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**BARTH, BARTHIANS, AND EVANGELICALS:  
REASSESSING THE QUESTION OF THE RELATION OF  
HOLY SCRIPTURE AND THE WORD OF GOD**

**JOHN D. MORRISON\***

From the Enlightenment there has arisen the strong tendency in theological circles to bifurcate, to dualistically separate, the text of Holy Scripture from "the Word of God," which is something reckoned to be necessarily other than all texts as such, whatever "the Word of God" is understood to be. The chasm between text and "Word" grew through the nineteenth century as a result of philosophical developments and, especially, the further development of historical-critical approaches to the study of Scripture. As a result, many developments of twentieth-century theology and its prominent schools of thought (especially in the first half of the century), followed by the "shattered spectrum" of multiplied theologies and the entrenchment of postmodernity, have affirmed the separation of Scripture from some non-contentful, non-discursive, non-historical "Word of God," which is the transcendent seat of divine truth and authority. Hence religious authority was located anywhere but in the text of Scripture, which was regarded as simply another human religious product resulting from the effect of or "encounter" with divine Truth/Word of God.

Into the midst of this theological fray came Karl Barth, who, because of his prolific, powerful, and consistent christocentric theological writing, came to be known as the greatest theologian of the twentieth century—perhaps the greatest since Calvin. Barth did much to turn European and American theology, for a time, back to serious theological and christological engagement, and to the serious use of Scripture for the theological task.

Yet at the same time Barth's theology became a center around which diverse discussion swirled. Classical liberals and later neo-liberal and existentialist theologians criticized Barth's apparent readiness to return to Reformation themes and doctrines. "Orthodox" Protestants varied in the form and focus of their responses, and were at first mostly critical, though usually not without constructive interest and appreciation for the new direction in which Barth was taking Christian theology. Suspicion was

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coupled with regard for Barth's emphases on the Godness of God, the Trinity, the centrality of Jesus Christ for all Christian thought and theology as truly Christian, human sinfulness, and real redemption through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. But among the most repeated points of concern was (and *is*) Barth's understanding of the nature of revelation and so "the Word of God" and its relation to Holy Scripture.

In any case, "Barthianism" or more broadly "dialectical theology" (neo-orthodoxy is not an adequate designation) was a position understood to be something of a *tertium quid* between more "liberal" or even (after the rise of Bultmann) "existential" theologies and the loose elements of Protestant orthodoxy. As a result the label "Barthian" was attached to many, including more and more "post-fundamentalist" evangelicals, who found a place to stand in what they perceived to be Barth's simultaneous confession of the classical doctrines of the Christian faith and his subscription to modern, scientific, historical-critical approaches to the very human words of Holy Scripture. Thus, through Barth, many were attracted to the possibility of a substantially "orthodox" faith commitment and confession without the need wholly to follow the pre-modern Reformers and, even more, pre-modern Protestant Scholasticism's location of present historical authority in the actual concrete text of Holy Scripture as verbally inspired, written Word of God, and as an *aspect* of God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit. As James Robinson put the matter, "Barthianism consists . . . of a meeting of the later Barth's move to the right with conservatism's opening itself to influence from the center."<sup>1</sup> Or as evangelical theologian Bernard Ramm put the matter, "Barth's theology is a re-statement of Reformed theology written in the aftermath of the Enlightenment, but not capitulating to it."<sup>2</sup>

In this way, Barth's theology was regarded as an avenue whereby one could be both faithful to the historic Christian faith while avoiding labels like pre-modern, unscientific, obscurantist, and theological dinosaur. It is especially Barth's "Doctrine of the Word of God" (especially in CD I/1, I/2) and, therein, the relation of Holy Scripture to the Word of God and God's (self-)revelation, *as it is* and as it has been *interpreted* by both "Barthians" and "evangelicals," and as it has and continues to exercise monumental influence on evangelicalism's estimation of the nature of Holy Scripture, that I wish to analyze in this essay. To that end we will first briefly present Barth's own often misunderstood presentation of the "ontology" of Holy Scripture, i.e., that like the triune God, Scripture's "being is in becoming." Second, we will cursorily

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<sup>1</sup>James M. Robinson, ed., *The Beginnings of Dialectical Theology* (2 vols.; Richmond: John Knox, 1968), 1.28.

<sup>2</sup>Bernard L. Ramm, *After Fundamentalism: The Future of Evangelical Theology* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 14.

examine representative “Barthian” misinterpretations of Barth’s own doctrine of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, noting how Barth has been mishandled even by those who claim to follow in his theological footsteps. As we will see “Barthians” (with reason) have understood Barth to assert that Scripture, as simply human, written text, “becomes” what it is not, “the Word of God,” when God sovereignly chooses to “speak” (non-contentfully) *through* the text, so as to thereby meet/encounter persons who respond in faith. Next we will examine representative evangelical criticisms of Barth’s view of Scripture showing, again, theological misinterpretation of his multi-leveled dynamism regarding “the Word of God.” We will conclude with an example of an evangelical, who, under the influence of “Barthian” (contra Barth’s own) presuppositions, methods, and conclusions, has been led to finally separate the historical text of Holy Scripture from “The Word of God,” and so from real participation in and as an aspect of the self-disclosure of the triune God.

### I. KARL BARTH’S ONTOLOGY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Karl Barth’s theological argumentation, and so his intention, can sometimes be difficult to pinpoint because each element stands in relation to the massive whole of the *Dogmatics*, because there is often a multileveled complexity that interpretation tends to “flatten out,” and because of the overall “unity (Christ)-in-diversity (development)” of his thought. This is certainly true of Barth’s understanding of the nature of Holy Scripture.

As mentioned, it is understandable that both “Barthians” and evangelical readers should see in Barth’s view of Scripture one of dualistic separation from “the Word of God” which is said comes to persons “through” the human text of Scripture, the “primary witness to the Word of God,” which, again, thereby (adoptionistically) “becomes” the Word of God. Many of Barth’s own statements in the *Dogmatics* appear to say just that. Given that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is the one Revelation of God, the one “revealed Word of God”<sup>3</sup> then Scripture, “the prophets and apostles,” as primary witness to Jesus Christ,

is God’s Word in so far as God lets it *be* His Word, so far as God speaks through it. . . . The statement, “The Bible is God’s Word,” is a confession of faith, a statement made by faith that hears God Himself speak in the human word of the Bible. . . . 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 the

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<sup>3</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I/1 (trans. G. Thomson; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), 124-35. Hereafter *CD*.

Bible is God's Word. It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith, but of course, because it *becomes* revelation for us.<sup>4</sup>

Given Barth's actualism, it seems that God's Word as such always has the character of an *event*, and Scripture thus "becomes" in/as an event, e.g., "The Bible is God's Word to the extent that God causes it to be His Word, to the extent that He speaks through it."<sup>5</sup> This is also reflected repeatedly in Barth's emphasis on this event of "becoming" as "miracle," and so related to his dominant perception of "inspiration" of Scripture as *ever present* divine decision continually made in the life of the church.<sup>6</sup> Thus Scripture "is the literary monument of an ancient racial religion and of a Hellenistic cultus religion of the Near East. A human document like any other."<sup>7</sup> But, it seems, it is a document which, paradoxically is "Word of God" by the divine decision, as well as word of man. Apparently for Barth the Word of God is not tied to the text of Scripture, for *the* Word is nothing other than the *free* divine disposing of God's grace, specifically the incarnation.<sup>8</sup>

Given that such statements are numerous in *Dogmatics* and his many other works, it would appear that all that can be positively said about the relation of Holy Scripture to "Word of God" is in terms of its "becoming" Word of God—a kind of divine alchemy, lead to gold, or perchance negatively, "bibliological adoptionism." But in fact this is not the whole picture. What Barth states regarding Scripture, as on any theological issue, is formed by the larger context of his theological ontology, "God's being is in becoming." For Barth, all that is has its being in becoming, but not everything becomes what it is under the same set of conditions. As applied to God, there is nothing here akin to process theology's notion of divine "becoming" or evolving. Rather the being of *God* is Self-determined being in an absolute sense. As Eberhard Jüngel points out, for Barth God's "being in becoming" reflects the fact that the living God can reveal himself and that this is a capacity of pure grace and not from necessity.<sup>9</sup> God's revelation is his Self-interpretation; in God's revelation, "God's word is identical with God himself."<sup>10</sup> Revelation is that event in which the being of God comes to word, and revelation is, too, God's free decision in eternity to be *our* God, and so to bring himself to speech for us. Thus the ontological relatedness

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 123-24.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., I/2:534-35.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (trans. D. Horton; New York: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 60.

<sup>8</sup>E.g., Barth CD I/2:172; IV/1:152, etc.

<sup>9</sup>Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being is in Becoming* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 42 ff., 89 ff. Cf. also Jüngel's further massive development of this theme, especially in relation to the trinity of the God who is love in *God as the Mystery of the World* (trans. Darrell Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).

<sup>10</sup>Barth, CD I/1:304.

of the triune God is irreversibly tied to the world, relations *ad extra* corresponding to relations *ad intra*, yet always lying in the ontological *difference* between God and the world. So while God's gracious covenantal being-for-us does *not define* God's being, God's being-for-us, pointedly in the event Jesus Christ, does *interpret* God's being (his self-relatedness) to us.<sup>11</sup> Jüngel concludes, regarding Barth's foundational theological ontology, that

God's self-relatedness thus springs from the becoming in which God's being is. The becoming in which God's being is a becoming out of the word in which God says Yes to himself. But to God's affirmation of himself there corresponds the affirmation of the creature through God. In the affirmation of his creature, as this affirmation becomes event in the incarnation of God, God reiterates his self-relatedness in his relation to the creature, as revealer, as becoming revealed and as being revealed. This Christological relation to the creature is also a becoming in which God's being is. But in that God in Jesus Christ *became* man, he is as creature exposed to perishing. . . . There, where God's being-in-becoming was swallowed up in perishing, the perishing was swallowed up in the becoming.<sup>12</sup>

While this foundational theological ontology is not often grasped, its application in Barth's doctrine of Scripture within his larger doctrine of revelation is almost never recognized. Geoffrey Bromiley, a primary *Dogmatics* translator and noted Barth interpreter, moves in the right direction when, in analyzing and assessing Barth's doctrine of Scripture, he notes that while for Barth Scripture is not itself directly revelation (his point being to differentiate Scripture from the incarnate Word), he maintains that it was raised up *within the event of revelation* and is regarded as perichoretically part of it.<sup>13</sup> While Barth stresses Scripture's *function* as "witness to" the Word (Christ) and, as witness its *present* inspiring, and so its present "becoming" as Word of God now by the Spirit, he thereby only "mutes" his affirmation of the *past inspiration* of Scripture. For Barth, then, Scripture is authoritative because, in terms of what it *is*, God inspired it once and for all when he raised up the prophets and apostles to speak and write the primary words of testimony. Contrary to common opinion, Barth intended to present Scripture's authority as objective by the Spirit in Christ the Word, thereby negating the notion that present authority is locked in human subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Scripture's "becoming" Word of God to one

<sup>11</sup>Jüngel, *Trinity*, 104-6; cf. 15-25.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, 107 (italics his).

<sup>13</sup>Geoffrey W. Bromiley, "The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth," in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon* (ed. D. A. Carson and J. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 290.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 291. Note Bromiley's introductory article, "The Authority of Scripture" on the doctrine of revelation and contextual discussion of Barth and (and distinct from) "neo-orthodoxy" on the relation of the Word of God to Scripture in *The New*

now by the Spirit is grounded in its "being" the past inspired Word of God. Thus Scripture's unique priority and authority beyond any and all other human writings, as the Word of God, is rooted in the Spirit's act which causes contextual human language to be God's own words to us.

Yet Bromiley's interpretation at least allows for the possibility that Barth's view of Scripture as Word of God, as participative aspect in the event of revelation which is Jesus Christ, arises from "bibliological adoptionism," that God's past act by the Spirit was to "adopt" as his written words prior human texts. Gregory Bolich, brings yet greater clarity to Barth's intention regarding Scripture. For Barth, Christianity is valid only when "it is not ashamed to be actually and seriously a book-religion." Under God, who raised it up, Scripture's authority rests *in itself*. As Barth put it, "Scripture is (now) recognized as the Word of God (by faith) by the fact that it *is* the Word of God." As a result it has, as the Reformers, too, noted, authority for, in, and *over* the church.<sup>15</sup>

But it is only recently, within the larger breakthrough work on Barth's thought by Bruce McCormack, an evangelical who is Weyerhouser professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, that Barth's ontology of Scripture, its being-in-becoming, has been given sufficient clarity and due credit. McCormack expresses the concern of many in evangelicalism when he points out that, given Barth's principle whereby Scripture is *not* revelation *as such* but the "primary witness" to revelation (Jesus Christ), he seems to erode the needed distinction between what was written by the prophets and apostles and the witness to Christ borne by all Christians. Or more to the real point, paralleling the issues between the "Orthodox" and "Arian" parties at Nicaea, "on which side of the great divide which distinguishes God from all things human do the prophets and apostles stand?"<sup>16</sup> Does Scripture stand on the "divine side" with and as the Word of God which founds the church, or is it merely the first in a historical series of later witnesses? Herein McCormack has found that much misinterpretation of Barth's view of the nature of Scripture, including much evangelical criticism, results from failing to take Barth's more striking statements in their proper context. This is immediately the ontology, or being-in-becoming of Holy Scripture, and more broadly his theological ontology as a whole.<sup>17</sup>

Again, according to Barth, everything that is has its being in becoming. But not everything becomes what it is under the same

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*Bible Commentary* (2d ed.; ed. D. Guthrie and J. Motyer; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970), 10-11.

<sup>15</sup>Gregory G. Bolich, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1980), 196-97 ff.

<sup>16</sup>Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism" (unpublished paper presented at Wheaton College, Wheaton, Ill., April 2001), 2.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 2-3.

conditions. God's being is Self-determined being in an *absolute* sense; the human being is self-determining subject in a *relative* sense. Thus God's being-in-becoming differs from human being-in-becoming and from all things creaturely. The ontological chasm is absolute.<sup>18</sup> But the conditions by which Scripture "becomes" *what it is* is seen to differ again from that of God and the human. Scripture is not a person. It is a thing, an object. Yet it thereby stands between two competing but unequal wills. The will of God determines Scripture's true being as Word of God. The will of all fallen human interpreters purposes to hear in and through Scripture *everything but* the Word of God.<sup>19</sup> Barth's intent, is first that what Scripture *is* is defined by the will of God declared in his act of giving it to the church. This means that where and when Scripture "becomes" the Word of God, it is only "becoming" what it *already is*. But, second, where and when Scripture does not "become" the Word of God there God has chosen provisionally not to bear witness to himself to this or that particular reader. But note, McCormack says, this changes nothing as to the true nature of Scripture as defined by the divine will. Hence, the being-in-becoming of Holy Scripture as Holy and as Word of God takes place first in the relation of faith and obedience in which the reader/hearer stands to the God whose Word the Bible is, and second that God is willing to grant faith and obedience to the reader so that the first condition might be fulfilled.<sup>20</sup> When one "hears truly" Scripture in its authoritative, redemptive role by the Spirit, at that moment Scripture "becomes" for that person now what it already was, Word of God.

According to McCormack, then, how did Barth understand the process by which Scripture was produced which would reflect this outcome? Briefly, revelation (Jesus Christ) engenders Scripture, which attests it as the commission laid by God on the prophets and apostles. Revelation as such (Jesus) is then distinct from such divinely commissioned witnesses, while being both judge and guarantor of what they say. Thereby, and through the event of "inspiration," these become the speakers and writers of the Word of God. Because the revelation uniquely engenders Scripture, the record which is Scripture could become the canon.<sup>21</sup> Regarding the divine calling and commission, McCormack adds,

And so Barth can say that "What we have in the Bible are human attempts to repeat and reproduce this Word of God in human words and thought and in specific situations." But he does not mean to suggest that what we have in the Bible are *only* human attempts of this kind. For the witness of the prophets and apostles

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. Barth, *CD IV/2*.

<sup>19</sup>McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture," 13.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 13-14.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

takes place in the fulfillment of an office to which they were not only called but for which they were also *empowered*.<sup>22</sup>

The outcome, like Jesus Christ, is neither divine only nor human only nor a mixture (*tertium quid*), "But in its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation which itself belongs to revelation."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, that the church is able to say anything at all about the event of the incarnation is . . . only because something unique has taken place between

God and these specific men and because in what they wrote or what was written by them they confront us as living documents of that unique event. The existence of these specific (commissioned) men is the existence of Jesus Christ for us and for all.<sup>24</sup>

For Barth, then, the prophets and apostles are said to be the foundation on which the church is built *together with* Christ the cornerstone (cf. Eph 2:20). All of this means that in answer to the earlier question, on which side of the "great ontological divide," which distinguishes God from all things creaturely, would Barth place the canonical writings of the apostles and prophets, Barth would assert that the Scriptures *precisely in their humanness* stand on the *divine side*. While Scripture and church proclamation may be similar as human phenomena, they are *dissimilar* in Barth's understanding in that Scripture has "absolutely" constitutive significance for the latter. Scripture is canon and norm and as such continually imposes itself upon the church.<sup>25</sup> For Barth, then, when his thought is grasped in its multi-leveled dynamic, Scripture's being-in-becoming means that when it "becomes" the Word of God for this or that reader this "becoming" now is grounded in and arises from the fact of *what it is* essentially as a result of revelation (Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit of God, the Word of God.

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., citing Barth, CD I/2:491 (italics his).

<sup>23</sup>Barth, CD I/2:501, cited in McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture," 15.

<sup>24</sup>Barth, CD I/2:486, cited in McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture," 16.

<sup>25</sup>Barth, CD I/1:102, 107, cited in McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture," 16.

II. "BARTHIAN" MISINTERPRETATIONS OF  
KARL BARTH'S UNDERSTANDING  
OF THE NATURE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Previously Bruce McCormack pointed out that much evangelical criticism of Barth's doctrine of Scripture failed to understand its theological ontological context. But it is first noteworthy that Barth's position, Barth's "striking statements" about Scripture, have also been mishandled by recognized "Barthians." Indeed, the views reflected here represent what has come to be known as the "Barthian" view of Scripture, as distinguished from that of Barth himself.

A. David Mueller

Mueller asserts that in light of Barth's comprehensive, christocentric definition of the Word of God, as synonymous with God's self-revelation, Barth regards the written and preached Word of God as secondary forms pointing to the acts of God in covenant history culminating in Jesus Christ. These "become the Word of God" by God's gracious action and presence in the Spirit. The writers of Scripture have a special place of authority in the church because they are the "primary witnesses" to those mighty acts of revelation. Scripture then is but the testimony of those primary witnesses to God's revelation.<sup>26</sup> Mueller finds, then, that Barth is always careful to firmly distinguish God in his revelation from all human testimony to that revelation. If so, then how can Barth speak of Scripture as Word of God? How can this fallible, human text of the prophets and apostles "become" what it is not, the Word of God? Barth, he says, is correct to regard Scripture as God's Word only if and when God speaks through it. Or, as Scripture has, does, and will "become" to the church a witness to revelation it *then* "becomes" holy, the Word of God. "Thus, *when* God . . . makes himself present in their testimony through his Spirit once again, we can (then) confess that the Bible is the Word of God."<sup>27</sup>

B. Otto Weber

Otto Weber was for many years professor of theology at the University of Göttingen, the university of Barth's first theological appointment. He is noted as a prominent advocate and expositor of Barth's work, as well as a constructive theologian in his own right. Relatively early in his career Weber wrote an "introductory report," an explanation of Barth's *Dogmatics* to that point (I/1-III/4). Therein his brief explanation of Barth's doctrine of Holy Scripture is

<sup>26</sup>David Mueller, *Karl Barth* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1972), 56.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

significant (and confusing) as a “Barthian” interpretation of Barth’s theology.

Reflecting Barth’s language, Weber states that for Barth, “The Bible is the witness to revelation” for it has actually given an answer to our human question *about* God’s revelation. But, again, the point is that the Bible is only a witness to that which it is not, to that from which it is differentiated, i.e., from God’s Word. It “is only a human witness” in terms of what it says, yet it is “special” because in it is unique and contingent testimony to the “majesty” of God’s Word.<sup>28</sup> But if, for Barth, Scripture is a human witness, how does Weber explain Barth’s giving to it a distinguished position in relation to other witnesses? The answer is, first, the content. It decisively attests the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Further, Scripture awakens faith and so proves to be God’s self-witness. But this is hardly unique to Scripture. Scripture’s uniqueness is also found in the contingent function of the “first witnesses.” These saw and heard in a way that happens but once. Yet Weber, too, notes that Barth does occasionally say that, as original and legitimate witness to God’s revelation, Scripture *is* God’s Word. What can this mean? Weber describes this only in terms of “becoming,” as divine decree, as act, as decision whereby such happens as “event” for hearers of the Word. God’s Spirit is *ever* “breathing” in and through Holy Scripture.<sup>29</sup>

This interpretation is brought to greater clarity in Weber’s later three volumes *Foundations of Dogmatics* where he states that he is “following Karl Barth’s doctrine of the threefold form of the Word of God.”<sup>30</sup> With a strong current of existential personalism more reflective of Brunner than the later Barth, Weber makes clear that the Word of God is “event” wherein God is revealed as the One he is. When God discloses himself as Word it is also historical, concrete, personal. The Word is the form of God’s self-giving address to humanity. How does this occur? The Word of God is God’s decision “made about me which demands my decision.” As Word it “happens”; it is historical, temporal, not timeless. Thus, Scripture points us toward the One in whom God himself addresses us as person—*not in mere words* but in the form of the Word become flesh. “The speaking divine I is recognized in the Word become flesh.”<sup>31</sup> How one is to recognize the personal speaking God as lordly Subject remains mystically vague. Yet Weber does say that the Word of God “takes the form” of the biblical witness, but he is quick to disclaim any ascription of a “supernatural” character to the text of the scriptural witness. Word of God truly speaks *only* of “the original

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<sup>28</sup>Otto Weber, *Karl Barth’s Church Dogmatics: An Introductory Report* (trans. Arthur C. Cochrane; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 57-58.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>30</sup>Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (trans. Darrell Guder; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 181.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 178-80.

event of the Word which happened and is happening."<sup>32</sup> The biblical documents make the acts or events of God's past revelation present by the Spirit. The witness contained in Holy Scripture proclaims what has happened once for all so that it will be believed as the event which is once for all. In thus reformulating Barth's understanding of the Word of God, Weber concludes that Scripture's uniqueness occurs in the "process of revelation" "as witness to the Word and as a vehicle that makes the Word-event known to us as valid for today."<sup>33</sup>

### C. Arnold Come

Arnold Come, professor of theology within the Graduate Theological Union, at one time stood squarely within the "Barthian" tradition and its interpretation of Barth's theology. His well-known *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* contains a lengthy interpretive overview of Barth's theological arguments and emphases, including Barth's doctrine of "the Word of God." Come explains that in beginning with the *actuality* rather than the *possibility* of revelation Barth's beginning point in all theology is the fact of the self-disclosure of the triune God. God's Word is the "event" of God's free self-revelation as his personal address to persons. This Word became objectively and concretely present in Jesus Christ. As central to all of Barth's theology, Jesus Christ is the temporal, historical event who is the objective reality of revelation. "The Word became flesh." "Word" declares the historical person of Jesus as Subject to be the eternal God in free act. "Flesh" asserts that in this act "the Word assumes all the qualifications of real human existence."<sup>34</sup>

But the whole revelation of God which concretely, historically takes place in Jesus Christ "is set before us in the Bible." As the written Word of God? No. In a typical "Barthian" explanation of Barth's thought, Come explains that Scripture is a collection of witnesses to the event of the Word in the form of expectation and recollection. Scripture is not revelation, is not Word of God in itself, but contains ordinary human words that point away from themselves. As a result, revelation occurs *through* Scripture. When this happens Scripture *becomes* God's Word to us by God's Spirit. Scripture as witness is the human conduit, the only medium, of the immediate presence of Christ the Word. So Come, too, takes Barth "in the flat," i.e., he denies any ontological basis to the claim of Scripture as ("being") Word of God, but states rather that only in the present event of God's adoptive use of these human witnesses does

<sup>32</sup>*ibid.*, 182.

<sup>33</sup>*ibid.*, 186, 188.

<sup>34</sup>Arnold Come, *An Introduction to Barth's Dogmatics for Preachers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1963), 89, 90, 92. Come died of cancer in 2002.

Scripture “become the Revealed Word when God freely chooses to be immediately present to men through them.”<sup>35</sup>

D. THOMAS FORSYTH TORRANCE

T. F. Torrance, longtime professor of dogmatic theology at the University of Edinburgh (now retired), has been widely recognized as one of the most prominent constructive (neo-) Barthian theologians in the world. His role as a prominent “Barthian” led, at one point, to his being approached by Barth about taking over the writing of *Church Dogmatics* should anything happen to Barth (at close of WWII). On the question of divine revelation, the Word of God, and its relation to Holy Scripture, Torrance tends not (so much) to use the “becoming” language often found in Barth, and in most “Barthians,” but rather is more inclined toward Barth’s use of the word “through,” i.e., the Word of God “through” Scripture. As a result, the relation Torrance often uses represents Scripture as an opaque (though somehow “inspired”) human medium which is dramatically made transparent by the “coming” of the Word “through” that medium by the Spirit in order to “encounter” the human hearer.

Within his larger ongoing struggle against epistemological and cosmological dualisms which he finds have distorted Western scientific and Christian theological, christological thinking, Torrance claims to stand (with Barth) within the “Hebraic-Patristic-Reformational pattern” of critical realism—especially in terms of real knowledge of the Trinity in Christ and by the Spirit. By “Hebraic” Torrance means essentially “scriptural” (contra Hellenic). This means that God, desiring to make himself known to humanity, chose one small group of people, Israel, and subjected this people “to intensive interaction and dialogue with himself” to mold and shape this people for the service of his self-revelation. Hence, as Torrance understands it, God founded this covenant kinship with Israel, thus imprinting himself upon the generations of the nation, his penetrating Word working its way, often “painfully,” into and through the fabric of this people.<sup>36</sup> This process caused God’s Word to penetrate ever more deeply, ultimately for all humanity, and culminated in the incarnation of that Word, God’s actual, final, historical, and ultimate revelation of himself. Israel was thus prepared by God as the “matrix” for the Word made flesh. Jesus is the one Word of God. From one perspective, Torrance regards Holy Scripture to be “the product of that process.”<sup>37</sup> If so, does Torrance

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 93, 94, 89.

<sup>36</sup>Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 16-17.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 18-19.

regard Scripture to be the written Word of God, an aspect of God's self-revelation, in, under, and from Christ the Word? No.

For Torrance, too, God's revelation, the Word of God *is* Jesus Christ. It is in, as, and from the specific, historical person of the God-man that God has disclosed himself to be *known* by existing persons *as he is* in "cognitive" union with Christ by the Spirit. Everything redemptively, epistemologically, and so theologically, begins and works its way out from the "dictation" of the Word made flesh, the historical facticity of God's Word, Jesus Christ, the Mediator between God and humanity. The redemptive movement of God from the ontological (Trinity) to/through the economic-ontic (Trinity) culminating in the incarnation represents the "inner logic" of God for us and the way to true knowledge of and blessed communion with the triune God.<sup>38</sup> This access one has to the Father, in Christ and by the Spirit, is not meant, says Torrance, in some "narrow biblicist way of thinking or speaking about God. . . . [but] our thought [must] be determined by the Truth of God *to which* [the Scriptures] *direct us*."<sup>39</sup> The point is that the Truth/Word of God in Christ, and so the inner-logic of God's Word, has not been and cannot be manifested as human language and as human text. The Word of God as other than and beyond Holy Scripture "encounters" one "through" the text of Scripture in dynamic, transformative, "Word-event." This is, says Torrance, real God-human meeting, but, in true "Barthian" form, it is the coming of Christ the Word, e.g., "through the Spirit-inspired apostolic witness," "through" the diacoustic and diaphanous media (i.e., Scripture), and "enwrapped in the historical, biblical forms." The result of this Word-event, this God-human encounter as the coming of Christ through Scripture, is said to be realist knowledge of God as he is. Yet he terms it "mystical knowing," "intuitive knowledge."<sup>40</sup> In correspondence with this writer, Torrance presented the following illustration of the dynamic and almost conflictual relation of Christ the Word to the prophetic-apostolic witness to Christ—through which he comes to encounter the existing person here and now.

Jesus, the Incarnate and crucified and risen Word who IS Jesus Christ comes to us through space and time and *through* the Holy Scriptures as *through closed doors*. He does not come in the kind of

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<sup>38</sup>See Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *God and Rationality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 145, 158-59; id., *Theology in Reconciliation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 80, 210, 226.; id., *Space, Time and Incarnation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 75; and id., "The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity According to St. Athanasius" *ATHR* LXXI/4:396 ff.

<sup>39</sup>Thomas Forsyth Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 57.

<sup>40</sup>Torrance, *God and Rationality*, 45, 99, 137f., 155-56, 185; id., *Theological Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), 52, 87, 100.

way one can specify with linguistic or logical tools . . . but in the power of the resurrection—really comes!<sup>41</sup>

*E. Daniel L. Migliore*

Daniel Migliore, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, also sets forth an expressly “Barthian” approach to Scripture which conveniently allows him to avoid alignment with, e.g., the “militaristic” and “patriarchal” elements of Scripture. In claiming to follow Barth’s “threefold Word of God,” Migliore claims that thereby we see how the Spirit of God works *through* particular human witnesses, “with all their limitations and flaws,” to lead to right knowledge of God. Thus Scripture, and proclamation arising from it, cannot be ignored. But Christ is the center, the one revealed Word of God. Thus revelation, that which *is* God’s Word, Jesus Christ, must be clearly differentiated from “the concrete media that it employs.”<sup>42</sup> Migliore admits that the threefold structure shows that God has chosen to give human beings an important role in the event of revelation. But, he says, this is singularly true of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. “The good news of God comes to us not directly but indirectly, *through* the fully (i.e., only) human witness, memory, hope and practice of a community of believers.”<sup>43</sup>

So we have, says Migliore, the treasure of the gospel in the clay jars of Scripture, human language, a characteristic of all subsequent witnesses to Christ the Word. And, as noted, given that Scripture contains, e.g., “militaristic” and “patriarchal” ideas, then Scripture clearly stands, in many ways, in contrast to revelation (which revelation(s) is not specified). Thus, says Migliore, it is

essential that a Christian doctrine of revelation distinguish clearly between Scripture’s witness to the personal self-disclosure of God that culminates in Jesus Christ and the historical contingencies and ambiguities of this witness.<sup>44</sup>

*F. Summary*

The purpose above has been to show that Karl Barth’s dynamic, multi-leveled, interactive view of Holy Scripture, in relation to Word of God, is grounded in his theological ontology whereby Scripture *is* Word of God so that it may “become” God’s Word. We also see that this is to be distinguished from the often truncated “Barthian” interpretation whereby Scripture is only human text, which by the Spirit of God can “become” that which it *is not*, Word of God, in the

<sup>41</sup>Personal correspondence by the author with Thomas Torrance.

<sup>42</sup>Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 34.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>44</sup>*Ibid.*

moment of “encounter” with the risen Christ. As Bromiley has noted, Barth, having disowned much in his earlier dialectical, existential stage in his shift to theological objectivity, is clearly to be differentiated from what has commonly been called “Barthianism,” or, more broadly, neo-orthodoxy, those whom Bromiley calls “his looser disciples.” In fact, contra the “Barthian” understanding and use of Barth’s own theology, Bromiley states that “(Barth’s) discussion of the precise question of the authority of Scripture brings him very close to biblical and Reformed teaching.”<sup>45</sup>

But a further concern is to represent evangelical criticisms of the “Barthian” view of Scripture and its formative influence upon “evangelical” theology, one way or another.

### III. “EVANGELICAL” MISINTERPRETATIONS OF KARL BARTH’S UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

McCormack has explained that many orthodox Protestant criticisms of Karl Barth’s formulation of the relation divine revelation/the Word of God and Holy Scripture have foundered in the failure to interpret Barth in light of his overall theological ontology. They have worked primarily from his apparently radical statements of separation. But we found that many claiming to be Barth’s disciples have made much the same mistake in their affirmations. Yet an examination of prominent evangelical analyses of Barth’s view of Scripture is in order. We will begin with the most severe, Cornelius Van Til, moving to the more mixed and moderated responses of Gordon Clark and Carl F. H. Henry.

#### A. Cornelius Van Til

Cornelius Van Til, longtime professor of apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, was one of the first evangelical thinkers to engage Karl Barth’s theology. But none can rival the length of critical engagement Van Til had with Barth’s work, spanning some three decades. His first major work analyzing Barth (and Brunner), *The New Modernism*, was largely a polemical criticism of the bases and doctrines of “neo-orthodoxy” coupled with strong warning to evangelicals not to be enamored by it. Interpreting the later *Church Dogmatics* in terms of Barth’s earlier work, Van Til concluded that despite deceptive use of orthodox language and concepts, Barth did not answer Feuerbach and theological liberalism

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<sup>45</sup>Geoffrey Bromiley “The Authority of Scripture,” introduction to *The New Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 10. Note too Bromiley’s clear concern regarding Barth’s strong emphasis (not total) on *present* inspiration of Scripture (ibid., 9-11).

(modernism), and, despite appearances to the contrary, stands in its line.<sup>46</sup>

About revelation and the Word of God and the relation of such to Holy Scripture, Van Til begins by explaining Barth's "activistic" view of revelation. Revelation comes from God as *actus purus*. Revelation is the realm of "primal history" (*Urgeschichte*), the dialectical union between God and man. Barth relates this to Jesus of Nazareth, but only *indirectly*, for the realm of "primal history" is not to be identified with history or anything in history. "Revelation is super-history in the sense that there is eternal happening in God himself."<sup>47</sup> Yet it meets human beings in history and it is the *tension between* the two realms (super-history and ordinary history) that constitutes "primal history," "God's time for us." It is there that God meets one and thereby gives meaning to ordinary history. Primal history is the realm of the Logos.<sup>48</sup>

But what role can Scripture play in such an understanding of God's "primal historical" meeting with persons in the incarnate Christ? Van Til approaches Barth through negation, i.e., Barth rejects the doctrine of Scripture as found in Roman Catholicism, in Mysticism, and in traditional Protestantism. Barth, he says, rejects orthodoxy's belief in "verbal inspiration" for it destroys the idea of revelation Barth has defined as non-historical, "primal history." Yet, like orthodoxy, he finds Barth claiming that Scripture is the Word of God. What can this mean? First, revelation occurs in Scripture and not behind or beyond it. Second, it means one is not to distinguish this or that portion of Scripture as "Word of God" while others are "word of man." But while Van Til found Barth claiming the inescapability of the biblical texts for theology and teaching verbal inspiration in some sense, he found Barth claiming also that orthodoxy has absolutized this doctrine by making verbal inspiration "the symbol and climax of the idea of *direct* revelation of God."<sup>49</sup> For Barth, this means the death of revelation, for the identification of Scripture with *direct* revelation denies the dialectical character of faith. It falsely makes God's revelation readily and historically accessible to humanity. *Direct* revelation for Barth, says Van Til, means no revelation. There can be no direct revelation, no direct Word of God, *in history*. Rather the "echo" of God's encounter with persons, the primal history of the Logos, is what is found in Scripture. Revelation is always contemporaneous act in speaking to the prophets and apostles, and *through* their witness. The text of Scripture, as it "echoes" the voice of God, witnesses to revelation, to the Word of God.<sup>50</sup> The freedom of God cannot be limited by a

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<sup>46</sup>Cornelius Van Til, *The New Modernism* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946), x.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 139-40.

finished, direct revelation. Scripture for Barth, in claiming no authority for itself, bears witness to the Word and thereby *becomes indirect* revelation, even “double” indirect revelation. Van Til concluded that what Barth meant in saying that Scripture *is* the word of God is that it is such so far as God *lets* it be when he speaks *through* it. Reversing McCormack’s point, Van Til found that for Barth Scripture *becomes* the Word of God in the “event” of revelation and thereby *is* God’s Word,<sup>51</sup> i.e., “becoming” as basis for “being” rather than “being” God’s Word as basis for its “becoming” for one hearing in faith.

C. Gordon H. Clark

Gordon Clark was, until his death in 1985, possibly the leading evangelical Reformed philosopher in the United States. His career included tenures at Wheaton College (where he taught, e.g., C. Henry, E. Carnell, P. Jewett) and Butler University. His presuppositional epistemology would seem to place him close to Van Til, but in fact they differed at several levels, and differed somewhat about Karl Barth. Before his prominent *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (1963), Clark had written “Barth’s Critique of Modernism” and a mock dialogue with Barth, both of which reflected appreciation for several elements of Barth’s thought. But it was Barth’s “shattering attack” upon modernism, and so his rejection of modernism’s anthropological orientation, his exaltation of God as *the* proper concern of theology and his personalistic conception of God that most appealed to Clark.<sup>52</sup> “Barth’s God is the God who creates, who loves, who reveals himself, who is therefore a Person.”<sup>53</sup> On these issues, then, Clark found Barth’s analysis “accurate.”

But, like Van Til, Clark found much that concerned him, notably Barth’s “irrationalism” and his conception of revelation. Regarding the first, Clark rightly distinguished Barth’s earlier more dialectical work from his mature work. But he was still disturbed by Barth’s inconsistency with traces of irrationalism remaining in his theological method, while in other contexts Barth could be the great enemy of irrationalistic religion. Clark is well known for his respect for reason in theology, and its necessity if theology is to say anything worthwhile to the world.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 394. Van Til’s later work *Christianity and Barthianism*, consciously paralleling J. Gresham Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*, essentially reiterates his earlier view of Barth’s doctrine of revelation and Scripture, with special critical emphasis on Barth’s treatment of revelation as *Geschichte*. He found this “activism” undermines the incarnation and all revelation, for all is reduced to non-historical Act.

<sup>52</sup>Gordon H. Clark, *Karl Barth’s Theological Method* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1963), 48.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 32.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 59.

But it was in Barth's doctrine of revelation that Clark found the real theological-epistemological problem. Having noted that "theology of the Word" is probably the best descriptive phrase for Barth's system of thought, Clark explains:

Barth stresses the Word of God. In the Word, in revelation, and not in any independent anthropology or the like, Barth locates the source of religious authority. The Word, then is the substantial core of Barth's theological method; it is the Logos or logic which governs his thought.<sup>55</sup>

In that context, Clark explains that Barth begins by referring to a recollection of revelation, but that this is not a capacity of persons or the church as such but expresses Christ's rule over the church concretely expressed in that temporal but superior entity Holy Scripture. "Simply by being there and telling us what God's past revelation actually is, Holy Scripture is the canon."<sup>56</sup> But despite Barth's strong and exalted claims regarding the nature of Scripture, thereby apparently pointing to Scripture as written divine revelation, verbal inspiration, and complete truthfulness, in fact he does not, says Clark, draw these implications. Indeed, Clark concludes that Barth's concept of revelation "fails of intelligible definition," and a critical element of this failure is Barth's unwillingness to equate Scripture with revelation and so to affirm that revelation has been given in propositional or textual form.<sup>57</sup> Thus Clark is critical of Barth's initial doxological portrayals of Scripture which are immediately negated or seemingly to be retracted, so thus both giving to and then robbing Scripture of its proper authority. After an extensive quotation from CD I/1 (pp. 123-24), wherein he finds some clarification of Barth's position on Scripture, including the oft repeated, "The Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be his Word, so far as God speaks through it," Clark interprets:

These latter statements of objectivity are to be accorded full force, and the shift from objectivity to subjectivity may be explained by the fact that the objectivity, real though it may be, is only momentary rather than permanent. The Bible *is* the Word of God, but only at certain instants; the Bible *becomes* the Word of God from time to time. Yet if these times are those when God lets the Bible speak to us . . . it is difficult to see how "the Bible *is* God's Word" can be true quite independently of (our) experiences. . . . Therefore (for Barth) it *is not* the Word of God.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 13.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 160-65, 188 ff.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 184.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 163-64.

## C. Carl F.H. Henry

Through much of the second half of the twentieth century Carl F. H. Henry was widely regarded as the “dean” of American evangelical theologians. As a central figure (and with Bernard Ramm, preeminent theologian) in the post-fundamentalist-modernist emergence of a distinct evangelicalism, more directly engaged socially and intellectually with culture, Henry’s theological and philosophical concern to “define” evangelicalism (vis-à-vis liberalism and fundamentalism) brought him into long-term interaction with “neo-orthodoxy” and especially Karl Barth. In many ways, the fact that Barth’s theology is sometimes considered a legitimate and scholarly alternative for “evangelical” thinkers has spurred Henry into *ongoing* “fruitful (and critical) interchange” with Barth and prominent “Barthians” (especially Torrance).<sup>59</sup> Henry is sharply critical of Barth’s epistemological and theological positions while defending him from zealous attackers who have misunderstood or overlooked numerous commendable elements or been unwilling to reckon with development in Barth’s thought. With concerns about his understanding of the Trinity, his apparent universalism, and his interpretation and use of Reformation theology (notably Calvin), Henry has been especially critical of Barth’s view of God’s self-disclosure, of Holy Scripture in relation to such, and his problematic, often “irrational epistemology.”

Henry sought to develop his own theology and conclusions on divine revelation and knowledge of God from an “Augustinian” perspective, i.e., *between* Tertullian (fideism) and Aquinas (empirical evidentialism/rationalism). In this way, Henry sought to unite presuppositionalism with rational inquiry, while avoiding the excesses of both.<sup>60</sup> For Henry it is crucial that one recognize the essentially rational nature of revelation and that the revelatory process includes the conceptual and verbal/language elements. From these bases, Henry’s many writings usually include analysis of Barth’s errors and inconsistencies, especially regarding revelation and Scripture.

While very appreciative of Barth’s strong attacks on theological liberalism and truly positive theological developments and correctives, Henry concluded *early* that Barth’s view of revelation was on the one hand reductionistic, equating the Word of God wholly with Jesus,<sup>61</sup> and Schleiermachiian, *refusing* to identify

<sup>59</sup>Bolich’s description of Henry here reflects Bernard Ramm’s earlier recommendation that evangelicals engage in a “dialectical reading” of Barth with the goal of fruitful interchange. Bolich sees Henry as filling that calling (Bolich, *Karl Barth*, 94).

<sup>60</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol. 1 (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1979), 182.

<sup>61</sup>Carl F. H. Henry, *The Protestant Dilemma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 89, 149.

Scripture directly as an aspect of the revealed Word of God. Behind Barth's "halting return" to Scripture, he found dialectical prejudice which imparts anti-intellectualism, a partial and distorted view of revelation, and a failure to "acknowledge the inspiration or inspiredness which the New Testament ascribes to Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16)." At the same time, Henry notes that "even with respect to Scripture as the norm of Christian doctrine Barth has given us in many statements which, as far as they go, have an evangelical ring and vigor."<sup>62</sup> Yet problems remain and, at root, Henry finds that the errors of "neo-orthodoxy" generally, and Barth in particular (while recognizing Barth's clear advance and superiority over, e.g., Brunner), lay in a combination of Kantian internal moral response and "existential faith in God's self-revelatory confrontation."<sup>63</sup>

It is in Henry's six-volume *God, Revelation and Authority* that one finds the fruition of Henry's theological thinking on central issues of evangelical orthodoxy and, too, his dialogical engagement with Barth. While some early criticisms have been dropped as not applicable, central criticisms of Barth regarding revelation and Scripture remain and are clarified. Given that Barth seems to locate special revelation, even in Jesus the Word, beyond historical inquiry; rejects the necessity of rational revelation; asserts the impossibility of adequately speaking of God; and *disparages language*; he has doomed his theology to an irrational ambiguity. Despite his desire that theology and the truth of revelation remain independent of the dominating effects of particular philosophical schools, Kantian skepticism and Kierkegaardian "irrationalism" in Barth's theology have made him "more than any other theologian responsible for encouraging the notion of irrational revelation in Euro-American thought."<sup>64</sup> Henry recognizes that Barth's mature thinking regarding human concepts of God makes advances from his early denials in *Römerbrief*, yet the advance is partial for he still asserts that human concepts of God gain adequacy only by a "divine miracle of grace." He continues to emphasize the cognitive gulf between the "known" God and the knowing human, in spite of confession of special revelation in Christ. But then Barth still denies significant validity to statements ("propositions") about God. By placing a gulf between the truth of statements about God and the truth of revelation, Barth "makes cognitive skepticism inevitable."<sup>65</sup> While clear that propositions/statements of fact are certainly not exhaustive of truth, Henry is firm that all truth must be expressible, to be intelligible and communicative for human beings.

The effect of Barth's understanding of the nature of Scripture is clear and problematic. First, Henry notes how and why Barth's

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<sup>62</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 1:62.

<sup>63</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:187.

<sup>64</sup>*Ibid.*, 1:276-77; and 3:290, 364-65.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:224-27.

rejection of the truth of statements about God is contrary to the view directly and indirectly taught in Scripture itself—a basis of authority Barth uses and maintains throughout the *Dogmatics*. Second, Barth, contrary to his claims, has not in fact returned to the understanding of truth and revelation set forth by the Reformers.<sup>66</sup> Third, while Henry acknowledges that, contra theological liberalism, Barth often grants to Scripture strong and seemingly exalted authority, especially over the church, yet he then strips all such authority away by denying Scripture any direct role in and as revelation, as the written Word of God. By definition, then, divine self-disclosure cannot be directly identified with any human words or concepts, and orthodox claims to the contrary are strangely said to reflect the influences of natural theology and secularization.<sup>67</sup> Henry points out that Barth will occasionally state that “God’s revelation . . . gives . . . information,” that it “informs man about God and about himself . . . by telling him that God is free for us,” that “God’s revelation is authentic information about God.”<sup>68</sup> These claims seem to set him, at least on these occasions, against other existentialist-dialectical theologians who emphasize the wholly non-cognitive nature of revelation. Yet when relating this to Scripture, Barth reflects great inconsistency by concluding that “it is impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God.”<sup>69</sup>

In his denying the objectivity of the Scriptures as God’s written word (he) robs Scripture of any revelatory-epistemic significance as a carrier of valid information about God.<sup>70</sup>

The enigma of Barth’s theory is: Why should revelation—which according to Barth is not to be hardened into concepts and words—ever have become so entangled in concepts and words that it requires the disentangling he proposes.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 466-68.

<sup>67</sup>Note Barth’s explanation: “The gradually extending new understanding of biblical inspiration was simply one way, and in view of its highly supernaturalistic character, perhaps the most important way, in which the great process of secularization, on which post-Reformation Protestantism entered, was carried through” (CD, 1/2:522). Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:199-200.

<sup>68</sup>Barth, CD, 1/2:29-30; and II/1:210, in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:466.

<sup>69</sup>Barth, CD I/2:499.

<sup>70</sup>Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 4:267.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 4:200. Note the important statement by Donald M. MacKinnon, late professor of divinity at Cambridge, who said (contra those who claim that the Christian faith has moved away from propositional truth to personalist I-Thou imperatives), “We cannot allow any seriousness to Christianity’s claim to truth unless we can also claim factual truth in a simple, ordinary sense, for propositions (at the heart of the biblical faith). . . . If this foundation is ignored, or is treated as of little import, we shall surely find that we have lost precisely that which distinguishes Christianity from every other faith, namely its claiming, among its fundamental truth-conditions, the truth of propositions that might have been otherwise—and this as an

Thus Henry affirmed much of what Barth said theologically, applauded his insightful criticisms of theological liberalism, and could stand with Barth in much that Barth apparently *intended*. But because he finds Barth's epistemological bases leading to denials of crucial elements of historical orthodoxy's understanding of divine revelation, the adequate knowability and expressibility of God, and the truth of God in human concepts, language, and particularly the text of Holy Scripture, he cannot describe Barth as an evangelical. Were Henry to recognize what McCormack et al. have found to be the christological nature of many of Barth's apparent denials regarding Scripture in its being and becoming, might Henry reconsider his conclusion? Maybe. But he would have continued concern about Barth's formulation of inspiration as preeminently *present* inspiring, which is coupled with a *strongly* subordinated, modified notion of *past* inspiredness, and this would be considered a problem – which it is.

IV. FORMATIVE "BARTHIAN" INFLUENCE ON  
EVANGELICAL VIEWS OF SCRIPTURE:  
THE CASE OF BERNARD RAMM

The "Barthian" understanding of Scripture as finally separated from the Word of God, as finally but word of man used by God's Spirit, so "becoming" (in *this* sense) God's Word, has been very and variously influential upon numerous evangelical scholars. Among these are G. C. Berkouwer, Donald Bloesch, Clark Pinnock, James William McClendon, and even Alister McGrath. We will examine the instructive "case" of Bernard Ramm and his developing relation to the "Barthian" understanding of divine disclosure and Holy Scripture. This last section will thus be complicated by reflecting on how *not* Karl Barth's but the "Barthian" doctrine of Scripture interpretation of such has influenced this prominent evangelical theologian of the twentieth century. Given Bruce McCormack's uncovering of Karl Barth's theological ontology in relation to Scripture, we will examine both Ramm's developing interaction with Barth's theology and how the "Barthian" view led him increasingly to separate Scripture from "Word of God."

Bernard Ramm's lifelong interest in the sciences directed him to study in the field at the University of Washington until his conversion to Christianity redirected him to philosophy and speech. After his divinity degree at Eastern Baptist Seminary and while earning two graduate degrees (M.A., Ph.D., focusing on philosophy of science) at the University of Southern California, Ramm began his teaching career "within fundamentalism" at Biola. Growing

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aspect of its central affirmation that in human flesh and blood the ultimate secrets of God were disclosed, and . . . the ultimate contradictions of human existence resolved" (*Borderlands of Theology*, 83, in Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, 3:456).

discomfort led him into the wider “evangelical” circles at Bethel College and Seminary, Baylor University, Eastern Baptist Seminary, and finally American Baptist Seminary of the West (GTU). During these years Ramm wrote much, especially in apologetics and the relation between contemporary sciences and Christian faith. In the latter half of his career he moved toward directly theological/dogmatic issues. Early in his teaching he began to hear criticisms of Barth’s theology, but wanting to assess Barth for himself he began a program of study of the *Dogmatics*. Later he took a sabbatical year with Barth. But throughout the 1950s, 60s, and 70s his works included discussion of Barth’s theology, and often his view of Scripture, with assessment. At the same time Ramm was grappling with the relation of evangelical orthodoxy to the revolutionary reality of the Enlightenment and, therein, the problem of evangelical definition/identity and methodology (like C. Henry). As a theological leader among the new “evangelicals,” Ramm continued to experience a “continuous upward spiral” toward an “open” evangelical Christianity—and Karl Barth continued to have a prominent place in that process.<sup>72</sup>

In his widely used *Protestant Biblical Hermeneutics*, Ramm defends “a full-fledged intelligent Biblicism” and so Scripture as verbally and plerarily inspired and the result of the “revelational” process.<sup>73</sup> Thus he “severs company” with Karl Barth and “neo-orthodox” theology. Ramm acknowledges Barth’s separation from liberalism, concern for Reformation thought, and “neo-supernaturalism,” but is concerned about his denials of orthodox views of revelation, inspiration, and infallibility. While Barth affirms that God speaks, that God reveals himself, says Ramm, he concludes that since only God speaks for God and revelation is only his presence, above all Jesus Christ, then God’s speaking *cannot be in words*. Therefore, for Barth, Scripture *is not* revelation, *is not* the word of God in any direct way. When the Word behind the words addresses me, *then* revelation occurs.<sup>74</sup>

In *Special Revelation and the Word of God*, Ramm presents Scripture as a “product of Special Revelation” (revelation in the form of language, and so knowledge of God). Having explained the nature and indispensability of language and God’s historical use of it, Ramm asserts, explains, and defends the fact that special revelation has appeared in written form. “Special revelation . . . appears in written form. The product of special revelation as speaking is thereby carried over *as writing*. . . . In the providence of God there is no better means of preserving the special revelation of

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<sup>72</sup>Alan Day, “Bernard L. Ramm,” in *Baptist Theologians* (ed. D. Dockery and T. George; Nashville: Broadman Holman, 1989).

<sup>73</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (3d rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1970), 93-95, 126.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 69-73.

God than by casting it *into* writing.”<sup>75</sup> In all of this, Ramm rightly points to the incarnation as central and supreme as “modality of revelation,” but after this is the divine speaking and “the creation of a Scripture is but the extension of the modality of the divine speaking.”<sup>76</sup>

To verify this scripturally, Ramm first provides a “provisional summary” of NT “revelational” contexts, thereby showing that Scripture’s portrayal of God’s revelatory processes (focusing on the Greek verbs and nouns) expresses the revealing action of God, a *deposit created by the revealing action* of God and the *identification* of Scripture with this deposit. Contrary to many modern theological trends which have disparaged written communication, Ramm argues carefully that Scripture’s own attitude is that writing is as much a form of the mediation of the word of God as is speaking and that the divinely given product/deposit of special revelation has been substantially cast into written form—the Christian *graphē* and canon. Indeed, it is noteworthy that it was (apparently) Ramm who coined the phrase “inscripturated Word of God.”<sup>77</sup> By thus emphasizing the reality of God-given truth content, the truth of God, and the actual role of Holy Scripture as the inspired textual form (*graphē*) of that “deposit,” Ramm was simply seeking for biblical balance. While appreciating Barth’s emphasis on revelation as event, encounter, and personal, Ramm found it inadequate. Rather, as text and by the Spirit, the whole revelatory reality is comprised of event and interpretation, encounter and truth, personal relation and knowledge.<sup>78</sup> Barth is right as far as he goes, reflecting the dynamism of the Word of God by the Spirit. But he tends to separate Scripture and revelation. Unlike his theological contemporaries, Barth discusses inspiration, as well as revelation, but the resulting relation of revelation to Scripture is merely functional.<sup>79</sup> Still Ramm’s appreciation of “Barthian” theology was clearly growing.

Through the 1960s and into the 1970s Ramm was turning from apologetics toward definition of evangelicalism via positive constructive theological expression and historical theological analysis—the significance of which he found in Barth’s *Dogmatics*. Emblematic of multi-leveled development in Ramm’s thought was his insightful, seminal monograph *The Evangelical Heritage*. Herein he defines “evangelical” to cover a broad stream of conservative Protestantism from fundamentalism, reformational confessionalism, Pentecostalism, etc., and those who bear “such a vague title as evangelical neo-orthodox.”<sup>80</sup> Well and good, but how then is one to regard Barth’s theology and particularly his view of Scripture? First,

<sup>75</sup>Bernard Ramm, *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 125-38.

<sup>76</sup>*Ibid.*, 159-60ff. Cf. the three sections from pp. 161-67.

<sup>77</sup>*Ibid.*, 160-69.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 159-60; cf. 170, 174, 176 n., 180 n.

<sup>79</sup>*Ibid.*, 174, 176, 178-79.

<sup>80</sup>Bernard Ramm, *The Evangelical Heritage* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1973), 14.

Ramm finds that while Barth must not be cast off as modernist nor wholly appropriated, one can profitably respond dialectically, assessing, evaluating, weighing, criticizing, *and* approving.<sup>81</sup> Ramm rejoiced in Barth's destruction of theological liberalism, his erudition, and centrally his reaffirmation of the necessity of objective divine revelation. This is necessary for "the evangelical believes that theology will have genuine dignity only if it retains (the) non-negotiable element of the objective in its doctrine of revelation."<sup>82</sup> Ramm finds that "neo-orthodox" theology often tends to see revelation as internal decision or as the pure confrontation of God, thus evaporating any substantial knowledge of God. Fortunately, Barth is "inconsistent," admitting "a disguised objective form" into his theology.

If Barth wishes to call Scripture the witness to revelation, and not *the* revelation or *a* revelation, he has nevertheless tied Scripture into the concept in such a way that Scripture is certainly revelational.... The evangelical believes this is a certain amount of theological double-talk. He would prefer (Barth) come out and affirm that *revelation is poly-dimensional*, and that *one of these dimensions is Holy Scripture*.<sup>83</sup>

Clearly, Ramm still interprets Barth in "Barthian" terms, as separating Scripture from the Word of God, but not without recognition that a "revelational" Scripture is, in fact, central to Barth's own theological program. At this juncture, too, Ramm's relation to Barth is, indeed, dialectical—and critical of Barth's unwillingness to follow through and so recognize Scripture as (being) Word of God.

But in Ramm's *After Fundamentalism* his "upward spiral" continued, and his radical concern that evangelical theology respond effectively to the Enlightenment led him to dissolve the dialectic and to call evangelicalism to its true future, Barth's theological methodology. In the Enlightenment revolution, evangelicalism was faced with a crisis and must move toward a new paradigm. Barth's Christian response must become, in principle, its own. Where the Enlightenment represented true knowledge and advance, Barth was ready to incorporate such legitimate insights. Where it oversteps its bounds, e.g., rejecting the idea of biblical authority and questioning all revelation, Barth was its most severe critic. Finding the Enlightenment to be the great tide of modern thought, he says evangelicals, too, must accept what is valid in modernity without capitulating to its errors. Ramm did not mean adopting the whole of Barth's theology but, more heuristically, his method of response for writing theology in the modern context. In light of his purpose,

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<sup>81</sup>*ibid.*, 103-10.

<sup>82</sup>*ibid.*, 146.

<sup>83</sup>*ibid.*

Ramm's review of several of Barth's major theological issues is significant. With each he presents Barth's careful grounding in the great tradition of the church coupled with his openness to valid elements of modernity.<sup>84</sup>

Ramm is most appreciative of Barth's subtle distinctions such as the balance between the humanity and divinity of Scripture. As he explains Barth's doctrine of Scripture he develops, contra McCormack, what he takes to be the notion of the divine Word (*Bild, Sache, Wort*) in the words/text of Scripture, i.e., a Word *behind* the words to which good exegesis of Scripture can reach *through* the words.<sup>85</sup> While often describing this Word-words relation in Barth's theology in ways akin to McCormack's presentation of Barth ontology of Scripture—that Scripture truly *is* the Word of God for Barth,<sup>86</sup> Ramm clarifies the issue. For Barth, he says,

The doctrine of verbal inspiration and inerrancy represents a *materialization* of the doctrine of inspiration. By "materialization" is meant that the Word of God is reduced literally to a book that one can carry around in one's pocket. . . . The wicked in the book of Jeremiah could cut up the words of Jeremiah and burn them in the fire (Jer. 36), but only because they were Jeremiah's witness to the Word of God and not the Word of God itself.<sup>87</sup>

Ramm's interpretation of Barth's doctrine of Scripture as the transcendentalizing and platonizing of "the Word of God" is essentially affirmed when he portrays with approval what he takes to be Barth's teaching about Scripture as only "becoming" the Word of God when one believes, thus emphasizing the central role of the Spirit and Word.<sup>88</sup> We find in Ramm, then, not only the same "flattening" of Barth's position, Scripture dualistically separated from Word of God, the "Barthian" conception, but also a shift toward that position, in part from the "pressure" of modernity.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Our concern regarding the modern, and now post-modern, theological tendency to dualistically separate the Word or Self-disclosure of God from the historical text of Holy Scripture has been directed through the massive, powerful, influential work of Karl Barth, especially as related to "evangelical" and/or contemporary "Protestant orthodox" theology. Karl Barth and "Barthian" theology have both been understood to demand this separation of Word of God from Scripture text, and to be influentially reshaping or inclining much evangelical understanding of the nature of Scripture

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<sup>84</sup>Ramm, *After Fundamentalism*, 24-28.

<sup>85</sup>*Ibid.*, 93-94.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 94-95, 117.

<sup>87</sup>*Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

toward such bifurcation, especially in the face of historical criticism. Is this true? Not totally.

We have found that Barth did clearly and rightly distinguish the incarnate Word from textual Word, but unlike the "Barthians" he did not finally separate "Word of God" from Scripture. Holy Scripture *is* Word of God and, hence, can "become" Word for one hearing the Word in faith. Yes, I believe Barth has significant problems. His emphasis on present "inspiring" over "*inspiredness*" (which he also affirms) and his odd caricature, or strawman portrayal, of the historical orthodox view of inspiration, are weak points. His assertion of "divine freedom" seems to allow God both to give and to retract his promise for the sake of that freedom. But almost all disciples and evangelical critics of Barth's doctrine of Scripture have, basically, focused only on his "radical" statements that Scripture is only prophetic-apostolic witness to the Word of God, and as such can, when the Word "breaks through" the human word, "become" the Word of God. For many, given the Enlightenment revolution, scientific method, and historical criticism, Barth's apparent simultaneous affirmation of divine Word, transcendent triune God, incarnate Son, "authoritative" text, and the radical historicity and total humanness of that text, seemed to allow the luxury of "having their cake and eating it too," of being in large measure orthodox and yet thoroughly modern (Enlightenment), or postmodern, people. Bernard Ramm, as evangelical theologian, traveled far along that road, and many evangelicals are merging onto the same "Barthian" road in these days. But while Barth did find much in the Enlightenment that he could affirm as a Christian, and in light of the Word of God, he could and did become one of modernity's severest critics. Indeed, despite all philosophical, philological, epistemological, and cultural-theological pressures to reject pre-modern, "orthodox" conclusions, Karl Barth still asserted that Holy Scripture *is* that Word of God which, by the Spirit, can "become" the Word of God, the Word of God's redemptive truth and grace in Jesus Christ, to one who hears in faith.