The Karl Barth Centenary

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Reactions to Karl Barth in the Evangelical world have been largely negative. In some circles he has met with indifference. In others points of disagreement have dominated the picture. More violent criticism has even portrayed him as a dangerous Liberal Protestant making use of Evangelical terms and concepts. No great range of knowledge or depth of understanding has usually gone into such evaluations. More detailed discussion might certainly support some of the criticism, but the fact remains that many of the depictions, being poorly informed, generalized, and superficial, show very little appreciation of Barth's theology and its potential contribution.

The centenary of Barth's birth in 1886, with the worldwide attention to Barth that it commands, offers the opportunity for a measure of possible self-correction in the approach to Barth and his work. Naturally, a short article cannot do much in this regard, but a few suggestions might be made about ways in which Evangelicalism might profit by some of Barth's insights without in any sense committing itself to all his positions or refraining from criticism where appropriate. For good or ill, Barth was obviously one of the greatest theologians of the century, and indeed of the whole of the modern epoch. If, then, our senses are properly trained to differentiate the good from the bad, we might extract some useful things from his voluminous writings while excluding what we might regard as unusable or harmful.

A first suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper nature of theology. Over the century and more from the Deists to the present era, theology has found itself increasingly pushed into other academic corners, predominantly among the humanities in the form of religious philosophy, anthropology, sociology, history, or psychology. The reasons for this are complex, involving as they do such influential movements of thought as those associated with Descartes, Lessing, and Kant. Even where a struggle for orthodoxy has been maintained, the tendency has been to move on to the anthropocentric ground occupied by opponents. The stock of divinity in its older sense has undergone painful devaluation as sceptics have questioned whether God may be an authentic object of human knowledge at all, the orthodox have tried to meet the objections on metaphysical grounds, and religious Liberals have replied by postulating a religious *a priori* as part of our human make-up, and devoted their main attention to its discovery and exposition. For Barth, however, capitulation to the implied anthropocentricity is a betrayal of the true nature of theology, no matter whether the betrayal takes a more orthodox or a more heterodox form.

Theologians, he teaches us, should stick to their last. They should let others engage in the valid pursuit of the human sciences. They should unashamedly and consistently recognize that divinity is their field, the science of God, certainly of God in relation to the human creature, yet still God. They should contend for the validity and integrity of their own discipline on its own terms and in its own right. They should do theology, and do it as Barth himself does, with verve and vitality and conviction, but also with a godly jealousy, not allowing other things so to intrude as to crowd out the proper object of study.

A second suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper method of theology. The shift in an understanding of the nature of theology has carried with it a shift of method in which all kinds of materials from other sources have been regarded as necessary in the establishment and presentation of theological positions. The Bible has still occupied a large place in the theological curriculum but it has come to be studied predominantly from a literary and historical angle, or from the standpoint of its religious character or value, or in the context of extraneous concerns. Grasping afresh the true nature of theology, Barth has found it possible to relegate secondary materials to their proper secondary rank, to deal once again with Scripture as a primary and authoritative source, to subjugate historico-critical analysis to the demands of authentic exposition, and in this way to open the door to the strange new world within the Bible which a false approach had for so long closed to any real penetration.

Now Evangelicals, it is true, have often found in Barth's doctrine of Holy Scripture the main reason for their suspicion and rejection of Barth. They criticize his concession of a capacity for error as the concomitant of humanity. They dislike his preference for the present inspiring of the Holy Spirit as compared with the past act of inspiration. They conclude that his refusal to try to give historicist proofs of biblical events forfeits the authenticity of these events as real happenings in history. They do not accept the full weight that Barth attaches to the inner (or outer!) testimony of the Holy Spirit as the true basis for confidence in the reliability and authority of Scripture. They have doubts about the thesis of Barth that Christ forms the hermeneutical key to the Bible. They thus find difficulty with many of Barth's own exegetical procedures and conclusions.

All these are legitimate queries and call for ongoing debate. Yet they should not blind us to the virtues of many of Barth's emphases as he expounds Scripture as our direct, absolute, and material norm. First, Barth makes much of the fact that the biblical authors, the prophets and apostles, belong to the event of revelation itself. Second, he firmly extends the authority of the Bible to the canon alone, but to all parts of the canon. Third, he argues forcefully that, although humanity entails liability to error, we do not in fact have any place from which to find the Bible definitively in error. Fourth, he protests against the tyranny of historicism, and indeed of the whole historico-critical method, which makes a useful servant but a poor master. Fifth, he contends for a truly historical approach

which does not impose alien criteria upon Scripture, but considers Scripture on its own terms and in the light of its own nature and purpose. Sixth, he seeks an interpretation *with* the biblical authors instead of *about* them in an openness that lets them tell us what they have to tell us rather than trying to force them to say what we want them to say, or to answer the questions that we want answered. Seventh, he develops a doctrine of inspiring which entails verbal inspiration whereby God himself says what the texts are saying in the very words of the texts, so that we are tied to these texts and cannot evade or amend them at will. Eighth, and on this basis, he espouses as firmly and consistently as anyone could wish the unique and exclusive authority of Scripture as the primary and normative witness that God has raised up in his saving word and work. Ninth, he equates the inner witness of the Spirit, not with human subjectivity, but with the divine subjectivity, ie, with the objectivity of the sovereign ministry of the Spirit acting in and with holy Scripture itself. Tenth, and finally, he has a magnificent confidence in Scripture that it will do its own work and put forth its own power – a confidence that leads him to regard biblical exegesis as the foundation of all theology, to make lavish use of it in his own theological activity, to find in true dogmatics only reflection upon the underlying biblical material, and to give to authentic and effective preaching a necessary focus on scriptural exposition.

A consequence of Barth's emphases that Evangelicalism may rightly applaud and profit by is the reorientation to linguistic study, theological exegesis, and biblical theology that has changed the face of Old and New Testament scholarship over the past decades. Yet Barth did not contend merely for a movement direct from proper biblical study to dogmatic presentation. He recognized that secondary authorities – indirect, relative, and formal – exist under the primary authority of Scripture. It is by way of these authorities – those who have preceded and who accompany us in the church and its ministry – that we have to pass in the fulfilment of our theological task. In other words, Barth made a plea for historical theology, not as a mere branch of history, nor as a purely academic exercise, but as a constitutive part of theology itself. We go to holy Scripture first, but we must also test our reading of Scripture by the ways that others have read it, or even by the ways that they have failed to read it. Part of Barth's genius as a theologian was his ability to see the relevance of past theology, to take what others had treated as outdated materials and to breathe new life into them, to relate them in a vivid and dynamic way to contemporary debate. Some of his historical surveys will surely count amongst the most brilliant and perspicacious of all his writings. They have rendered the inestimable service of rekindling interest not merely in more recent authors or the reformers, but also in the fathers and schoolmen and even the Protestant orthodox of the seventeenth century. Here again we may often dissent from Barth's own analyses and judgments. He admittedly writes only from particular angles. He adapts his materials to his own immediate purposes. He reaches overhasty conclusions. Nevertheless, we can learn not only

from his method but also from the force of his concern, the acuteness of his insights, the range of his vision, and the power with which he links past discussions and present issues. Good theological method demands that after consulting the prophetic and apostolic testimony we should also consult the secondary witnesses, not with a view either to subjecting ourselves to them or placing ourselves above them, but with a view to learning both from their successes and their failures, and to incorporating what we learn into what we hope will be our own more faithful dogmatic presentation.

A third suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper theme of theology. For Barth the very nature of theology suggests its theme, namely, the self-revealing God himself in his relation to the human creature. In this respect Barth avoids the error of anthropologizing theology. He also avoids the error of dogmatizing it, ie, of making the dogmas as such the theme of theology, especially in a system which gives a central or basic position to one specific dogma, such as that of justification, predestination, or even christology. For Barth the triune God in his word and work toward us is the theme of theology, the God who has given himself a secondary objectivity in history in order that we might know him, the God who has created the world in order that it might be the theatre of his gracious covenant action, the God who has effected reconciliation in order that we might have pardon and life, and the God who works by his Word and Spirit in order that we might find fellowship and final redemption. In practice, since the word and work of revelation and reconciliation comes to a climax and completion in Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son, this means for Barth that Christ himself is the central theme of theology, the object of the prophetic and apostolic testimony, the object also of the Church's ongoing proclamation, and hence the constant object of all dogmatic enquiry, around whom all the dogmatic *loci* circle, toward whom they all refer, and in relation to whom we must always understand and expound them.

The consistent focusing on Christ has drawn a certain measure of criticism upon Barth. For some theologians it does not permit a sufficiently independent doctrine of creation. For others it does not allow Barth to take sin with adequate seriousness. For Lutherans it entails a blurring of the distinction between law and gospel and a virtual elimination of two-kingdom teaching. For the Reformed it disturbs a proper appreciation of election and reprobation. For scholars of various persuasions it depreciates the propositional character of truth and overvalues the personal aspect of theology at the expense of the intellectual. The general charge has developed against Barth that he carries his christocentric emphasis to the point of what is pejoratively called 'christomonism', ie, a focus that is so exclusive that it brings distortion to the total picture, particularly in the sense that the objectivity of Christ's saving work obliterates human action and carries an almost unavoidable implication of universalism.

Barth himself disliked all 'isms', and he neither accepted nor appreciated the charge of christomonism. As he saw it, Scripture itself justifies a reference of all things to Christ, for all the Scriptures bear witness to him.

The gospel is no mere set of abstract truths, but news of the personal God, Father, Son, and Spirit, who deals with us in grace and judgment in the history of him to whom all the associated facts and teachings relate. It is in Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, that God himself is with us at the climax of his word and work, revealing himself in the incarnate word and reconciling the world to himself in the crucified and risen Lord. Barth insists, however, that by stressing the personal character of evangelical truth and action he can preserve both its objective facticity and its existential thrust, for on the solid basis of Christ's action *for* us, and the Spirit's action *in* us, there can be freedom for action *by* us. Furthermore, by promoting Christ as the central theme of theology, he has no thought of giving christology as a dogma a crucial place in some dogmatic system. Above all, by uplifting Christ he does not exclude the Father or the Holy Spirit, for, as he constantly reiterates, all God's external works are works of the whole Trinity, some of the works may be specifically appropriated to the Father and the Spirit, and if a certain centrality accrues to Christ, this is only because the Father, in the power of the Spirit, brings his revealing and reconciling word and work to their objective fulfilment in the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection of the Son.

Whether or not Barth offers adequate safeguards against the christomonist threat, his understanding of the theme of theology reinforces many emphases that are integral to Evanglicalism. The thought of Christ in all the Scriptures has constantly played a key hermeneutical role in Evangelical exposition. The recognition that Christianity is finally Christ himself and not merely facts or doctrines about him, so that faith has more than a purely intellectual character, must also be described as essentially Evangelical. The finished work of Christ and its vicarious nature belong to the very warp and woof of Evangelical conviction and proclamation. What Barth has ventured to do is simply to think through these common fundamentals with a new and more radical rigour, to apply them more consistently to the whole understanding of the gospel, to work out their implications over the full range of the biblical testimony, but always with an attempt to ascribe to Christ himself the preeminence that Scripture rightly regards as his due. Opinions will naturally differ as to many of the applications that Barth proposes or the implications that he perceives. A slavish adoption of Barth's theological outworking would be the last thing that he himself would desire. Thematically, however, he offers Evangelicals in particular the opportunity to refocus on their central theme in Christ and to find enrichment by discussion of the proper ways in which to relate the individual teaching to this proper centre.

A fourth suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper aim of theology. Only too often theology has fallen victim to an unhealthy isolation from the full life and mission of the Church. It has become preoccupied with the solution of intellectual problems, with the building of abstract systems, with the serving of a purely apologetic purpose, or even with the promotion of individual speculations, or the advancing of academic

careers. Theological students preparing for the ministry often sense this isolation and revolt against it, not questioning, perhaps, the theoretical value of what they are summoned to do, but failing to see the validity of its purpose so far as their own goals are concerned, or the pertinence of its achievement to the ministry to which they are called. Such criticisms, of course, are in many cases overhasty and ill-informed, for often theology has to do only an indirect or implicit work whose practical ramifications do not appear at once. Yet the common acceptance of a distinction between the theoretical and the practical, and the divorce that not infrequently results in many areas of Christian action and conduct, should warn us that a measure of truth lies behind the widespread criticisms.

Barth, however, has from first to last a lively sense of the fact that theology is a ministry. It has, then, a servant role. In Barth's own experience, the problem of the pulpit, and the poor practical results of Liberal Protestant theology, were two of the decisive factors that drove him back to theological study. Reflection on ethics, both individual and social, quickly produced the conclusion that ethics must be the outworking of dogmatics. In the crisis brought on by National Socialism, theology supplied him with the necessary basis of opposition to the totalitarian claims of Hitler, eg, in the forthright words of the Barmen Declaration. Considering the aim of theology in the *Church Dogmatics* (I, 1), he insisted that it must serve the Church and its proclamation, so that it might itself be numbered among the forms of ministry (IV, 3). How does it perform its service? It does it primarily by helping the Church both negatively and positively to achieve and preserve the purity of proclamation, whether by teaching it to draw its material from the proper source, directing it to the central theme, or protecting it against aberrations both on the right hand and the left. In his own dogmatics Barth often became involved in detailed deliberations whose immediate practical bearing might not be apparent. Critics might also argue that his own dogmatic formulations contribute more to the polluting of proclamation than to its purity. Some of his individual discussions of divergent movements might not have later the relevance that he himself perceived at the time of composition. His failure to give to theology a more direct apologetic function might seem in many circles to involve the elimination of one of its most vital services. Nevertheless, Barth's emphasis on the servant-aim of theology ought surely to commend itself in principle, above all in the Evangelical world, which has always had a keen concern for biblical normativity. To see the proper function of theology is to see that we must constantly subject not only our theology itself, but also our preaching, our practice of the ministry, our church order and policies, and all our activities both individual and communal, to fresh theological scrutiny and correction. It is to see that the theology we so easily dismiss as irrelevant and abstract is in fact one of the most exciting and practical of all our pursuits. Willy nilly, everything we think and speak and do in the Church and the world reflects some kind of theology. The problem is that the theology it reflects is often

a poor and ill-considered theology that may bear little relation to our theoretical formulations. What Barth teaches us is, first, to come to a proper awareness of the theological basis of our activity, and, second, to bring our theological considerations to bear upon our ministry and conduct. A revitalizing both of theology itself and of the Church's witness might well be the happy result if this recall to the proper aim of theology is heeded.

A fifth suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper scope of theology. Already under previous heads we have touched on something of what this means, eg, the inclusion of basic exegesis, the provision of supporting historical materials, the comprehensive discussion of dogmatic themes, and the consideration of the practical bearing of theology. In extending the range of theology, however, Barth took much more than what one might perhaps call a curricular view or a purely pastoral view. From the personal standpoint, for instance, he adopted a broader as well as a narrower definition of theology itself. Technically, one might equate theology with the discipline or disciplines pursued by the divinity faculties in universities or theological schools. Yet even technically theologians outside the academic world have always made notable contributions to theological learning or understanding, whether in the form of larger studies or in that of individual monographs. Furthermore, theology in its more general sense, as all the Church's talk about God, had for Barth an even wider scope which includes what is said about God in the Church not only by its scholars and pastors but also by its ordinary members. A constant source of irritation to Barth was to hear people refer to the distinction between lay people and theologians. Such a distinction denoted either false humility on the part of the former or false arrogance on the part of the latter. As Barth saw it, theologians undoubtedly belong to the laity, ie, the people of God, and so called lay people are all theologians, participating in the Church's talk about God, and equally responsible for authentic participation with a view to the better fulfilment of the Church's ministry both of word and work. Along similar lines Barth objected strenuously to the division of the Church into the hearing Church and the teaching Church, not because there is no differentiation of function, but because all hearers are also in a sense teachers and all teachers must always continue to be hearers. Evangelicals for the most part have always avoided the sharp distinction of hearing and teaching, and they have always retained some sense of the duty of 'lay' ministry and consequently of 'lay' theology, if one might for a moment use the common terminology that Barth so greatly disliked. On the other hand, they have not always succeeded so well in preventing theology from becoming an esoteric pursuit in which only a tiny minority may engage, which confers on this minority a highly specialized function, and which arouses at best the bewilderment, at worst the suspicion, and for the most part the indifference of an unengaged majority that gives itself to Christian life and work in the comfortable illusion either that it can very well do without theology, or that whatever theology it has can readily

take care of itself. To such a situation Barth's recall comes with all the force of a reminder and a summons: a reminder that whether we realize and like it or not, theology gathers us all under its comprehensive umbrella so long as we venture to speak about God at all; and a summons, therefore, to responsible commitment, both individually and in concert, to a better fulfilment of the theological task by means of the common hearing and teaching in which the technical theologians serve as leaders, guides, and facilitators for the rest.

Barth broadened the scope of theology from a practical as well as a personal angle. The decisive factors that drove Barth himself back to theological study included, as we have seen already, the conviction that all practical problems in both Church and world are at root theological problems. Barth discerned only too clearly the poor theology that lay behind the poor pastoral and homiletical practice of the early twentieth century churches. He also discerned the wrong theology that lay beind the easy capitulation of liberal theologians to German militarism, and then only a few years later the widespread defection of Liberals and Existentialists to the German Christian heresy by which the Church made common cause with National Socialist ideology. The conviction, however, did not take merely the negative form of an analysis. It inspired the search for a theological correction which would carry with it a practical correction as well. It produced the ringing theses of the Barmen Declaration in which Barth stated the theological basis for opposition to the demands of ideological totalitarianism. It brought ethics within the compass of dogmatic theology as Barth tried to find for ethics a solid theological foundation and then to work out the ethical implications of his dogmatic theses. Preaching and pastoral work also claimed Barth's constant attention. So, too, did the shifting social and political problems of his time, both national and international, as he reflected on the ways in which the Christian community, with Christ as its head and centre, might serve in some sense as a model for the secular community. That Barth did not enjoy uniform success in his efforts is obvious. His suggestions at some points came under the charges of naivety and ambivalence. His advice to Christians in East Europe aroused furious protest. Time defeated him in his mature attempt to work out the ethical implications of reconciliation and redemption. Nevetheless, inadequacies in detail do not of themselves overthrow the validity of the underlying thesis that Christians can contribute distinctively to the solving of individual and social problems only if they first establish the theological basis of action. Evangelicals among others have only too often acted without a proper theological awareness, or thought it enough to combine a few biblical texts or passages with contemporary wisdom, particularly in social matters, or, in many cases, imagined that by failing to act at all they were adopting the Christian course. The time has surely come to learn the lesson that Barth learned and that he can now pass on to others, namely, that all the great practical problems of the day, whether ecclesiastical or secular, have a vital

theological dimension, and that only a thorough theological analysis and a sound theological foundation will enable Christians to point the way, at least, to the penultimate solutions that alone are possible until God himself, and God alone, brings the ultimate eschatological solution.

A final suggestion is that Barth recalls us to the proper spirit of theology. As theological studies had become increasingly specialized in the modern period, they had also become increasingly intellectualized. Their incorporation into other academic areas had tended to tear them away from their proper rooting in the Church's faith and piety. Apologetics had retained a closer relation to broader concerns, but at the expense of an abstraction which tended to isolate its proponents from the central biblical material. The doubts and debates of the age had brought a polarization which gave a polemical edge to much of the theological writing, nurturing anger and scorn and sarcasm and superciliousness instead of the Christian qualities of forbearance, love, humility, and good humour.

Now Barth himself did not propose any relaxing of academic rigour. Indeed, during the student revolts of the sixties he objected strenuously to the replacement of serious work by flimsy discussion, and he constantly insisted on the need for deep exegetical work in the proper ministry of the word of God. Again, he did not reject the necessity at times for firm and occasionally very sharp opposition to persistent and pernicious errors. He might have regretted later the vehemence of his famous *No* to Emil Brunner, but he believed that any confession worth its salt should not only advance its own theses but also condemn the countertheses. With the increasing mellowness of age, however, and with his strong commitment to theology as a form of ministry, along with a keen sense of our constant dependence upon the present ministry of the Holy Spirit, Barth set a pattern of theology which certainly uses all the tools of authentic scholarship, and makes the most stringent of intellectual demands, but which is still informed and enthused by a spirit of prayer and worship that keeps it both from excessive intellectualism on the one hand and from unbecoming bellicosity on the other.

Barth himself, of course, refers to various marks of the proper spirit of theology, eg, obedience and commitment. At the devotional level, however, prayer calls for special notice. A constant refrain in the *Church Dogmatics* is that no good theology can be done without prayer. This is no mere bit of tradition for Barth. It is not a tipping of the hat to the Spirit. He never views theology as merely a human enterprise. It can engage in a valid exposition of the primary testimony, not with the tools of exegesis alone, but only as the Holy Spirit acts as the final expositor who takes the human word and speaks the divine word in and through it, so that it is in very truth the word of God. Real theology, then, will give itself to the most exacting of academic work, but it will do so with the recurrent prayer: Come, Holy Spirit, knowing that it can neither achieve a proper understanding of its theme, nor render its proper divine and human service, unless this prayer is made and heard and answered.

Worship also calls for particular attention, for Barth's commitment to a spirit of worship in theology is no less implicit if not, perhaps, so explicit. Time and again Barth exhibits this spirit in his own theological writing. Concentration on the theological theme constantly propels him forward from more rigorous exposition or discussion to expressions of the truth and beauty of the theme that lead to adoration of the God whose Glory is thus revealed. Barth the preacher is never far away as we listen to Barth the theologian. As he sees it, the good theology that begins with prayer has an irresistible impetus toward praise. This does not mean that all theological works should either include prayer and praise or expressly state the need for them. But it raises the question whether many of the theologies, both orthodox and less orthodox, which have incontestable intellectual stature can stand the final spiritual test which Barth proposes. It also carries with it a call to all of us to see to it that if theology is indeed a work of ministry, then, it, too, should begin with the prayer and end with the praise that are the marks of all Christian ministry and that will give to what it writes and teaches a more equable temper, enable it the more fittingly to discharge its critical and constructive task, and make it more solid devotional nourishment for pastors and congregations in their Christian life and witness.

It is here, perhaps, that Evangelicals can especially learn from Barth. This is an area which is close to the heart of Evangelicalism. Yet it is also an area where Evangelicals have not always offered the best of theological models. Too often we hear the argument that the worlds of theology and devotion are far apart. The over-obtrusive demands of philosophical and apologetic theology have driven a wedge between intellectual and spiritual activity. The sheer weight of exegetical and historical work has left little place for devotion even in biblical study or in the survey of past theologians whose works have themselves considerable devotional power. Conflicts both with divergent movements within and dissident parties without have caused much theological writing to be done in a contentious, pugnacious, bad-tempered spirit that is not really compatible with the humble supplication of God's aid or the joyful celebration of his glory. The recognition undoubtedly persists that no work, including that of theology, can be done without prayer, and that all work, including that of theology, should redound to the glory of God. Yet far too often the prayer and praise do not come to adequate expression, either explicitly in the work itself, or implicitly in the spirit in which it is done or which it evokes in those who hear or read it. If theology is indeed a ministry, then we need to discharge it with that spirit of prayer and praise, and hence with all the attendant qualities, which will mean for those on whose behalf we perform it not merely a criticism and correction of their message and conduct but also a spiritual enrichment that will manifest itself in a closer walk with God and spiritually more effective and fruitful service. Evangelicals have made no mean contribution to both theology and devotion. They still do so. But they may do so with even greater power if they can bring theology and

devotion into fuller and more forceful combination, giving to theology the peace and joy of devotion, and to devotion the depth and strength of theology. It is here that Barth's recall can make its last but by no means its least important contribution, not involving any sacrifice of academic integrity or of zeal for divine truth, but resulting in a theology which is all the stronger and more influential by virtue of its diminished abstractness, isolation, or contentiousness, and even more so by virtue of the spirit, or perhaps we should more accurately say the Spirit of prayer and praise who informs and enriches it.

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