), 2, pp. 113—14.
8. *Ibid.*, I (4), 2, p. 123.
9. *Ibid.*, I (5), 2, p. 155.
10. Barth, *Dogm.*, I (2); II (20), 1, pp. 647—48 (trans. by writer).
11. Barth, *Doctrine*, I (7), 1, p. 299.
12. *Ibid.*, I (4), 2, pp. 123—24.
13. *Ibid.*, I (4), 3, pp. 126—27.
14. McConnachie, pp. 105—6.
15. Barth, *Doctrine*, I (4), 2, p. 119.
16. Barth, I (2), II (20), 1, p. 640.
17. Rolston, p. 86.
18. Luther, p. 453.
19. Calvin, I, 7, 1.
20. *Op. cit.*, p. 135.

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