

Barthian Beginnings

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We begin a series of lectures on the subject of neoorthodoxy. And as we turn to this series, we find ourselves today in a situation which has changed. There was a day when one might talk about liberalism and fundamentalism and somehow or other find all of us either in this one field or another. Today, however, we must mention a third possibility. Some are neither liberal nor orthodox but find themselves in a third position, a third “ism,” we might call it: Barthianism.

It all began about fifty years ago in a little Swiss village. And if we are to understand this movement and to comprehend it as a very powerful movement in our day, we will have to look at it historically. As we said, it all began about fifty years ago in a little Swiss village. A young pastor by the name of Karl Barth tells us that he was like the custodian of a church who was going to open a window. And as he was making his way to open the window, he stumbled and fell and got hold of the bell rope. He pulled the bell rope and rang the bell and made a sound which was heard all over Europe. What he means is that what happened to him as a comparatively small thing suddenly blossomed into a movement which was to influence the whole Christian church of our day. We must remember that we are dealing here with a theological movement. There is no particular church which we might call the neoorthodox church. There is no particular church which we might call a Barthian church. We are not talking about a particular school or a particular organization, but we are speaking about a theological movement. And no one was more surprised than the young pastor himself at the beginning of this movement. What he calls his discovery of the strange new world behind the Bible was indeed the beginning of this movement.

This movement, which arose out of the discovery, has been called by various names. What we, for lack of a better name, are now calling neoorthodoxy has by some been called the new modernism. It was also often called in its earlier days crisis theology.

Some have called it dialectical theology. Over the years, the mainstream of this neoorthodox movement has more and more acquired the name of Barthianism. And perhaps we shall do well even to call it Barthianism as we discuss it in this particular context. Karl Barth certainly did not wish that it should be called by his name. However, across the years as his contributions to the movement became more and more abundant, there definitely arose a large body of theology which may be called Barthianism. And in some rather general way, the vast multitude of his disciples who may now be found in many lands and in many churches and who have often become teachers in many seminaries not only in Europe but also in America and other lands, may be called Barthians.

For all practical purposes, we might best describe our study then as a course in the teaching and doctrines of Barth. We shall see that this is due not only to the fact that Barth is in every way the main figure in the movement but also to the consideration that it is Barth who in very deed has done the most profound and eloquent work as a spokesman of the new theology. Even his most bitter critics have had to admit that we are here dealing with a giant amongst the theologians. And he is a giant not only amongst the theologians in some general sense, but he is a giant as an originator. Not only may he be called the greatest theologian of the twentieth century, but he has often also been compared with such significant men of stature as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, or a Calvin and a Luther.

The recent death of Barth has indeed brought to an end a long and very influential career as one of the most attractive professors of theology that ever lived. One aspect of his growing influence was no doubt his long career as a teacher of theologians. And these theologians were in turn to become the theological professors in the seminaries of many churches and of many countries. Some of them are in Japan. Others of them are in Indonesia. One of Barth's own sons is teaching in Jakarta. Another of Barth's sons is teaching in the United States in a theological seminary. And although Barthianism may be looked at as a kind of revival, we must not think of its leader as a revivalist in the pattern or image of a Billy Graham or of our American revivalists. Barth did make the pages of *Time* magazine in 1962. And in that sense, a kind of popularity has been achieved by him. But his popularity is strictly that of a theologian. He may be called a reformer of theological thought.

Perhaps this is a good time to say a word about the importance of the theologian. And here we are thinking of a man like Barth in his influence upon the world and in his influence upon the churches. Why is theology so significant for the churches? Here I do not mean either the influence of that dominant theologian, as he often has his hand on the control of the church machinery. We know that in America, there are theologians or professors who control the organizations of the churches and the various councils and perhaps have a great control upon the various councils in the community or the world council. Although Barth had something to do in a very practical way with the founding of the confessional church in Germany in 1933 and took a very active part in the writing of the Confession of Barmen or the Barmen resolution; and although he did at times take a part in the ecumenical movement and spoke at the World Council of Churches, he never was nor wanted to be a church politician or in any sense an ecclesiastical administrator.

His work, therefore, is a work of revival strictly in the area of theological thinking. And for some people, this is the same as saying that he was really out of the place where the action is. Of course, it is possible to have a theology which somehow or other has lost touch with reality. And sometimes this seems as true of the difficult paradoxes of modern thinkers as it was of the speculation of old scholastics. On the other hand, in the true sense of the word, there is nothing so important for the church and for its message to the world today as a good understanding of its theology. Again, this is true not only for the obvious reason that the theologians trained and influenced the pastors and the leaders of the churches. There is also a stream from which the church drinks, and this stream is often purified or poisoned above the point at which the masses are reached. In other words, things are being argued out and things are being taught which influence the thinking of the church whether it realizes it or not. And many a man today is being influenced by Barthianism, and he doesn't realize it. Barthianism is not thus to be considered always in its purest form or in its most obvious form.

But neoorthodoxy has made its impact and is making its impact. It has made its impact upon those churches that are creedally orientated and had especially a weakening influence upon their creedal commitments. It has made its influence upon liberal churches and has often had in them a corrective force. It has made some influence no doubt in those churches that were committed to the Bible and perhaps has had in them a liberalizing force.

Dr. Fred Klooster, in his little book on the significance of Barth's theology, calls Barth the most influential theologian of this generation. He not only substantiates this statement with the testimony of many prominent religious leaders who were deeply influenced by Barthianism, he further elucidates this statement by showing that the influence here referred to is of a most radical character. In other words, there is a theology which does affect our thinking and our life. Barth's theology is of that character. There are theological reformers, and there are theological repeaters. And most of us are theological followers, but Barth is a theological reformer and a theological innovator. In this sense, he in some way compares with men like Luther, who were not only carrying on a church reform and a personal reform in their piety and life but who were definitely carrying on a theological reformation. Luther was trying to get at very deep theological principles, and we know that Calvin likewise was committed not only to an external reform of certain evils in the church but is to be remembered because of his great theological reformation. Barth's theology is indeed such a reforming theology.

If someone is truly Barthian, that is if Barth's theology is for him not merely a plaything or a retreat into an ivory tower, this Barthian theology will be a decisive thing in all his approaches to Scripture and to the church and to all the various other aspects of Christian thinking. There is a spiritual battlefield, in other words, which in many ways seems to lie altogether in the rare and high atmosphere above the clouds and which is hidden from the eyes of the average man. And yet the things that are being carried on there are of utmost importance to the church. Sometimes men like Barth seem only to be carrying on their battle far away from the actual scenes and conflicts of life. Anyone who has the patience to read through the thousands of pages of fine print in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* is tempted to ask again and again, what has this to do with reality? What is this really all about? And yet we must not suffer from an illusion that because Barth talks in difficult terms and on a very intellectual level, that therefore Barthianism does not have its impact on our practical life.

The difficulty to understand Barth becomes obvious. This is especially true when the long discussion of some point seems to lead us to a place where we do not want to go. And undoubtedly many of us, as we begin our study of neoorthodoxy, will find ourselves being led in directions or to subjects which we do not want to pursue. Let us be frank.

Our first and even further contact with much of this neoorthodoxy is to be rebuffed by its paradoxes and difficulties of thought. Again, this is especially true when we begin to suspect that we are dealing here with positions with which we cannot agree. For this very reason, one of the objectives of this series of studies will be to try to discover at every point what we may call the practical relevancy or significance of Barth's theology. We may learn much from those with whom we do not fully agree.

And let it be said in passing, that while all of us like to learn things which we ourselves can accept, appropriate, and use in our work, other men around us may be accepting and using very different ideas than we use. Again, there is always a temptation to only seek that theology and those thoughts which we can apply in our sermons or which we can use in some little talk. Today we are trying to get beyond this, and we are trying to make a more profound study of the matter of neoorthodoxy. If sometimes we cannot respect the ideas of others because we hold them to be untrue, let us not fool ourselves into thinking that these ideas are of no importance. In other words, a theology which I may not appreciate and certainly with which I do not fully agree, might be the very theology which today is shaping the life and the mind of the Christian church round about me. And if I am to deal relevantly and knowledgeably with the church and with other Christian people round about me, I will have to be acquainted with what they are thinking. Theology is, therefore, not always a comfort. And we study theology, the theology of others, sometimes because it may become for us a threat and a danger.

Let us remember that Barthianism began in a very practical way. We all know the story of Luther in the monastery. There is a kind of parallel between Barth and this reformer. The parallel does not hold at every point, and yet we cannot understand him unless we understand that something similar was taking place in Barth as was taking place in Luther in his monastery and in his lecture room in Wittenberg Seminary and University. The question for the young monk was, how can I be saved? By the grace of God, Luther found his answer in the Bible. And he found his answer in the epistle to the Romans. In 1911, Karl Barth was appointed pastor to his second charge in the Reformed Church of Switzerland. It was in the small village of Safenwil that he spent ten momentous years. And this young pastor, like Luther, had a very real problem. From the wrestling with this problem, and the subsequent answer that he was able to give to it, sprang the movement with which we are now concerned.

Perhaps it is significant that as far as I have been able to determine, the problem was never stated as, what can I do to be saved? Perhaps this problem was disturbing the heart of Barth, and he was personally concerned in this matter. Later he often gives a testimony about what happened to him; and no doubt something in his heart was also craving the certainty of the grace of God. Thus at heart, the problem may have been very close to the problem of Luther. However, the statement of his problem is somewhat different. It is not, what can I do to be saved? But his problem is rather stated, how can I be a preacher? Why should this young preacher have had this particular problem? Why should he be asking, how is it possible for me to preach? Any of us evangelical pastors could immediately assure him that there is an answer to this question and that the answer is not far to seek. For most of us it is very clear that we must preach the gospel, or to put it another way, we must preach the Bible. But things apparently were not that simple for this perplexed pastor. And to understand the whole movement, we must understand the complexity in which he found himself.

To comprehend Barth's predicament, we must realize that he had really lost the Bible. Surely he had Bibles enough. And in his ministerial training, he had learned to read both Greek and Hebrew. And by the way, he could use them very efficiently and knew them very well. And yet he was like many of his fellow preachers of that place and day, for he had really lost the Word of God. You and I must stop for a moment to consider the sad plight in which he found himself. Not only had he lost the Word of God, but he had to preach. And here he was faced week after week with this problem, how can I mount the pulpit? How can I preach to this people? How can I say something which is really the Word of God when I have lost the Word of God? Modernism had robbed him of the one thing which he should have been preaching. It had brought him to the pulpit with no real message to preach.

For those of us who know something of the history of German theology in the nineteenth century, it is not too difficult to understand how Barth got into his predicament. Barth's father, Fritz Barth, has been pictured for us as a rather conservative or fairly evangelical Reformed minister who spent a good deal of his time as theological professor at the University of Basel where Barth was later to teach. I do not know too much about his father. He tells us that Fritz Barth expressed concern about his son, for his son was studying theology and wanted to study his theology with the more radical and liberal theologians of his day.

The son did not heed his father's advice but rather sought his education amongst the liberal, German universities. Here he entered a world which had rejected, in the name of higher criticism, the supernatural character of the Scriptures and its revelation. The vacuum that had been left by the skepticism of the Bible was largely filled in the manner of Schleiermacher and others by an appeal to human religious experience. Since there was no revelation but man only had human ideas and human thought, man had to depend on his human thought. And so the preacher had to depend upon his human study, either his study of religious experience or his own religious experience.

Men sought further to teach and to preach about the historical Jesus particularly as an interesting man and a very helpful character study. In order that one might imitate this good man, sermons were made about the historical Jesus. Others stressed a kind of social gospel, and this became a substitute to ministry for the gospel of Jesus Christ. These held that the ideal of forming the kingdom of God on Earth was the very heart and essence of the Scripture, that it was a kind of ethical guide, and that it would help us in our social life. Salvation was for this world. Salvation was a thing to be achieved by various political and economic programs; and thus men preached either religious experience, historical character study, or the ideal of an earthly and social kingdom of God.

As we know, liberalism has often carried on for some time with a show of success by using the pseudo-gospel. And this had been going on for many years in Switzerland. One cannot say that the churches were exactly booming, but people were still attending the churches. Young ministers were being graduated from the seminary, and the whole show was going on. And apparently everything was fine. The young Barth and his fellow pastors were doing this very thing. Barth even strengthened himself in his position by becoming a socialist and, in the zeal and enthusiasm of his socialism, attacking what he considered the social evils of the village in which he lived. But this did not satisfy him. He was still haunted every time he preached by the question, what must I say? How can I preach? As the years went on, the problem became more pressing.

Then something happened. He made a twofold discovery. He was struck by the foolishness and the impotence, the radical evil of the world in which he was living. Things were not right. They were all wrong.

But human thought had not discovered this evil. Human thought had merely put its veneer of goodness upon this evil and said this was the way to walk. However, revelation was to speak to him of sin and judgment. Revelation alone could make known to him the evil of the world and the gospel. The world which had been trying to save itself had really plunged itself further and further into the depths of despair. Thus began for Barth what is known as the theology of crisis. He recognized a crisis of our civilization. And we must take special note of this word *crisis*, for he is beginning now to move toward a crisis theology. The crisis of our civilization came home to him most forcefully in the time of the First World War. Of course he was in Switzerland, and Switzerland was not particularly involved in the war. But he had been a student in Germany, and the crisis was there in Germany. Germany was carrying on this fearful war. But the crisis was not primarily the tragedy of the devastation and destruction which took place in the war. This was a real enough crisis for the world. The real shock for the theologian lay elsewhere.

If man, he asked, really is so good and only had in his own way to build a Christian civilization, how come he was now really destroying himself? Was there not something more radically wrong with man than the mere effect? Had the whole program not been wrong from the very start? Were not the very ideas beyond the whole program wrong? And when in August of 1914, ninety-three leading German intellectuals (including some of the professors whom Barth held very dear) came out with a proclamation in defense of the policies of the German Kaiser and in full support of the war, Barth discovered that many of those who had been his leaders had gone astray. How could he any longer follow the ethics and the theology and the gospel of man whose way led to this sort of thing? How was it possible that they did not know that man was really depraved? How was it possible that they were not more concerned with the fundamental evil in the heart of man?

It is doubtful, however, whether Barth would have read the events of the time as the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of modern Christianity and modern theology if he had not been reading a Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard. Somehow or other, Barth became acquainted with this Danish philosopher who a half century earlier had looked upon the situation in which he lived, a situation of bland and moralistic and liberalized Christianity, as a great display of *phariseism*. It took the penetrating view of this man, Kierkegaard, to see that the world in which he lived was basically also only a whited sepulcher.

Søren Kierkegaard became very critical of the situation. He saw that men were not preaching the true gospel of Jesus Christ. And as he looked at this matter, he began to develop the dialectical approach, or what is known as a crisis approach. For Kierkegaard, the very crisis in which our civilization finds itself is the only door to hope. By this again is meant not merely the situation in which we find ourselves; but the awareness that we are in a hopeless situation is the beginning of hope. As Barth studied Kierkegaard, he began to recognize that the sickness of our civilization and especially the sickness of the church itself was, as the gloomy Dane had so aptly put it, “a sickness unto death.”

In the writings of the Russian novelist Dostoevsky, Barth had also discovered a similar critical analysis of the evil of our so-called Christianity and Christian world. For those who have always believed in a sinful and fallen humanity, it is particularly hard to understand what a tremendous shock this discovery of the basic depravity of all men must have been. Of course, for us man is sick, and man is sick unto death. But the world of liberalism in which Barth lived knew nothing of this, recognized nothing of this. It felt that if only man could be man, if only man could go his humanistic way in his humanistic intelligence and in his humanistic understanding and could rid himself of much of the superstition and tradition of the past, man could save himself. But now we begin to see man is sick. And as Barth read Søren Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky, he also began to study Calvin and Luther. And here he began to find something of the same message. Man is sinful. Man is sick unto death. The illusions of modernism that man was good and can climb up to God by his efforts have only added to the sickness. The church they had built was no church, and the gospel which they were preaching was only human pride. Thus the very god of the modernist is not the living God but an idol. This is the crisis. This is the crisis which Barth faced. By nature we are without God and without hope in the world. But the crisis does not remain merely crisis. I think I can insert that in the next lecture.