

Karl Barth and Evangelicalism

The Varieties of a Sibling Rivalry¹

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IN RECENT YEARS, WE have seen a flexing of the muscles of what both insiders and outsiders have come to call “Evangelicalism.” This current of American religious life is no new phenomenon; what is new is that a culture that apparently thought it had moved beyond taking “Evangelicalism” seriously is being forced to reevaluate that easy dismissal. What is true on the cultural level is also reflected in intellectual circles—and in the discipline of theology.

This is perhaps especially true among students of the theology of Karl Barth, where a special affinity between “Evangelicals” and Barth has, for example, recently swelled the ranks of the Karl Barth Society with newcomers from a variety of “Evangelical” traditions. And the literature on this relationship has so grown that we now have a survey of the discussion, whose title I have appropriated for this article: *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism*, by Gregory C. Bolich.

But you will notice that I have quickly added to this title my own subtitle, “the varieties of sibling rivalry,” to suggest that we are dealing with a matter of greater complexity than we (or Bolich) may at first imagine. Something of the difficulty of the path ahead of us in this essay may be suggested by the diversity of “evangelical” opinion about Barth. Reformed theologian Cornelius van Til, on the one hand, has consistently polemicized against Barth in such works as *Christianity and Barthianism*, with an emphasis on

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the implied dichotomy. In an essay titled “Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?” he judged that of all the heresies that have evoked the great creeds as refutation, “no heresy that appeared at any of these was so deeply and ultimately destructive of the gospel as is the theology of Barth.”² We could survey other such statements—like that of dispensationalist Charles Ryrie who finds “Barthianism” to be a “theological hoax”³ because it attempts to be both critical and Orthodox. But on the other end of the spectrum we find other evaluations that could hardly be in starker contrast to the judgment of van Til. Donald Bloesch, for example, has insisted that “Karl Barth is himself an evangelical theologian”⁴—though with some qualifications. Between these two extremes may be ranged the variety of “evangelical” judgments on Barth.

But how do we get such diverse readings of Barth from “evangelicals”? From one angle this diversity should be no surprise. Barth has suffered much from his interpreters in all camps. He has often been interpreted from caricature or on the basis of fragmentary readings. Barth is, of course, not without fault in this process. The range of his writings makes the task of adequate interpretation a lifetime task. The dialectical and multifaceted character of his thought means that one is always in danger of reading and extrapolating from one of several facets. And the changes in Barth’s thought—especially from the earlier dialectical period to the later Christocentric orientation in which his Christology and the doctrine of incarnation overcome earlier themes—have always provided problems for interpreters. “Evangelical” interpreters have, not surprisingly, shared all these problems.

But there are within the nature of what we call “Evangelicalism” itself issues and problems that complicate our discussion. The most profound of these is the “slipperiness” of the term *evangelical*. In the language of W.B. Gallie, it is an “essentially contested concept”⁵—one whose fundamental meaning is at debate. My own efforts to bring clarity to this issue have centered in the development of a typology of the meanings that the term *evangelical* may convey.⁶ I would argue that there have been three primary periods in the history of Protestantism that have provided content to the word *evangelical*. Uses of the word may generally be shown to gravitate

2. Van Til, “Has Karl Barth Become Orthodox?” 181.

3. Ryrie, *Neo-Orthodoxy*, 62.

4. Bloesch, *Evangelical Renaissance*, 81.

5. Brown, “Concept of ‘Evangelical,’” 104–9; Abraham, *The Coming Great Revival*.

6. This typology was first developed in Dayton, “Social and Political Conservatism,” 72–74, but also in Dayton, “Whither Evangelicalism?”

toward one or another of these periods or modes of using the word. Let me indicate these meanings:

(1) Many users of the word *evangelical* have in mind primarily the Reformation and its themes, particularly the great *solas* (*sola fide, sola gratia, sola Christe, sola Scriptura*) that convey the Reformation call to grace and the centrality of “justification by faith.” Usually correlated with these themes are an Augustinian/Reformed anthropology, a doctrine of election, and a predominantly forensic view of atonement and salvation. These themes are generally common to the figures of the magisterial Reformation, though we have articulated them in a pattern that may be tipped more toward Lutheranism than Calvinism. But this is in part to reflect the German usage where the word *evangelisch* roughly means “Protestant” but particularly Lutheran.

(2) In the Anglo-Saxon world, the word *evangelical* is more likely to gather its connotations from the “evangelical revival” and the “great awakenings.” In this period, Protestant themes were pushed in new directions and into new configurations. There is an intensification of the soteriological orientation of the Reformation in the turn to a piety of “conversion” that involves a shift of emphasis from “justification” to “regeneration” and often indirectly to sanctification. This orientation flowered in missions, evangelism and the rise of benevolent societies to address every kind of human ill. Nineteenth-century revivalism emerged from these currents and accentuated the low-church, moralistic and ethical tendencies to be found in this form of Evangelicalism. It is important to notice that the preservation of “Orthodoxy” is not the major motif of this form of Evangelicalism. From the rise of Pietism on, it includes an element of protest against Orthodoxy in favor of spiritual vitality. The emphasis has been on conversion. The enemy is “nominal Christianity” on the right as much as rationalism and deism on the left. This form of Evangelicalism became the dominant form of religion in America for much of the nineteenth century. In Europe it was much more marginal and would have been known in German as *Pietismus* or in its more recent forms as *NeuPietismus*, or as the *Erweckungsbewegung*.

(3) Especially since the Civil War and particularly in the United States, there has been a growing split in American Protestantism that culminated in the twentieth-century fundamentalist/modernist controversy. Since World War II, a more intellectually articulate and socially and culturally engaged wing of the fundamentalist party has also appropriated the label “evangelical.” It is this use of the word *evangelical* that has become the dominant one in our own time. The word in this context refers to a mixed coalition of a variety of theological and ecclesiastical traditions that have found common cause against the rise of “modernity” and the erosion of older forms of Orthodoxy

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under the impact of biblical criticism, the rise of Darwinianism, and, perhaps even more fundamentally, the relativism occasioned by the impact of the social sciences and historical consciousness. In this use of the word, the primary thrust is “conservative” and is concerned with the preservation of “Orthodoxy”; the consistent “enemy” is “Liberalism” in a variety of forms. The German language was not well prepared to describe this current, but in the last decade or two it has taken over from the English a neologism, *evangelikal* with a *k*, to represent the post-World War II post-fundamentalist Evangelicalism that in the wake of the Lausanne Congress of early 1970s has also become a force in Europe.

This, then, is my typology of uses of the word *evangelical*. Like all typologies it has its problems. Many currents fall between my periods and types. Calvin’s emphasis on regeneration, for example, puts him somewhat between types one and two. Some wings of type two were close to the classical Reformation. And type three includes groups shaped by the earlier currents. Even though one may discern certain continuities by emphasizing one strand or another, I find it both helpful and necessary to distinguish between these various connotations of the word *evangelical*—and to argue that they are finally irreducible. Strict advocates of type one will lump large segments of types two and three with Liberalism and Roman Catholicism as fundamentally in error in tending toward “Pelagianism.” Similarly, strict adherents to type two will deny the label “evangelical” to many classical expressions of type one and some of the more confessional expressions of type three. Some of the ironies in the modern post-fundamentalist use of the word may be seen in the emerging neo-Catholic movement among evangelicals, whereby holding a commitment to “Orthodoxy” and “traditionalism” constant, an evolution into a new sacramentalism is possible. There is a tendency to use the label “evangelical” to describe all sorts of cultural and theological reasons, no matter what the fundamental issue at stake.

The value of this typology will be demonstrated as we turn more fully to examine Barth’s relationship to Evangelicalism. We must distinguish these usages of the word, because in each case the shape of the discussion with Barth is quite different. But in each case, we will find the relationship ambiguous—sharing Barth’s commitments to various degrees but also differing in the appropriation of themes. It is for this reason that we have subtitled this article “the varieties of a sibling rivalry”—to emphasize both the close relationships and the tensions present. With this background let us briefly examine Barth’s relationship to each of these currents.

Evangelicalism as Fidelity to Reformation Themes

It is the first version of Evangelicalism that is most congruent with Barth's fundamental commitments. The movement of which he was a determinant force has been called "New Reformation Theology." An early British *Festschrift* for Barth was entitled *Reformation Old and New*. In his contribution to that volume, John McConnachie suggested that "no one has done more to reinterpret, transform, and illumine the issues of the Reformation for our day as Karl Barth."⁷ It was in many ways the rediscovery of the Reformation that launched Barth on his new theological direction. Eberhard Busch traces this development at Göttingen largely in the words of Barth himself.

In Göttingen things changed almost at a stroke. Barth now felt that his previous theological view was really a pre-Reformation position. . . . "Only now were my eyes properly open to the reformers and their message of the justification and the sanctification of the sinner, of faith, of repentance and works, of the nature and the limits of the church and so on. I had a great many new things to learn from them." At that time "I 'swung into line with the Reformation,' as they used to say," not uncritically, but certainly with special attention.⁸

These hints from early in the theological career of Barth were echoed at his retirement when in his final lectures, repeated on his American tour, he did not hesitate to use the word *evangelical* to describe his theology.

The theology to be introduced here is *evangelical* theology. The qualifying attribute "evangelical" recalls both the New Testament and at the same time the reformation of the sixteenth century. Therefore it may be taken as a dual affirmation: the theology to be considered here is the one which, nourished by the hidden sources of the documents of Israel's history, first achieved unambiguous expression in the writings of the New Testament evangelists, apostles, and prophets; it is also, moreover, the theology newly discovered and accepted by the Reformation of the sixteenth century.⁹

This, at least, was the basic theological intention of Barth: to recover and restate the Reformation recovery of the New Testament gospel. In this Barth would be in accord with our first type of evangelical. But, of course,

7. McConnachie, "Reformation Issues Today," 103.

8. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 143.

9. Barth, *Evangelical Theology*, 5.

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this congruence of intention does not answer all questions. There is much room for debate about precisely how to retrieve and articulate the Reformation message for our own times. Barth himself was clear about the need to revise Reformation theology at several points:

Having in the 1920s swung in clearly behind the “Reformation line,” “I soon saw that it was also necessary to continue it, to arrange the relationship between the law and gospel, nature and grace, election and christology and even between philosophy and theology more exactly and thus differently from the patterns which I found in the sixteenth century. Since I could not become an Orthodox ‘Calvinist,’ I had even less desire to support a Lutheran confessionalism.”¹⁰

Barth also understood that in each case the basic reason for his reformulation was the same: the pressures of what he called his “Christological concentration.” We cannot take time to work out the implications of this move for each of these themes. Let me merely indicate how this concern leads Barth to revise what is generally seen to be the center for Reformation faith (especially for Luther): justification by faith.

The *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification as such, but its basis and culmination: the confession of Jesus Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col 2:3); the knowledge of His being and activity for us and to us and with us. It could probably be shown that this also was the opinion of Luther. If here, as everywhere, we allow Christ to be the center, the starting point, we have no reason to fear that there will be any lack of unity and cohesion, and therefore of systematics in the best sense of the word.¹¹

I find this move of Barth’s not only appropriate, but a necessary revision of the patterns of thought in Reformation theology. I suppose other implications of Barth’s Christological concentration might appear more problematic for some—especially in the doctrine of election, where the revisions seem much more radical. (I shall leave that debate to experts in the Reformed tradition.) I shall only note as an outsider that one sees, for example in the book by James Daane, *The Freedom of God*, the pressure, in what might be called evangelical circles, to move in a similar direction as Barth (though interestingly enough in this case without real acknowledgment of the apparent impact of Barth himself). From my vantage point,

10. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 210–11.

11. Barth, *CD IV/1*, 527–28.

these questions of Barth seem entirely appropriate and well within the range of the necessary for an “Orthodox” retrieval of the Reformation tradition for our own time. And I would concur with, for example, Colin Brown that

The basic difference between Karl Barth and traditional Protestant theology lies, therefore, not only in his doctrine of the word of God. Barth has, in fact, more in common with traditional Protestantism on this score than is sometimes imagined. Whilst there are vital differences, there are things that evangelical theology could learn from Barth without any surrender of vital principle. The basic difference lies in Barth’s understanding of the significance of Christ. It is summed up in the contrast between the older idea of the two covenants—the covenant of works and the covenant of grace—and Barth’s idea of the single, all-embracing covenant of grace in Christ.¹²

It is in these areas that the discussion ought to be pursued.

If we were to look for a representative of Evangelicalism that has most pursued the dialogue with Karl Barth from a commitment to my first paradigm, it would have to be Donald Bloesch, who has found himself increasingly drawn toward Barth as a result of his commitment to the faith of the Reformation.¹³ Perhaps we are now in a position to understand better his judgment that Barth is indeed an “evangelical theologian.”

Evangelicalism as Expressed in the Pietist Traditions

Our second paradigm of Evangelicalism was that expressed most fully in the Pietist and Awakening traditions. When we turn to this paradigm we are immediately faced with an historical anomaly. Even though it could be argued that this paradigm has been the most influential in the Anglo-Saxon world, there has been almost no English literature of discussion with Barth from this perspective. (The major exception would be the work of Donald Bloesch, who, because he tends to see the rise of “evangelical Pietism” as the fulfillment of the Reformation, has engaged Barth from issues that arise from the Pietist vision. This can be seen particularly in his book *Jesus is Victor! Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Salvation* with its concentration on Barth’s soteriology.)

Ironically, we must turn to Germany for the major discussions with Barth from this second paradigm. This is in part because the German

12. Brown, *Karl Barth and the Christian Message*, 139.

13. This attitude is most fully evidenced in Donald Bloesch, *Jesus is Victor!*

counterpart of what we would call Evangelicalism in this country is less shaped by fundamentalist concerns and more by themes of nineteenth-century revivalism and which is called *NeuPietismus*. In part this is because of the dominance of what is called the *Gemeinschaftsbewegung*, a “fellowship” and “higher life” movement that has many affinities with what we call in the Anglo-Saxon world the “Keswick movement.” As a result (as I discovered on a recent sabbatical term in Germany), Evangelicalism in that context has a distinctively different character than in America—though the scene is becoming increasingly muddied by recent American imports. Thus the German counterpart to the American InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the *Studenten Mission Deutschland*, is less troubled by apologetics, the concern to preserve Orthodoxy, and the American “battle for the Bible,” and more fully defined by its concern for the cultivation of the devotional life and its commitment to evangelism and mission. There is a growing interest in Barth in these circles, often mediated by Otto Weber, whose dogmatic work has served as a bridge from the concerns of Pietism into contemporary theology.

Slightly before the publication of Bolich’s volume in America, there was a counterpart in the German discussion, *Karl Barth und die Pietisten*, by Eberhard Busch, the biographer of Barth and one of his last *Assistenten*. Busch has deep family roots in the leadership of the *Gemeinschaftsbewegung*. His book is concerned primarily with the early Barth, the critique of Pietism in the early editions of Barth’s commentary on Romans, and the responses to it by writers in the various journals of the *Gemeinschaftsbewegung*. (This discussion has been extended in a series of articles by Busch on “Karl Barth und der Pietismus” and a response by editor Ulrich Parzany titled “Die Pietisten und Karl Barth” that appeared in *Schritte* [July-September 1980], a magazine representing roughly a cross between *His* and *Eternity* in this country.)

This dialogue immediately takes a different character because of a special burden not present in other forms of evangelical dialogue with Barth—Barth’s own intense polemic against Pietism as merely another form of the anthropocentric orientation that manifested itself in liberal neo-Protestantism. In entering this discussion we are immediately drawn into the question of Barth’s ambivalent relationships with Schleiermacher and Kierkegaard, both of whom, it has been argued, may have some claim to being a theological articulation of Pietist themes. What is primarily at stake in these discussions is Barth’s so-called objectivism, with its concern to ground salvation in a cosmic, external event that is prior to and the ground of any experiential appropriation of it. As he put it in the first edition of the commentary on Romans:

The Holy Spirit in us is no subjective experience concealed in mystic darkness but is the objective truth that has disclosed itself to us. . . . It is our life-basis, not our experience.¹⁴

Two themes regularly occur in Barth's critique of Pietism. One of these is related to one of the structural features of the fourth volume of the *Church Dogmatics* where ecclesiology takes precedence over the treatment of the response of the individual Christian. Barth attacks what he sees as the individualistic tendency of Pietism in which the experience of God's grace *pro me* obscures the priority of the *pro nobis*. Thus in IV/1, after almost six hundred pages of theological foundations—primarily Christological—Barth devotes only forty pages to the act of faith. In doing this Barth is self-consciously setting himself against both the *Glaubenslehre* tradition and Pietism.

In the last centuries (on the broad way which leads from the older Pietism to the present-day theological existentialism inspired by Kierkegaard) the Christian has begun to take himself seriously in a way which is not at all commensurate with the seriousness of Christianity. . . . From the bottom up we can neither approve nor make common course with this procedure of modern doctrines of faith. We shall give to the individual Christian and his faith the attention which he demands, but it must be at this point—not at the beginning of our way, but very briefly at the end.¹⁵

The other side of Barth's critique of Pietism we have already indicated is grounded in his so-called objectivism. Barth is concerned to maintain the priority of the salvation wrought for us *extra nos* in the work of Christ. He fears that the *pro me* and *in me* of Pietism may obscure the *extra nos* as well as the *pro nobis* and *in nobis*. As Barth put it in his dialogue with Methodist pastors, "I do not deny the experience of salvation. . . . But the experience of salvation is what happened on Golgotha. In contrast to that, my experience is only a vessel."¹⁶ We know this to be a fundamental theme in Barth, one that stretches minds shaped by more traditional theologies most with the difficult claim that all are not only *de jure* justified but also sanctified in Christ prior to and *de facto* appropriation or acknowledgment of that fact.

Here we are very close to the disputed question of how best to understand the universalistic themes in Barth. This issue arises in any "evangelical" discussion with Barth, though with different concerns in each of the

14. *Der Römerbrief*, 114, as translated by Smart in *Divided Mind of Modern Theology*, 85.

15. Barth, *CD IV/1*, 741.

16. Busch, *Karl Barth*, 447.

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three paradigms. From the Pietist or second paradigm, the focus is less on election or eternal destiny and more on the efficacy of grace and Barth's relativizing of the boundary between believers and unbelievers. Busch reports that this has been the major unresolved issue in Barth's dialogue with representatives of Pietism.¹⁷ Far be it from me to attempt to resolve these issues here. I am convinced, however, that Barth is often caricatured on this issue and that his denials that he is a universalist need to be taken more seriously than they often are. And several readings of IV/2 have convinced me that Barth posits more difference between believers and unbelievers than the awareness of the former of the salvation wrought for all. But the very difficulty of establishing that and the "slipperiness" of Barth's language in dealing with these themes indicate that there is a real issue here between Barth and the Pietists.

On the other issues—the priority of the *extra nos* and the *pro nobis* over the *pro me*—I have more difficulty seeing that the issue is one of genuine substance. It seems to me that Barth reads Pietism through its most decadent forms. I do not think that classical Pietists, at least, really understood themselves to actualize salvation so much as to fully appropriate it. And even if we grant a tendency toward individualism in this evangelical vision, we should also note that this vision has been exceedingly creative of communal forms of Christian life and piety—from the *collegia pietatis* of Pietism to the bands and societies of Methodism. At this point, there is clearly a difference of emphasis between Barth and representatives of this evangelical vision.

Barth's relationship to Pietism is not fully grasped by noting only his correctives to it. Busch points out the Pietist influences in Barth's own background. One cannot help but notice Barth's appropriation of and praise for Pietist exegesis (cf., for example, his use of Bengel on 1 Cor 13 at the end of IV/2). Nor are we prepared for Barth's growing appreciation for Zinzendorf and his piety. Barth discovered several of his basic themes in Zinzendorf, and came to see him as "perhaps the only genuine Christocentric of the modern age (fools would say Christomonist)."¹⁸ In dialogue with modern Moravians, Barth shared increasing fascination with Zinzendorf's linking of Christ as Savior and Creator, his tending to speak of our sanctification as fulfilled in Christ, and his tendency to polemicize against less Christocentrically oriented representatives of Pietism.

Nor may we forget the impact of the Blumhardts on Barth and the significance of the slogan *Jesus ist Sieger!* that emerged in the much discussed

17. Ibid., 445–46.

18. Barth, *CD IV/1*, 683.

“exorcism” in Möttingen. Barth is inclined to appreciate themes from this event as mediated by the younger Blumhardt and Leonard Ragaz in the religious socialist movement, with the implication that this movement toward a world-transforming understanding of grace is a decidedly “unPietistic” emergence from Pietistic roots. I am coming to the position that it is of the essence of Pietism’s shattering of the Lutheran *simul Justus et peccator* with a strong doctrine of regeneration that soon overflows into culture and society. A similar movement has taken place in Methodism and elsewhere. And even though Barth’s appropriation of “Jesus as Conqueror” and “Overcomer” may be given a new content by his “objectivism,” it may well be that in this—one of his most central themes—Barth is more dependent on Pietist currents than he realizes. If so, Barth’s relationship to this form of Evangelicalism is more dialectical than his polemics would at first suggest.

Evangelicalism as the Defense of Orthodoxy

Finally, we turn to the last paradigm, the one that is probably the most common use of the word *evangelical* in our own time. As we have already suggested, here we have less a movement that can be defined in terms of its positive commitments and more of a complex coalition in opposition to a common enemy—Liberalism or perhaps modernity in general. It is a much disputed question whether Fundamentalism, or Evangelicalism in this sense, can be more precisely defined theologically. Ernest Sandeen, for example, has argued in his *Roots of Fundamentalism*, that the movement must be seen theologically as the rise of premillennialism in the nineteenth century and its coalescence with the so-called Princeton theology of the same period—the bridge being the doctrine of Scripture, specifically the doctrine of inerrancy. Thus we see the effort of the Evangelical Theological Society, for example, to build its coalition since World War II on a single platform—the doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture.

Any means of describing the character of Fundamentalism will inherently be reductionist and one-sided. To focus our discussion, however, we need to pick out one discernible tradition for analysis. Probably the most useful for our purposes is the “Princeton theology,” already mentioned. This theological tradition, especially its doctrine of Scripture, has become influential beyond its normal confessional boundaries. The struggles at Princeton that led to the founding of Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia are in many ways the classical illustration of the fundamentalist/modernist controversy. The shape of this theology could be described in several ways, but for our purposes we may note that it attempted to preserve the theological

formulations of Protestant scholastic Orthodoxy—particularly at the point of the doctrine of Scripture. The importance of Orthodoxy in this sense for modern Evangelicalism is confirmed by Bernard Ramm in *The Evangelical Heritage*, where he defines “evangelical” in terms of this movement and recognizes the influence of Princeton even upon his own Baptist tradition. I find this way of describing Evangelicalism highly inadequate, but do agree that this is the dominant theological construct in the post-fundamentalist evangelical experience that is epitomized in Westminster and Fuller seminaries, for example, or in the pages of *Christianity Today*. And most of the modern “evangelical” dialogue with Barth in this country has been out of this theological tradition.

We can also see in this paradigm the basis for both attention and revulsion between Barth and this variation of Evangelicalism. Barth emerged in the twentieth century as the most powerful critic of “Liberalism,” the *bête noir* of modern Evangelicalism. Yet his standpoint was one of a “neo-Orthodoxy” that broke the categories of the older Orthodoxy. Barth attempted to articulate a biblical starting point, but his appropriation of Scripture was “post-critical” while most modern evangelicals were still committed to a largely “pre-critical” position that could only see such an agenda as a “theological hoax” (again to use the words of Charles Ryrie).

Barth even re-appropriated the traditions of Protestant Orthodoxy, while at the same time recasting them in new forms and conceptualities. This last point is worth further elaboration. Protestant Orthodoxy has by and large had bad press in modern theology. Yet it was the rediscovery of this Orthodoxy that played a crucial role in the emergence of Barth’s own *Church Dogmatics*. Barth describes this and his relations to Orthodoxy in a preface to Heppé’s *Reformed Dogmatics*:

I shall never forget the spring vacation of 1924. I sat in my study at Göttingen, faced with the task of giving lectures on dogmatics for the first time. No one can ever have been more plagued than I then was with the problem, could I do it? And how? . . . Then it was that, along with the parallel Lutheran work of H. Schmid, Heppé’s volume just recently published fell into my hands; out of date, dusty, unattractive, almost like a table of logarithms, dreary to read, stiff and eccentric on almost every page I opened. . . . I read, I studied, I reflected; and found that I was rewarded with the discovery, that here at last I was in the atmosphere in which the road by way of the Reformers to Holy Scripture was a more sensible and natural one to read, than the atmosphere, now only too familiar to me, of the theological literature determined by

Schleiermacher and Ritschl. . . . At the same time I was also aware that a return to this Orthodoxy . . . could not be contemplated.¹⁹

We may see in this quotation epitomized the frustration that Barth evokes among evangelicals. He seems to veer toward them and to share fundamental commitments, but at the last moment he moves off in a new direction that is beyond their comprehension. We could pursue this discussion from many angles. (Fortunately, much of the evangelical dialogue with Barth is summarized in Bolich.) Let me turn to only two of the most basic issues—Barth’s doctrine of Scripture and whether his view of history allows the resurrection to occur in time and space.

The evangelical debate about Barth’s view of Scripture has produced numerous articles and at least one full monograph, *Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Holy Scripture* by Klaas Runia. On the most fundamental level, as we have already indicated, the clash is between pre-critical and post-critical use of Scripture. As Barth comments in the first preface to his commentary on Romans, if forced to choose between the older doctrine of verbal inspiration with accompanying modes of interpretation and the products of modern critical interpretation, he would go with the former. But Barth, of course, refuses to be captured by that way of putting the question and frustrates observers on both sides by using Scripture in a manner continuous with the classical theological traditions of the church while reflecting a critical consciousness. We cannot hope to resolve an issue that the church has struggled with for at least a couple of centuries. I will only comment from my own perspective that the pre-critical option still maintained by many, if not most, modern evangelicals is, at least for me, impossible. The significance of Barth for this issue is primarily that he transcends the evangelical way of putting the question.

Another point at issue in the evangelical dialogue with Barth is expressed in the accusation that for Barth, the Bible is not the word of God written and therefore objectively authoritative but only *becomes* the word of God in the moment of reading under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit or according to the subjective whims and predilections of the reader. My own reading of Barth finds this to be a caricatured and one-sided understanding of Barth, though it may point to a tendency of Barth’s “actualism” and his unwillingness to permit a totally objective, absolute authority in the Bible as such. Perhaps I am too shaped by Pietist and Wesleyan exegesis—which, for example, in the interpretation of 1 Tim 2:16, has also, over against the Orthodox concern for the once-for-all process of inscripturation in the past, emphasized the present “inspiring” work of the Holy Spirit. But I must

19. Barth, “Foreword,” v–vi.

confess that I find it almost ludicrous to accuse Barth of rampant “subjectivism”—especially in view of our earlier discussion of the Pietist concern with Barth’s rigorous “objectivism.”

More to the point are the implications of Barth’s Christological concentration. For Barth, Christ is the epistemological hinge; for the evangelicals, it is the Bible. Most evangelical formulations answer the question of our knowledge about God by some version of “God wrote a book” that makes Christ epistemologically irrelevant. For Barth this generates the “irremediable danger of consulting Holy Scripture apart from the center, and in such a way that the question of Jesus Christ ceases to be the controlling and comprehensive question.”²⁰ From the evangelical side, Barth’s position reduces the Scripture to the role of a mere witness to the revelation of God and not the revelation itself. The level of absoluteness that the evangelicals invest in the text itself is obviously another reason for their reluctance to have that text open to critical analysis. Barth’s shift of the fundamental hinge is one reason he can be more open to criticism. Those questions cannot be resolved here, and I would only reveal my own prejudices in indicating any further that I find Barth’s formulations to be vastly superior. Suffice it to say that the evangelical grasp of Barth’s doctrine of Scripture is becoming more subtle and appropriate,²¹ and that Bolich argues that it is at the point of Scripture that Barth has the most to contribute to modern Evangelicalism.

A second major point of evangelical discussion with Barth has revolved around his views of history. Several evangelicals, including Cornelius van Til, John Warwick Montgomery, and Fred Klooster, have accused Barth of splitting history into two realms, *Historie* (the realm of actual, factual history) and *Geschichte* (the realm of meaningful history and God’s transcendent action) so that, for example, the crucifixion happens in *Historie* but the resurrection only in *Geschichte*.²² The range of questions involved here is very complex and the issues much debated, within and without evangelical circles. Evangelicals have not been the only ones to accuse Barth of splitting history in this way. Whether or not one accepts this particular criticism of Barth, it is clear that this aspect of Barth’s thought—his views of history, historical method, their relation to revelation, etc.—is at least problematic and perhaps the Achilles heel of his theological program. It is clear that the theological programs of both Wolfhart Pannenberg and Jürgen Moltmann,

20. Barth, *CD IV/1*, 368.

21. Cf. for example the work of Loewen, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Scripture,” 33–49.

22. Cf. Klooster, “Karl Barth’s Doctrine of Jesus Christ,”; Montgomery, “Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology of History,”; and the various writings of Cornelius van Til, especially those mentioned.

as different as they may now seem to be, were launched to some extent against Barth at some of these points.

It has become increasingly clear that the earlier evangelical critique of Barth (that his view does not allow the resurrection to be an “historical” event in the normal sense) cannot be sustained. In volume IV of the *Church Dogmatics* Barth became increasingly clear about his affirmation that “the event of God’s loving” described in John 3:16 “did not take place in heaven but on earth. It did not take place in secret, but it can be known (i.e., not as a purely spiritual process, but as something which, according to 1 John 1:1, can be heard and seen with our eyes and touched, yes, handled with our hands).”²³ And of the resurrection, Barth has insisted that “it happened in the same sense as his crucifixion and death, in the human sphere and the human time.”²⁴

What is really at stake in the discussion with Barth at this point is an issue of historiography and historical method—whether there can be an “historical” or “apologetic” *proof* of the historicity of the resurrection. Barth is quite clear in his denial of this:

There is no proof, and there obviously cannot and ought not to be any proof, for the fact that this history did take place (proof, that is, according to the terminology of modern historical scholarship).²⁵

There is a genuine issue here—one described well by evangelical New Testament scholar George Eldon Ladd:

The basic problem for the modern theologian is this: Shall we insist upon a definition of history broad enough to include such supra-historical events as the resurrection; or shall we accept the modern view of history as a working method but insist that there is a dimension within history which transcends historical control? The latter is the method of Karl Barth, and even though it calls down the wrath of Rudolf Bultmann . . . it appears to be the only adequate explanation.²⁶

Since Ladd wrote these lines, the debate has proceeded along different lines and the first option has been powerfully defended by Pannenberg. The point to be made here is that the genuine debate that Barth raises is not one between Orthodoxy and heterodoxy or between Evangelicalism in

23. Barth, *CD IV/1*, 70.

24. *Ibid.*, 333.

25. *Ibid.*, 335.

26. Ladd, “Resurrection and History,” 56.

this sense and a position that is not “evangelical,” but an issue that faces all modern theology and one that has thus necessarily become also an “intra-evangelical” debate.

The evaluation of the evangelical debates about Barth’s views of history and the resurrection perhaps illustrates how Barth has become the bridge for many evangelicals into contemporary theological discussion. The fact that Barth is in many ways no longer at the center of contemporary theological struggles which have often moved on in different directions may limit the significance of this “bridge.” But in the present historical situation, with its inherited chasms between the grandchildren of both fundamentalists and modernists, we may need to value any bridges that are available. It may well be that the ecumenical significance of Barth’s thought has as yet unexplored aspects. Barth’s dialectical and ambivalent relationship to the varieties of currents that claim the label “evangelical” may be a means of drawing them all into closer theological dialogue not only among themselves but also into the broader theological world, hopefully for the mutual edification of all concerned. There is certainly extensive evidence that this has already taken place and that it is, among “evangelicals,” gaining force. I would not wish to attempt to predict the future, but we should not ignore the significance of the continuing discussion between “Karl Barth and Evangelicalism” even amidst the confusing but sometimes illuminating complexities occasioned by the “varieties of a sibling rivalry.”

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