

ARPTalk (13)

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ARPTalk(13.0)

~ Editor's Remarks ~

Barthianism at ETS: Things Haven't Changed!

This issue of *ARPTalk* focuses especially on the threat to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church posed by the theology of Karl Barth. In recent decades the ARPC has repeatedly taken a stand against Barthianism. In response to the presence of Neo-Orthodoxy at Erskine Theological Seminary the General Synod declared in 1979 and 1980: "Be it resolved that the General Synod . . . affirms that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are the Word of God without error in all that it teaches.

In 1994 there was a controversy on the floor of the General Synod over reports that a Seminary professor (reputed Barthian Merwyn Johnson) was declining to use masculine language for God. A Seminary Select Committee was appointed and, in addition to questions about God-language, this Committee asked questions such as whether one will affirm of Scripture "That the original writings of the Old and New Testaments are inspired by God, truth (without error), divine authority, and kept pure by Him through all ages." The Committee also asked each faculty member if they had any exceptions to the following statements: "1. Professors of Erskine Theological Seminary should teach and promote the doctrine of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. 2. If a member of the Seminary faculty comes to accept teaching contrary to the beliefs of the A.R.P. Church, he or she should communicate this to the dean of the Seminary for consideration or action." This is important because it uses inerrancy language ("without error") and it establishes that

Professors are expected to "promote the doctrine of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church" (1995 Minutes of the General Synod, p. 51).

In 2006 the Theological and Social Concerns Committee of the General Synod was asked to evaluate the *Natural Church Development* program of Dr. Christian Schwarz. Part of the Committee Report reads as follows: "Another set of problems arise out of Schwartz's basically Neo-orthodox understanding of revelation. The "objective element" of revelation is Jesus Christ (*Paradigm Shift*, p. 101). He distinguishes between the canon of Scripture and the "word of God." The written word must become a "living word" through the power of the Holy Spirit, and he decries "the formally authoritarian, fundamentalistic view of the Bible which culminates in the dogma of verbal inspiration" (*Paradigm Shift*, pp. 112-113). With his Neo-orthodox predecessors, Schwarz seems to assume that God's revelation is personal rather than propositional" (*2007 Minutes of the General Synod*, pp. 59-60). The Report and recommendations of the Theological and Social Concerns Committee were overwhelmingly approved by the General Synod—yet another indication that the ARP Church regards Barthianism as unacceptable.

In light of this record, it is ASTONISHING that Erskine Seminary has continued to hire and even grant tenure to Barthians such as Dr. Richard Burnett. Why is this going on? What is the agenda? Is it, as the current Executive Vice-President of the Seminary has been heard to say, to move the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church in a more "moderate" and inclusive direction?

In this issue of *ARPTalk* there are three articles. (1) We present an article by the Rev. Mark Wright, pastor of our Unity ARP Church in Piedmont, SC. Wright is working on a Th.M. at Erskine Theological Seminary. In the course of a class on Theological Hermeneutics, Dr. Richard Burnett recommended Geoffrey Bromiley as a fair expositor of Barth. Wright has gone back and read what Bromiley has actually written about Barth during his lengthy career. THE RESULTS MAY SURPRISE YOU! (2) We also present a December 2008 article from the *Reformation21* website by Dr. William B. Evans. Dr. Evans addresses some shifts in the academic study of Barth from Neo-Orthodoxy to Neo-Barthianism, and he convincingly argues that the "Neo-Barthian" version of Barth and Barth's view of Scripture is ultimately no more acceptable or helpful than the older version of Barth. (3) Finally, Florida Presbytery student of theology

Daniel Wells explores the persistent allegations of Barthian universalism. He shows that while Barth rejected the label "universalist," nevertheless Barth was quite open to the idea of universal salvation and aspects of his theology strongly imply it.

In the opinion of the Editor of *ARPTalk*, **the ARPC is now facing its most severe theological challenge since the 1970's**. The theology of Karl Barth, which now finds a warm welcome at Erskine Theological Seminary, is a clear and present danger to the MISSION and WITNESS of the ARPC. The Barthian denial of inerrancy strikes directly at the witness of the ARPC. If the Bible is, as Barth maintains, fallible with respect to its religious or theological content, then the Christian has nowhere to stand. If the Bible is only "dialectically" rather than unequivocally Word of God, then the Christian has no firm basis for proclamation. The WITNESS of our Church is in jeopardy. Likewise, the universalistic tendency that lurks in Barth's theology will sap our commitment to the Great Commission; just as it has destroyed the impetus toward missions everywhere Barthianism has become dominant. The MISSION of our beloved Church is in jeopardy!

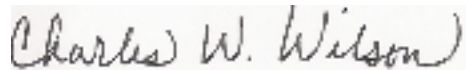
I close with a quotation from Baptist theologian Millard Erickson. In a recent essay entitled "On Flying in a Theological Fog," Erickson writes:

"In addition, categories and terms have become quite elastic. I term one aspect of this, 'category slide.' A person who once was considered neo-orthodox may now be termed evangelical and someone who formerly was clearly identified as an evangelical now may be branded a fundamentalist, without the actual views of the persons involved having changed in a significant way. My mentor [a neo-orthodox theologian] noted this stretch of terms when he said of what he called the new conservatives, 'To both the fundamentalist and the nonconservative, it often seems that the new conservative is trying to say, "The Bible is inerrant, but of course this does not mean that it is without errors.'" Millard J. Erickson, "On Flying in Theological Fog," in *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times*, ed. Millard Erickson, Paul Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), p. 324.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if Erskine Theological Seminary were to become a beacon of light in this theological fog instead of being

"Exhibit A" of the very problem Erickson describes? How long are we ARPs willing to tolerate this theological fog? We have tolerated it for nearly 40 years. Are we willing to tolerate it for another 40 years?

These are my thoughts,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Charles W. Wilson". The signature is written in black ink on a light-colored background.

Charles W. Wilson

(scroll down for article 13.1)

Bromiley on Barth on Scripture: A Case of Startling Consistency

Rev. Mark Wright

Not too long ago Karl Barth's theology was considered by many to be "outdated." However in recent years, renewed interest in Barth has made him a major voice in contemporary systematic theological circles once again. Bruce L. McCormack, currently the Weyerhauser Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and others such as Erskine Seminary's Dr. Richard Burnett have given us a fresh new look at Karl Barth. These men contend that Barth has been largely misunderstood by evangelical critics, and they seek to show us the real Barth. They are not persuaded with the interpretation of Barth given by the likes of Cornelius van Til or Gordon Clark. Though most evangelical critics of Barth are dismissed by neo-Barthians, there is one evangelical Barth scholar who seems to have their respect, namely, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. Bromiley will be of invaluable help to anyone desiring to understand Barth today. Interestingly, Bromiley has been extolled by Dr. Richard Burnett as one who has written a "marvelous book, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). This book is one of the finest overviews of Barth's theology I know and I commend it highly." (e-mail correspondence, 04/28/08)

Bromiley is well known, not only as a premier Evangelical historical theologian, but also as an editor and translator of the *Church Dogmatics* who knew Barth personally. His *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* is a good place to start for those who set out on the difficult task of trying to understand Karl Barth. Bromiley gives credit to Barth for helpful contributions, while at the same time exposing his more serious and dangerous errors, especially his view of Scripture. The importance of this last issue must never be forgotten. The Bible, being God's infallible and inerrant word, is the final authority for the church. To recognize the absolute truth and trustworthiness of Scripture is essential if we are to uphold its authority in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. It is Bromiley's conclusion, and my firm conviction, that Barth's view of Scripture results ultimately in the loss of the Bible's authority. Barth may have attempted to save the Bible from liberalism, but the

attempt failed. The ARPC cannot afford to look to Karl Barth's theology of Scripture if we are going to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. The following selections from Bromiley's writings clearly demonstrate why the ARPC must reject Barth's doctrine of Scripture and resist the infiltration of neo-Barthianism in our church and its institutions.

"Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration"

(G.W. Bromiley, "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87, 1955: 66-80.)

Some of the earliest comments made by Bromiley concerning Barth's view of Scripture are found in an article titled "Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration," written in 1955, appearing in the *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*. In the introduction Bromiley states that "In a critical appraisal acknowledgement is made of the strong points in Barth's treatment, but some unsatisfactory features are also noted." For the purposes of this paper, a bit more attention will be given to the "unsatisfactory features" of Barth's views on Scripture. This is done so that the reader might be able to weigh these against the many positive assessments being made by the newer Barth scholars and make his or her own judgment as to whether the current praise for Barth is warranted. Bromiley identifies the primary source for his comments when he says, "If we are going to speak at all about Karl Barth's doctrine of any subject, it is essential that we should study in detail the authoritative statement which he himself has given us in the *Dogmatics*."

Bromiley begins by pointing out that Barth's view of Scripture results in a divided allegiance to the Bible and human sources of authority.

Already in this introductory section Barth raises a big issue and states one of his primary convictions. He does not believe that the Bible can be proved false or proved true by logical or empirical processes. Indeed, he thinks that it is treason not only to the Bible but to God himself to suspend our acceptance of His Word written upon what are at bottom human factors. We are not to follow the Bible because it is proved true by the mind of man or the results of human scientific or historical investigation. We are to accept the Bible as God's Word in obedience to the Bible as God's Word self-authenticated. In principle, there is little doubt that Barth is right in this contention, and it is one which needs to be emphasized in an age which sets far too much store by the cleverness of man and the infallibility of his conclusions. In our dealings with God's Word the Bible must be the judge

and not the judged. Even if the decision goes in its favor, it is wrong even to think of the Bible at the bar of human reason or scholarship. At the same time, we may ask whether Barth does not carry the point too far. If we accept the Bible in obedient faith, there seems to be no reason why it should not find a secondary confirmation in other fields. To remove the Bible as God's Word altogether from the sphere of human judgment may easily become only a device for maintaining a twofold allegiance: an allegiance to the Bible itself in the sphere of revelation and faith, an allegiance to reason and science and history in more mundane or human matters (p.68).

Bromiley moves on through Barth's material, agreeing with him and defending him in several areas related to the canon of Scripture and its uniqueness as a divine and human book. Next in the article, Bromiley identifies a problem with Barth's view of inspiration. Inspiration of Scripture for Barth is not found in a once for all objective work, but rather an ongoing, more subjective work of the Spirit. While evangelicals would agree with the necessity of the work of the Spirit to bring about faith in the Bible as the Word of God, we would not identify the illuminating work of the Spirit with the doctrine of inspiration. Bromiley says,

In the sixth paragraph Barth comes to grips with the critical question of inspiration as the decision and act of God by which the Bible has priority in the Church and is the Word of God (pp. 557 f.). He argues that we can make the statements, that the Bible has priority and that it is the Word of God, only in a context of recollection and expectation: that it has had and will have priority, that it has been and will be the Word of God. He tries to prove this point by an exegesis of the two most relevant passages in the New Testament, 2 Tim. 3: 14-17 and 2 Peter 1: 19-21, in both of which he finds elements of recollection and expectation bracketing the statement that Scripture is God-breathed. The point of this insistence is to make it clear that inspiration is not a state but the free act of the Holy Spirit, but it is difficult to see why Timothy's past, present or future recognition of the Bible as God's Word should be necessary to enable us to say that God exercised His decision and act in the prophetic or apostolic author. It is valuable to be reminded that the inspiration is a dead thing for us if we have not read, or do not and will not read the Bible as God's Word; but surely the act of the Spirit in the authors cannot be suspended on the response of the hearers or readers, even though the work of the Spirit may not be completed until there is the true response. This is just the error in relation to Scripture which Barth now condemns in Bultmann in relation to the atoning work of Christ, and it is difficult to think that if Barth were to write this section to-day he would not make a complete shift of emphasis away from the subjective to the objective aspect of inspiration, as he does almost to excess in his most recent volume on the Atonement. But taking the chapter as it stands, there seems to be a regrettable hesitancy to accept the objectivity of the initial work of the Spirit.

For fear of a lifeless orthodoxy Barth leaves the way open for a no less dangerous subjectivization (pp. 73-74).

Bromiley interacts with Barth's acceptance of fallibility and mistakes in the biblical text. He indicates that Barth is unwilling to consider that under the direction of God's Spirit the writers of Scripture could have been kept from error and contradiction:

It is only by the Holy Ghost and in faith that we can say that the Bible is God's Word. All this is, of course, very true. But it need not alter the fact that by that earlier act of the Holy Spirit what the prophets and apostles wrote is in itself the Word of God, however we ourselves or others may read it. Nor does it mean that it is the Word of God in complete defiance of rational or empirical considerations. This is, however, the direction in which Barth's argument is leading, for separating again between the infallibility of the Bible on the divine side and its fallibility on the human he finds a stumbling-block to reason in the literary forms, the concepts, the mistakes, the contradictions and above all the Judaistic setting and spirit of Scripture. In this respect he forgets that it is only the fallen reason of man which is scandalized, as it will be in any case, not only by the form but by the whole message of the Bible. And while no one would argue that in all their thoughts and words and actions the prophets and apostles could not make mistakes, it is surely not too much to expect that at least where they were specially controlled by the Spirit according to the decision and act of God they would be preserved from gross blundering and self-contradiction. Is it not, perhaps, that at this point Barth's own reason was still in conflict with his faith? (pp. 74-75).

At the end of the article, Bromiley summarizes his main criticisms of Barth's views of the Bible. Bromiley says:

In detail, there are two main points at which the teaching of Barth seems to be neither right nor necessary. The first is in relation to the fallibility of the Bible, which he goes out of his way to emphasize as the correlative of its humanity. But in this respect his thinking is surely a little muddled. For one thing, he is accepting a historicist standard as the norm of inerrancy, which is to be guilty of the very error of judging the Bible by human philosophies which he rightly criticizes in others. Again, it is not really necessary to insist on errors in the Bible to maintain its true humanity. Quite apart from the human wording and forms and concepts, we can readily concede the limitation of the Bible and yet believe that in virtue of the special decision and act of God which is inspiration, it is preserved from actual error (p. 79).

Bromiley concludes the article with these words:

For after all, events have shown that his safeguards against subjectivism are not really adequate if the dynamic view of inspiration is pressed to its extreme. It is all very well to say that we are dependent on God Himself speaking in His Word, but the fact remains that if inspiration is not complete until it takes place in the individual, then God does not speak unless He speaks to me, and this means in practice that the only real or important act of “inspiration” takes place subjectively in the recipient. For a true objectivity it is necessary to insist that although there has to be the speaking to me, God has in fact already spoken: “men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (p. 80).

Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology, “Karl Barth”

(G.W. Bromiley, “Karl Barth,” in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. by Phillip E. Hughes, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1966: 27-59)

Bromiley’s chapter in this book begins with a brief history of Barth’s life. The bulk of the chapter is a succinct summary and analysis of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, since Barth himself has “expressed the desire that he should be judged theologically by the *Church Dogmatics* rather than by earlier writings.” Concerning Barth’s handling of the doctrine of Scripture Bromiley says:

Nevertheless, there are real defects, not merely in lesser matters, but at points of major significance. A first group concerns the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Barth accepts the Bible’s absolute authority. He allows that it is revelation. He endorses its uniqueness. He makes no artificial distinction between word and content. But he also advances some extraordinary propositions which are poorly supported in Scripture and which open the door wide to liberal approaches. Thus he finds the inspiration of Scripture predominantly in its present use by the Spirit. In terms of historicist criterion of errancy, he attributes all kinds of errors to the Bible. In a curious application of the concepts of offense and sovereignty, he even argues the necessity of a fallible Bible. His handling of Scripture is in many ways the weakest and most disappointing part of the whole *Dogmatics*, and his safeguards against subjectivism here are very flimsy (p. 52).

An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth

(G.W. Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979: 34-44)

In chapter three of this book, Bromiley assesses Barth’s section in the *Dogmatics* concerning “The Word of God for the

Church.” Here Bromiley identifies Barth’s rejection of the Bible’s inerrancy. Bromiley says:

Sixth, we believe that Scripture “has priority over all other writings” and as the “original and legitimate witness is itself the Word of God” (502). It is this, not statically, nor as a compendium of human knowledge (508), but dynamically in the act of the Holy Spirit. Barth offers here an exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:10-21 in support of his dynamic understanding (503-503). Scripture has been God’s Word, it will be so again, and it is so, not as a lasting state, but at the living point between the “has been” and the “will be.” He does not think that this being of Scripture as God’s Word endows it with inerrancy, although he issues a warning against the idea that we have any superior platform from which to judge it to be in error (510-512). To get at the meaning of Scripture we have to study it in its human historical context. Nevertheless, it is by the miracle of God that the human words with their given contextual meaning are to us also the Word of God of Scripture (513) (p. 37).

He has little time for inerrancy, which he seems to regard as both irrelevant and even misleading. On the other hand, while thinking that the possibility of error must be accepted, he can see no absolute position from which to establish actual errors and he sets no store by the emphasizing of alleged mistakes or difficulties. Indeed, he does not follow here his own rule and deduce the possibility of error from its reality! (pp. 43-44).

Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth”

(G.W. Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995: 271-294)

Here is a more recent contribution of note by Bromiley concerning Barth’s view of Scripture. This section contains the fruit of many years of mature reflection upon the theology of Karl Barth. Bromiley still finds much that is objectionable about Barth’s view of the Bible. The following is from the section “Evaluation.”

The many quotations from so many works of Barth, which could well be multiplied, demonstrate beyond cavil his resolute commitment to biblical authority and his sincere intention to observe it in his own Christian service. Nevertheless, certain problems arise regarding aspects of his understanding of this authority that might seem to weaken or compromise the very position he ardently seeks to maintain (p. 290).

First, his stress and insistence on the witnessing role of Scripture leave at times an impression of devaluation of Scripture as God’s word . . . the accent

falls so heavily on the function of witness as to suggest, even if unintentionally, that Scripture has an inferior role except in so far as the Holy Spirit empowers it in sovereign freedom . . . (p. 290).

Second, Barth's muted championship of the past inspiration of Scripture as compared with its present inspiring produces further uncertainty about its objective authority. Is it authoritative because God inspired it once and for all, or is it authoritative only ad hoc as God inspires it when heard or read? Here again, of course, Barth made efforts to reduce the difficulty. He did not dispute the past act whereby God raised up prophets and apostles to speak and write the primary words of testimony. . . . Yet the emphasis of his presentation leaves serious questions as to the scope, meaning, and solid objectivity of the authority he proclaimed (p. 291).

Third, Barth's dismissal of biblical inerrancy and his assigning of a special historical character to events like the Resurrection pose the question whether the biblical books can really enjoy the status of direct, absolute, material authority, except by a sacrifice of the intellect, if they do in fact contain demonstrably incorrect statements or tell of events that do not meet the test of normal historical verifiability. . . . For many people, however, doubt seems unavoidably to arise about the great reality to which the Bible bears witness if it might be in error, or even under the suspicion of being in error, about plain facts (p. 291).

Barth compounds his problem by speaking of a capacity for error but not giving examples of the types of errors he has in mind. His supporting arguments are also weak. Undoubtedly, to err is human, but this does not entail a flat equation of humanity and error, as human experience amply demonstrates and the Incarnation itself should remind us. . . . Of no more value is the [Barth's] idea that God's speaking through what is erroneous at the human level is a greater miracle than His speaking through what He himself has freed from error by His own prior action. Barth himself may run roughshod over the problems that his teaching raises in this regard, but when essential facts or doctrines are at stake, as distinct perhaps from formal points of style or syntax, he seems to be unfortunately undercutting the very position on authority that he is passionately seeking to establish (pp. 291-292).

Finally, Barth's handling of biblical commands creates difficulties in the practical application of Scripture's authority in the ethical field. As Barth saw it, the commands were given to specific people in specific situations. Hence, we are not to make a simple transfer to different people in different situations. The commands are God's only as the Spirit so speaks through them that they go forth again as the direct voice of God. In this way, of course, Barth hoped to avoid legalism and casuistry, yet without falling into relativism or situationism. . . . The problems arise, however, whether the

commands have any real authority unless God speaks through them, and how one is to know that He really does speak, either enforcing the commands or making permissible exceptions. . . . the problem still obtrudes that at any given time there may be no coincidence of the living voice of the Spirit and the permanent record of the commands. If not, Scripture may still have indirect, relative, formal authority, as church law also does, but its readers or hearers are deprived of the decisive divine authority that it ought to enjoy (p. 292).

When I showed some of the Bromiley quotes above to Dr. Richard Burnett, he seemed mystified and wondered if Bromiley had changed his mind. But there was no change of mind. Over the course of his lengthy career, Bromiley has consistently pointed to very serious problems in Barth's view of Holy Scripture. Karl Barth may have sincerely intended to uphold biblical authority, but Bromiley demonstrates that his position actually undermines it. In seeking to reform a liberal church, Barth did not go nearly far enough.

Many in the Confessing Church movement within the Presbyterian Church (USA) are turning to Barth as the answer to the theological and moral disaster within that denomination. But how can one fight error with error? Barth's doctrine of Scripture provides no sure foundation for faith. The ARPC at its most recent General Synod (2008) demonstrated a renewed commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible. We stand on the traditional view of Scripture as found in the reformers and the Westminster Confession of Faith. We are a reformed, evangelical denomination and if we are going to stay reformed we must reject the corrupting influence of Karl Barth's theology, especially within Erskine Seminary. Our students of theology deserve to be given a firm foundation in the Bible and theology, not the subjectivism of Barth. Barth's theology is currently being promoted at Erskine Seminary. Something must be done about it if we would be faithful to our vows to promote the peace, the purity, and the prosperity of the ARP Church.

(scroll down for article 13.2)

**Comments on
Karl Barth,
Bruce McCormack, and
the Neo-Barthian
View of Scripture**

William Evans, December 2008

Taken from *Reformation21*, December 2008

<http://www.reformation21.org/articles/comments-on-karl-barth-bruce-mccormack-and-the-neobarthian-view-of-scripture.php>

A frequent topic of conversation in theological circles recently has been the general revival of interest in Karl Barth's theology, and particularly the revisionist "Neo-Barthian" interpretations proposed by Bruce L. McCormack, currently the Weyerhauser Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and others. Considerable attention in all this has been focused on Barth's view of Scripture. The rhetoric of some of those associated with this newer line of interpretation often seems to suggest that no one has really read Barth properly until now, and that earlier evangelical and Reformed critics of Barth (e.g., Francis Schaeffer, Carl Henry, and Cornelius Van Til) were invincibly ignorant.

An intriguing and stimulating theologian and reader of the Christian tradition, McCormack is one of the more creative (and assertive) thinkers on the current scene. I should add that I personally have learned a good deal from his writings over the years. Moreover, his work has garnered a fair amount of positive press, even from some putative "evangelicals." This brief and informal internet essay attempts to shed light on some of the issues involved.

McCormack on Barth--Bruce McCormack argues for what he calls a "consistently dialectical" and "critically realistic" Barth; i.e.,

that there were only two main periods in Barth's theological development, in contrast to the influential view of Hans Urs von Balthasar that there were three distinct theological periods in Barth's work (his early liberalism, his Kierkegaardian dialectical phase, and his "analogical" period inaugurated by his 1931 book on Anselm). To make a long and somewhat complicated story short, the Barth that emerges from McCormack's interpretive mill is a sort of left-wing, infallibilist evangelical (McCormack uses the term "dynamic infallibilism"). He goes on to argue that both the "neo-orthodox" and "evangelical" readings of Barth (which largely agree that Barth views Scripture as but a "witness to revelation" and that Scripture only "becomes" God's Word in an event of encounter) are mistaken. McCormack contends that Barth's view of Scripture is to be understood in terms of his "theological ontology" and that there is an analogy between his theology proper (doctrine of God) and his bibliology (doctrine of Scripture). Taking his point of departure Barth's dictum that "God's being is in becoming," McCormack points to passages where Barth refers to Scripture as in some sense "Word of God" prior to its reception by us, and he argues that if the matter is understood in its properly dialectical sense, Scripture becomes God's Word because it already is God's Word. In this way, McCormack argues, we can do justice to both inspiration and illumination. McCormack has developed this argument at some length in his "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," in *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. V. Bacote et al (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), 55-75. See also his *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909-1936* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

McCormack identifies himself as an "evangelical," though his theological program seems to be largely geared toward the development of themes in the work of Barth. Not surprisingly, he has affinities for universalism (see Bruce L. McCormack, "That He May Have Mercy Upon All: Karl Barth and the Problem of Universalism," unpublished paper presented at the 2007 Karl Barth Conference at Princeton Theological Seminary, in which he reportedly suggests that universalism is a biblically defensible option; for a PTS student report of the conference, see <http://fireandrose.blogspot.com/2007/06/2007-karl-barth-conference-recap.html>).

His view of the Trinity is regarded by some as problematic as well. For example, McCormack has persistently been accused of

collapsing the ontological and economic trinities and threatening the doctrine of divine immutability by subordinating God's "being" as Trinity to God's "becoming" in the decree of election to be God for us (see the criticisms leveled by McCormack's PTS colleague George Hunsinger, "Election and Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth," *Modern Theology* 24:2 [April 2008]: 179-198; and Paul Molnar, "Can the Electing God Be without Us? Some Implications of Bruce McCormack's Understanding of Karl Barth's Doctrine of Election for the Doctrine of the Trinity," *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 49:2 [2007]: 199-222).

The Interpretive Challenge of Barth--When confronting Barth and his massive body of work, we must realize that he is an elusive and complex thinker; thus it is not surprising that different appraisals of his view of Scripture have emerged. On the one hand, Barth does at points affirm that the Bible is "God's Word" even apart from our appropriation of it (see, e.g., *Church Dogmatics* I/1:107-110, 120; I/2:475). These are the sorts of passages McCormack exploits. But, on the other hand, Scripture is human and fallible (even with respect to "its religious or theological content"), and, moreover, we can never "possess" or profit from its content unless it "becomes" God's Word to us by the power of the Holy Spirit (see *Church Dogmatics*, I/2:502-514). Regarding the fallibility of Scripture and the use of this errant Scripture in theology, Barth provocatively writes:

There are obvious overlappings and contradictions--e.g., between the Law and the prophets, between John and the Synoptists, between Paul and James. But nowhere are we given a single rule by which to make a common order, perhaps an order of precedence, but at any rate a synthesis, of what is in itself such a varied whole. Nowhere do we find a rule which enables us to grasp it in such a way that we can make organic parts of the distinctions and evade the contradictions as such. We are led now one way, now another--each of the biblical writers obviously speaking only quod potuit homo--and in both ways, and whoever is the author, we are always confronted with the question of faith. . . . For within certain limits and therefore relatively they are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology. In view of the actual constitution of the Old and New Testaments this is something that we cannot possibly deny if we are not to

take away their humanity, if we are not to be guilty of Docetism. (Barth, Church Dogmatics I/2:509-510).

Here the "dialectical" character of Barth's thinking is evident. For this reason, Barth can be quoted in ways that are both affirming and destructive of the Bible's authority.

The traditional interpretations of Barth on both the "right" and the "left" more or less correspond to what McCormack dismisses as the "neo-orthodox" reading of Barth (that the Bible is not revelation or Word of God per se, but that it may become God's Word in an event of encounter; for a survey of both, see John D. Morrison, "Barth, Barthians, and Evangelicals: Reassessing the Question of the Relation of Holy Scripture and the Word of God," *Trinity Journal* 25NS [2004]: 187-213). While it may well be that this "neo-orthodox" version of Barth is not sufficiently nuanced as to certain details, I would argue that in broad outlines it has grasped rather well the practical implications of Barth's view. Because of Barth's insistence on the fallibility of Scripture and his focus on Scripture as "act" rather than text, we only apprehend Scripture as it "becomes" God's Word to us. Thus the problem of subjectivity looms, and appeals to Scripture as text are rendered problematic and even suspect.

Other questions can be raised about McCormack's reading of Barth's view of Scripture as well. For example, his revisionist reading implies that even Barth's closest friends and co-workers (e.g., Otto Weber, T. F. Torrance) badly misunderstood him on this point. Barth had ample opportunity to correct them, but he apparently never did so. Also, this reading fails to explain Barth's hostility to the evangelical doctrine of scripture--recall his cavalier dismissal of evangelical Christians with their affirmation of an inerrant Scriptural revelation as "blessed possessors."

Finally, much hinges on highly technical questions such as the nature of Barth's "actualism" and the precise character of God's (and Scripture's) "being in becoming." Contra McCormack, I think one can plausibly argue that for Barth the "being" of Scripture is, in a real sense, subordinated to its "becoming" (Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/1:110, writes: "The Bible, then, becomes God's Word in this event, and in the statement that the Bible is God's Word the little word 'is' refers to its being in this becoming. It does not become God's Word to us because we accord it faith but in the fact that it becomes revelation to us."). One can even argue that there is a sort of right-wing Hegelianism at work in the broader structure of Barth's

thinking about God and Scripture, although it would take a lengthy paper to flesh that out that assertion.

Implications for the Church--We currently see a revival of interest in Karl Barth, as well as some shifts in scholarly views of Barth (from what may be called "neo-orthodoxy" to "neo-Barthianism"). Those old enough to remember will recall that the influence of Barth waned dramatically after (and even before) his death in 1968, as many of his former devotees moved headlong in the direction of theological liberalism. Reasons for this are not difficult to discern. His dialectical views on history and Scripture were largely exercises in equivocation that left no firm place for Christians to stand.

To the surprise of many, Barth is now once again "front burner" in the theological world. Some of this interest is due to the work of theologians such as Bruce McCormack at Princeton Theological Seminary, which has been aptly termed a "Barthian hothouse." But the current culture also seems to be primed for such a revival. With the cultural shift from modernity to post-modernity, many have sought a nonfoundationalist "third way" that avoids what are thought to be the rationalist pitfalls of evangelicalism and liberalism (for an accessible treatment of this trend in Barth interpretation, see William Stacy Johnson, "Barth and Beyond," *Christian Century* [May 2, 2001]: 16-20). The Neo-Barthian reading has played a significant role here, despite the fact that McCormack himself has been critical of attempts to enlist Barth in the cause of Postmodernity. But the temptation to enroll Barth in the cause of contemporary theological programs remains strong, especially on the more conservative end of the mainline theological spectrum. Such people, however, are likely to find themselves betrayed in the end. For example, McCormack's PTS colleague Stacy Johnson warns against attempts to co-opt Barth by more conservative elements in the PCUSA, rightly noting that Barth's theology can as easily be taken in other directions.

To reckon with Barth, then, is to encounter one whose theology later inspired liberation theologians in Latin America and antiapartheid theologians in South Africa--a theologian who felt that what you pray for, you must also work for. To invoke the mantle of Barth for the cause of a narrow doctrinal confessionalism, in other words, simply defies the record of history, as is happening today when ultraconservative activists appeal to Barth and the Confessing Church movement against such things as the full inclusion of people who are homosexual

or against any sort of new thinking in theology. Not only is the birthright of the [German] Confessing Church movement more ambiguous than they suppose, but Barth himself is more complex and his pronouncements more determined by his social situation than some would care to admit. (Johnson, "Barth and Beyond," 16)

When all is said and done, it is not at all clear to me that the "neo-Barthian" Barth provides a better foundation for the church's witness than did the old "neo-orthodox" Barth. Moreover, the historic influence of Barth--with his problematic view of Scripture, implicit universalism, and low ecclesiology--on churches in Europe, Scotland, and America suggests that the current renaissance of interest in Barth is unlikely to empower the mission of Reformed churches today.

I am also struck by the parallel to Friedrich Schleiermacher--a comment that will probably surprise those who hold to the conventional view of Barth as an implacable opponent of the "father of liberal theology." In the mid-nineteenth-century context Schleiermacher was trumpeted as a bridge from the barren rationalism of Kant to orthodoxy. The church historian Philip Schaff, for example, argued in this fashion (see his *Germany: Its Universities, Theology, and Religion* [Philadelphia: Lindsay and Blakiston, 1857], 320). But bridges can be crossed in both directions, and while initially the preponderance of traffic over *die Schleiermacherbrücke* was toward more conservative forms of theology, the long-term story has been quite the opposite. I sense that the same is and will continue to be true of Barth.

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A Seminarian's Perspective on Karl Barth, Universalism, and the ARP Church

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A professor once told me that ideas are first formed within the academy, then they permeate "popular culture" through poetry and the arts, and then trickle their way down to the church. In other words, Christ's bride is usually the last to be aware of or even be infected with the trajectories and propositions of the academic elite. Realizing this trend, it is beneficial for the church to engage the academy (not necessarily fight it) so as to guard the flock of God. This is even more crucial when certain academies are ministry arms of the church that have been called to train, nurture, and raise up pastors and scholars for the kingdom. Thus, it is no impractical matter for even our small denomination, the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, to invest much care in certain theological discussions.

One matter that has been of great concern to ARPs of all stripes (elders, pastors, laypeople, students, etc.) is the Barthian, or rather Neo-Barthian, tendencies that are increasingly evident at Erskine Theological Seminary. Our goal in this brief, informal article is not to hurl accusations but rather to examine the potential implications of the presence of a Barthian influence at our denominational seminary. While Neo-Orthodoxy has been the biggest concern and hot button issue, I wish to look at the age-old question of Barth's "denial" of the charge of universalism which was originally made famous in the dialogue between Barth and G.C. Berkouwer.¹ After a summary of the basic issue/problem, I will note some practical concerns this has for our denomination.

While no one (especially a seminary student) is able to justly summarize Barth's doctrine of election as it relates to universalism in a couple of paragraphs, the following is a basic summary. In his freedom, God has chosen to look upon

¹ G.C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956). In this work Berkouwer levels the "charge" of universalism at Karl Barth's theology.

rejected humanity through the person and activity of his Son, Jesus Christ. Through his narrative of redemption, Christ himself takes on the rejection that belonged to humanity so that he is the rejected one. Yet, since Christ is the Elector as well as the elect one, humanity no longer is rejected but is also within the circle of election. Christ's death is universal and efficacious in this regard.² Barth states, "The rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in his love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects as their Head and in their place."³

Since Christ is both Elect and Reprobate in the place of "all men" one can see why those like Berkouwer would smell the aroma of universalism. While acknowledging that Barth had already denied the accusation,⁴ Berkouwer contends that Barth's rejection of universalism is not convincing given his theological method. What method does Barth employ that Berkouwer finds problematic? Part of it is his Christocentric "objectivism" whereby Christ not only fulfills "the divine initiative toward fallen humanity, but also fulfills the human requirement of response in faith and conversion...The difference, therefore, between the Christian and the non-Christian is not that the non-Christian is outside of Christ, but that he or she lacks the knowledge of reconciliation in Christ, and the obedience that flows from it."⁵ Barth says,

But Christians know and can declare what it is that belongs to them and all other men in Jesus Christ...That is something we cannot say of others. It is not that they lack Jesus Christ and in Him the being of man reconciled to God. What they lack is obedience to His Holy Spirit, eyes and ears and hearts which are open to Him, experience and knowledge of the conversion of man to God which took place in Him.⁶

Thus, we see why one is rationally justified to drawing an initial link between Barth's theology and the doctrine of universalism.

Berkouwer was answered with Barth's reiterated denial of universalism, or at least the form of universalism leveled against him by Berkouwer. One might think that Barth's denial would end the discussion on his views concerning the

² Oliver Crisp, "On Barth's Denial of Universalism", *Themelios* 29/1 (2003): 18-29. Crisp concludes that while Barth denies adherence to universalism one may logically deduce that Barth's system entails necessary universalism.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, trans G.W. Bromiley et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957), 123.

⁴ Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace*, 266.

⁵ William B. Evans, *Imputation and Impartation: Union with Christ in American Reformed Theology* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster 2008), 245.

⁶ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, 92-93.

subject, but things are never quite that simple in the theological world (especially with Barth).

Barth's dismissal of Berkouwer's charge lies in the fact that universalism "is the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a principle, rather than any limitation of the salvific work of God."⁷ Anyone remotely familiar with the theology of Barth sees his reasoning here. In rejecting absolute decrees of God as the starting point in dogmatics in favor of the revelation of the person and activity of Jesus Christ, Barth sees the doctrine/principle of universalism as diminishing God's freedom in Christ to save an elect people for his glory. The terms/phraseology of universalism did not sit well with Barth or the central thrust of his massive *Church Dogmatics*.

Such a response may harbor frustration and confusion with Reformed evangelicals seeking to understand Barth. He did not wish to work with standard systematic categories as employed in our own confessional context. This is not to say he did not employ categories, as Barth's response to Berkouwer rests on his doctrine of election, which Bruce McCormack believes is Barth's greatest theological contribution.⁸

While one may conclude that there is no entailment of universalism in Barth's doctrine of election, Barth's lack of denial of the possible telos of universalism demonstrates the existence of a contingent universalism. God's freedom and "friendliness" in Jesus Christ makes it possible (one may rationally argue *very probable*) that universalism is the end result of God's work through Christ in history.

What is the ARPC to gather from this discussion? What implications are there for those who remain concerned about the theological disruption at Erskine Theological Seminary? I contend that these issues are potentially vital for the spiritual health and wealth of our denomination. There are three reasons for this. First, while Reformed evangelicals would embrace God's freedom and sovereignty in being able to bring about universalism, we believe that God has revealed through holy Scripture that his wrath will remain on those who are reprobate.⁹ Yet, Barth's theological method is not always concerned (or not even largely concerned) with the propositional content in God's inerrant Word (it is well-documented Barth's denial of inerrancy). Such a method leads to disastrous results regarding theological and

⁷ Tom Greggs, "'Jesus is Victor': Passing the Impasse of Barth on universalism", STJ 60(2): 199.

⁸ Bruce L. McCormack, "Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology" in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge, 2004), 92.

⁹ I refer you to Rev. Gary L. Jones' article in *ARPTalk*(9) "Why Universalism is Incompatible with Biblical Christianity".

ethical issues.¹⁰

Second, this embrace of Barth without a systematic critique based on our confessional and scriptural heritage may actually lead to embracing universalism within our Reformed, evangelical body. Richard M. Weaver has shown us that ideas have consequences,¹¹ and so it is not surprising that some of those who follow Barth’s theological content and method end up leaning toward or wholly embracing universalism.¹² Finally, we must not think that the issue of Barth’s view of revelation and his doctrine of election are disconnected. As I noted in my first point, the overarching method of Barth influences the different categories of his theology. Thus, one who wishes to hold to Barth’s doctrine of election may end up embracing his view on revelation given his Christ centric “objectivism.”¹³ Our denomination took measures at the 2008 General Synod meeting to embrace the doctrine of Scriptural inerrancy. I would venture to say that reading and gleaning from Barth on the doctrines written in this article may go down the path of rejecting inerrancy and clinging to Neo-Orthodoxy.¹⁴

Let me conclude by saying that I am not against professors or pastors who desire to see their students or congregants dialogue/interact with Barth on some level. My years as a philosophy and theology student at Erskine College saw many dealings with Barth in the classroom, and we didn’t condemn every word of his works. Even at Reformed Theological Seminary in Charlotte I have been blessed to have one of the greatest Reformed minds in the world, Dr. Douglas Kelly, encourage us to interact with Barth. Yet, in all these circumstances, I’ve been given the tools to critique Barth and embrace the doctrine of Scripture’s authority as best expressed in the Reformed faith. As one who embraces the theological and confessional heritage of Reformed Presbyterianism, I would be wary of a pastor or scholar who

¹⁰ This is not to say that Scripture is **only** filled with propositional content. The emphasis on the narrative, or story, of God’s redemption of a people in his Son is theologically valid and sound. Balance among the multiple types of content in Scripture is key. I would like to thank Dr. Robert J. Cara for this insight in a lecture from his “Acts & Romans” class this past January.

¹¹ Weaver, Richard M., *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948).

¹² According to Princeton Seminary Systematic Theology Ph.D. student David W. Congdon, Princeton Neo-Barthian theologians Bruce McCormack and George Hunsinger are both universalists. See <http://fireandrose.blogspot.com/2006/10/evangelical-universalist-interview.html>.

¹³ I am presupposing here that Barth’s doctrine of revelation and Scripture is not compatible with either a Reformed or evangelical theology.

¹⁴ I recall the testimony of an ARP minister who told me of his experience at a Presbyterian Church (USA)-affiliated university where he encountered higher criticism and Neo-Orthodoxy that were embraced by his professors. This minister is now an inerrantist, but he went through a period of questioning the authoritative nature of God’s Word.

is connected to our Synod who reads and quotes Barth without explicitly providing a substantive critique of Barth within the framework of Reformed Orthodoxy. This is why the issues at Erskine Theological Seminary, I believe, regarding the Presbyterian Church (USA), Princeton Theological Seminary, Barth, inerrancy, etc., need to be examined by our Synod in the near future.

Thank you for reading *ARPTalk(13)*.