

Prayer: the chief exercise of faith

The centrality of prayer in faith and obedience
according to Karl Barth

by

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**For my mother and father
from whom I learned
to say NO
and YES!**

**With gratitude to
my wife
for her love, patience and sacrifice**

and

**my supervisor
who always had more faith in me
than I had in myself.**

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Abbreviations

Due to many references to Karl Barth's works, the following abbreviations have been added to ease the task of referencing.

CD – *Church Dogmatics* (Volumes are indicated by Roman numbers, parts by decimal numbers, half-volumes by letters. Example: *CD IV,3a* – *Church Dogmatics. Volume 4. Part 3. First Half-Volume.*)

CfG - *Call for God. New Sermons from Basel Prison*

CL – *The Christian Life. Church Dogmatics IV,4. Lecture Fragments*

CSC - *Community, State, and Church*

CtD – *The Call to Discipleship*

DiO – *Dogmatics in Outline*

ET – *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction*

FT - *Final Testimonies*

FQI – *Anselm: Fides Quaerens Intellectum. Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the context of his Theological Scheme*

G – *Gespräche. 1959-1962*

GD - *The Göttingen Dogmatics. Instruction in the Christian Religion*

GiA - *God in Action*

GHN - *God Here and Now*

HC - *Learning Jesus Christ through the Heidelberg Catechism*

HG – *The Humanity of God*

HS&CL – *The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life. The Theological Basis of Ethics*

KB – *Karl Barth. Inhaltsverzeichnis. Bd. 1-14.* (Unpublished: Heidelberg University.)

KG&SG - *The Knowledge of God and the Service of God according to the Teaching of the Reformation. Recalling the Scottish Confession of 1560. The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen in 1937 and 1938*

P – *Prayer. 50th Anniversary Edition*

Pn - *Karl Barth. Predigten 1954 – 1967*

P&P - *Prayer and Preaching*

R – *The Epistle to the Romans / Der Römerbrief*

RotD - *The Resurrection of the Dead*

T&K – *Die Theologie und die Kirche. Gesammelte Vorträge / 2. Band.*

WG&WM - *The Word of God and the Word of Man*

Summary

This dissertation is an attempt to show the centrality of prayer in the Christian life, in faith and obedience, according to Karl Barth.

It is argued that the Christian life was not the focus of Barth's theology. The focus of his theology was the divine reality upon which the Christian life is grounded and in which it continually finds its own reality.

In its correspondence to and dependence upon God's reality, God's Word and work, the Christian life is for Barth both faith and obedience, and at the core of faith and obedience, it is prayer. The inseparable relationship between faith, obedience and prayer, is not due to the nature of humanity, the Christian, or even the Christian life as such, but due to the divine reality which gives faith, obedience and prayer its reality.

Faith and obedience are inseparably related. Both are equally impossible for humanity by its own power and capacity. It is only by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that humanity is justified and sanctified, thus turning its unbelief into faith and its disobedience into obedience.

The unity of faith and obedience lies therein that they both form part of the one event of the reconciliation between God and humanity, which is accomplished in Jesus Christ. Both form part of the Self-revelation of this reconciliation by God's Word. The reconciliation between God and humanity, revealed by the Word of God, does not depend on faith and obedience, but is effective by its own power and grace, which brings both faith and obedience simultaneously into existence.

The reality of faith and obedience is a hidden reality, a divine reality, an eschatological reality, which is not externally observable, but can only be believed in faith, to which we are moving in obedience, and which we ask for in prayer.

Faith and prayer are also inseparably related. Faith, knowledge of God, is a personal response to God's gracious and miraculous Self-revelation, which humanity cannot produce by its own power. And therefore faith is to pray.

Faith is always praying, for God's Self-revelation never becomes the possession of the believer, but is always given anew, thus necessitating faith to always ask anew for God's Self-revelation.

Faith knows God in personal response, knows God in asking always anew, and therefore knows God in prayer. Faith only has knowledge of God by talking *to* God, by responding in prayer to God's prior Self-revelation to faith, and by asking for God to reveal God-self always anew.

Obedience and prayer are also inseparably related. Both obedience and prayer exist in the freedom of being bound unconditionally to God's action and Word. Freedom is not freedom from obligation, but the freedom of living within the claim of God's lordship over our lives.

The freedom of obedience is the freedom to act in reaction to the action of God. It is the liberation from pondering over different possibilities, and the freedom for living in the one and only path laid before it, the path of obedience.

The freedom of prayer is the freedom to respond in correspondence to the Word of God, by which it is addressed and claimed. It is the liberation from all other voices and claims, and the freedom to give witness to the one and only voice which claims its life in totality.

Faith, prayer and obedience are inseparably related. All three form part of the one Christian life lived under the Lord, who is Lord over the whole of creation, and who is Lord over the whole of the Christian life. In faith, obedience and prayer the Christian lives in correspondence to God's lordship over the world, the church and the individual.

Becoming a Christian, means believing in Jesus Christ. It means continually looking away from oneself, to Jesus Christ, who justifies humanity despite its unbelief, despite its pride, despite its faith in itself. Faith discards trust in itself, and trusts Jesus Christ completely.

Being a Christian, means obeying Jesus Christ. It means to surrender to Jesus Christ as the only Lord whom one is to obey in life and in death. As Jesus Christ sanctifies disobedient and slothful humanity, obedience is the freedom to rise and follow Jesus.

Acting as a Christian, means praying with Jesus Christ. It means to ask in the Name of Jesus Christ, in the power and presence of Jesus Christ, in the grace and lordship of Jesus Christ, that we will be able to believe what we cannot believe by our own power, and that we will be able to obey what we cannot obey by our own power.

Opsomming

Hierdie proefskrif is 'n poging om aan te dui dat gebed in die hart staan van die Christelike lewe, in beide geloof en gehoorsaamheid, volgens die teologie van Karl Barth.

In hierdie studie word aangevoer dat die Christelike lewe nie die fokus van Barth se teologie was nie. Die fokus van sy teologie was die Goddelike werklikheid waarop die Christelike lewe gegrond is en vanwaar dit voortdurend 'n eie werklikheid ontvang.

In ooreenstemming met en in afhanklikheid van God se werklikheid, God se Woord en werk, is die Christelike lewe volgens Barth gelyktydig geloof en gehoorsaamheid, en in die kern van geloof en gehoorsaamheid, staan gebed. Die onskeibare verhouding tussen geloof, gehoorsaamheid en gebed, is nie vanweë die aard van die mens, die Christen, of selfs die Christelike lewe in sigself nie, maar vanweë die Goddelike realiteit wat aan geloof, gehoorsaamheid en gebed hul werklikheid skenk.

Geloof en gehoorsaamheid staan in 'n onskeibare verband tot mekaar. Beide is ewe onmoontlik vir mense in hul eie krag and vermoë. Dit is net deur die genade van God in Jesus Christus, deur die krag van die Heilige Gees, dat die mensdom geregverdig en geheilig word, waardeur ongeloof in geloof, en ongehoorsaamheid in gehoorsaamheid verander word.

Die eenheid van geloof en gehoorsaamheid lê daarin dat beide deel uitmaak van die een gebeurtenis van versoening tussen God en mens, wat in Jesus Christus plaasvind. Beide maak deel uit van die Self-openbaring van hierdie versoening deur God se Woord. Die versoening tussen God en mens, wat die Woord van God openbaar, is nie afhanklik van geloof en gehoorsaamheid nie, maar is effektief in eie krag, deur genade, en dit bring beide geloof en gehoorsaamheid tot stand.

Die werklikheid van geloof en gehoorsaamheid is 'n verborge werklikheid, 'n Goddelike werklikheid, 'n eskatologiese werklikheid, wat nie van buite waarneembaar is nie, maar wat slegs in geloof geglo kan word, waarnatoe ons beweeg in gehoorsaamheid, en waarvoor ons vra in gebed.

Geloof en gebed staan ook in 'n onskeibare verband tot mekaar. Geloof, kennis van God, is 'n persoonlike antwoord op God se genadige en wonderbaarlike Self-openbaring, wat die mens nie in eie krag kan skep nie. En daarom is geloof om te bid.

Geloof bid voortdurend, want God se Self-openbaring raak nooit die besitting van die gelowige nie, maar word altyd opnuut gegee, wat dit noodsaaklik maak vir geloof om altyd opnuut te vra vir God se Self-openbaring.

Geloof ken God deur 'n persoonlike antwoord, deur altyd opnuut te vra, en daarom ken geloof vir God in gebed. Geloof het slegs kennis van God deur *met* God te praat, deur in gebed te antwoord op Gods voorafgaande Self-openbaring aan geloof, en deur vir God te vra om Godself altyd opnuut te openbaar.

Gehoorsaamheid en gebed staan ook in 'n onskeibare verband tot mekaar. Beide gehoorsaamheid en gebed bestaan in die vryheid om onvoorwaardelik gebonde te wees aan God se Woord en werk. Vryheid is nie vryheid van verpligtinge nie, maar die vryheid om te leef binne die aanspraak van God se heerskappy oor ons lewens.

Die vryheid van gehoorsaamheid is die vryheid om aktief op te tree in reaksie op die aksie van God. Dit is om bevry te word van bepeinsing oor verskillende moontlikhede, en die vryheid om te leef vir die een en enigste pad wat voor sigself lê, die pad van gehoorsaamheid.

Die vryheid van gebed is die vryheid om te antwoord in ooreenstemming met die Woord van God, waardeur die mens aangespreek word en in beslag geneem word. Dit is die bevryding van alle ander stemme en aansprake, en die vryheid om te getuig van die een en enigste stem wat die lewe in totaliteit in beslag neem.

Geloof, gehoorsaamheid en gebed is in 'n onskeibare verband tot mekaar. Al drie maak deel uit van die een Christelike lewe wat geleef word onder die Heer, wat Heer is oor die hele skepping en ook oor die Christelike lewe. In geloof, gehoorsaamheid en gebed leef die Christen in ooreenstemming met God se heerskappy oor die wêreld, die kerk en die individu.

Om 'n Christen te word, beteken om te glo. Dit beteken om voortdurend weg te kyk van sigself, na Jesus Christus, wat die mensdom regverdig ten spyte van hul ongeloof, ten spyte van hul trots, ten spyte van hul geloof in hulself. Geloof vertrou nie op sigself nie, maar vertrou Jesus Christus volledig.

Om 'n Christen te wees, beteken om Jesus Christus te gehoorsaam. Dit beteken om sigself oor te gee aan Jesus Christus as die enigste Heer wat gehoorsaam moet word in lewe en in sterwe. Jesus Christus heilig die ongehoorsame en traë mensdom, wat aan die mens die vryheid gee om op te staan en Jesus te volg in gehoorsaamheid.

Om op te tree as 'n Christen, beteken om te bid saam met Jesus Christus. Dit beteken om in die Naam van Jesus Christus, in die krag en teenwoordigheid van Jesus Christus, in die genade en heerskappy van Jesus Christus, te vra dat ons in staat sal wees om te glo wat ons nie self kan glo nie, en dat ons in staat sal wees om te gehoorsaam wat ons nie self kan gehoorsaam nie.

Foreword

a. Question

This dissertation is an attempt to answer the question what Christian faith is according to Karl Barth.

To the questioner, this is a very personal, existential question, born from the struggle to believe. In the theology of Karl Barth, an understanding of Christian faith is sought, which can guide one from the despair of doubt and unbelief, to the hope of faith and life in Christ. If the gospel of Jesus Christ contains good news – which is the meaning of the word “gospel” – what then is this good news to people in a largely modern, secular society, who find it increasingly difficult to believe in God?

In our contemporary society, it would seem that the problem is solved by a complete acceptance and affirmation of the modern anthropocentric worldview. Faith, then, is described in terms of human possibilities, abilities or capacities.

In more conservative or orthodox Christian circles, this could take the form of adherence to the orthodox confessions of faith, or perhaps the acceptance of the literal truth of the Bible in a positivistic way. This would entail a submission to the teaching of the church, a kind of *sacrificium intellectus*, whereby faith is attained. The unwillingness or inability to do this, would be seen as unbelief. Although one can appreciate the close connection between faith and its content, which is indeed to be found in the Bible and the proclamation of the church, the inherent danger is that the faith of the individual, the ability to understand and accept the teaching of the church or the literal truth of the Bible, will become the shibboleth which determines whether the gospel contains good or bad news. Thus faith remains an anthropocentric reality, dependent upon the cognitive ability of the individual to understand, as well as a decision of the will to accept and submit to the teaching of the church.

In more pietistic or charismatic Christian circles, the anthropocentric understanding of faith could perhaps entail the personal experience of faith of the individual. Faith can be described as an experience, as a feeling, a decision or even as an experience of personal conversion or calling. And although none of these should be denied, this does not solve the problem of faith in God, since faith is still ultimately understood as a human possibility, ability or capacity. Speaking of faith in terms of conversion or calling would certainly come the closest to understanding it in a more theocentric way, but as one lingers longer within these understandings of faith, the question invariably arises whether the words “conversion” or “calling” as it is used within these circles, refer to a divine reality, or rather to a human possibility.

In more liberal religious or secular circles, faith is unapologetically described as a human possibility, ability or capacity. This is understandable, since the attempt to understand faith in relation to God is rather explicitly and intentionally abandoned, and the endeavour to describe faith purely in terms of human possibilities, abilities or capacities, is taken up consciously. In the liberal religious sphere this could entail the understanding of faith as a synonym for spirituality. Spirituality is a word that allows faith to be described as a human possibility, ability or capacity for transcendence, without necessarily needing any reference to God or the content of the Christian faith. In secular arenas faith could be described in terms of cultural, historical, sociological, psychological or philosophical categories, thus enabling the questioner to sidestep once again the question of God, in whom this faith is supposedly posited. Although one can appreciate the attempts to view faith in relation to humanity’s desire for transcendence, or how faith is interwoven with cultural, historical,

sociological, psychological or philosophical complexities, we are not any closer to understanding faith in *God*, since faith is still only understood with reference to human possibilities, abilities or capacities.

At this point one might be critical of this stance, by asking why the questioner assumes that faith is *not* a human possibility, ability or capacity. This assumption cannot be made from outside the faith, but it comes from faith itself, according to Karl Barth. It is the endeavour of this dissertation to show that the theology of Karl Barth has pointed to a divine reality, which judges and rejects all human attempts at faith, and which brings faith into existence by divine grace. Thus, admittedly, it is not by pursuing all the possible paths mentioned above, that the questioner wishes to come to a conclusion whether faith can be attained by these pursuits or not. Rather, in following the direction shown by the theology of Karl Barth, the quest for finding a human possibility, ability or capacity of faith will be abandoned, in pursuit of the divine reality by which faith is established. The dissertation will show that according to Karl Barth, it is faith itself that knows the good news of the gospel that faith is not a human possibility, ability or capacity, but the work of divine grace.

Therefore it *is* assumed in advance that faith is not a human possibility, ability or capacity, but a divine reality, based upon the content of faith itself, the gospel of Jesus Christ. But this does not mean that this faith, which is established by God's grace alone, and which is not a human possibility, cannot be explained or made comprehensible. Doing theology as faith seeking understanding, the questioner can give witness to the faith which is brought into existence by God's grace. Standing within the divine reality of faith, the questioner can give a personal, self-involving account of what this faith entails. As a response to what God has done by grace, i.e., as a prayer, the questioner can give an answer to the question what Christian faith is. It will be argued that this is what Karl Barth did and what theology – which is truly *theos-logos*, i.e., God-talk, i.e., not talk about human possibilities, but talk about the divine reality – ought to do.

b. Method

As the questioner undertook the task of answering the question what Christian faith is according to Karl Barth, faith which is not a human possibility but a divine reality, the question (as well as the questioner) was transformed by the answer found in Barth's theology.

The method used to answer this question was a literature study, focused primarily on Barth's own works, and secondarily on works which comment on Barth's works. However, the question was not pursued narrowly, forcing Barth's theology to answer a question which perhaps it did not set out to answer, or to answer it in a way which it did not wish to give an answer.

Barth was averse to singular concepts which dominated and dictated the theological endeavour. The word "faith," especially, was the one word that governed much of the anthropologically centred modern Protestant theology, which Barth directly opposed for the largest part of his theological career. It would have been a misguided effort to single out Barth's usage of the word "faith" and to try to isolate and extract a theology of faith from his theology, which is abstracted from the whole of his thought and life, and which would perhaps be much closer to the modern Protestantism which Barth fought against (Barth, 1956: *CD IV*, 1: 740-741).

Therefore, the subject matter was approached with an openness to the whole of Barth's theology, and with a readiness to let the answer that Barth gave address the question asked (as well as the questioner asking), rather than dictating the answer by the question.

Thus the question (as well as the questioner) was gradually transformed by the force of Barth's theology. Being immersed in the whole of Barth's theology, from his early career to late in his life, two realities emerged which were so narrowly related to Barth's understanding of faith, that it could not be ignored, namely prayer and obedience.

Even at the outset of this research, it was suggested in the research proposal that a possible design and outcome of this dissertation might be that prayer is indeed the epitome of Christian faith. Already in the research proposal it was stated: "A possible design and outcome for my research could be that, since faith is not a human possibility, but divinely given, the most we as humans can do subjectively to remain within the faith that God has given us, is to invoke the presence of God in prayer."

And indeed, as the research progressed, it became clearer and clearer that if the questioner wanted to answer what Christian faith is according to Karl Barth, prayer could not only be central in the outcome, but also had to be central in the design of the dissertation, due to the inseparability of faith and prayer in Barth's theology. Over time it became inevitable to speak of faith and prayer simultaneously, if the dissertation wanted to do justice to Barth's understanding of faith as a divine reality, and to avoid falling into the trap of speaking once more of faith as a human possibility, but only in more elevated, "Barthian" phraseology.

The fact that faith and obedience are inseparably bound to each other in Barth's theology, emerged at a later stage of the research. The genesis of this understanding is still very clear to the questioner. It occurred at the Heidelberg University. While reading from beginning to end through Karl Barth's essays, lectures, newspaper articles, interviews and sermons, organised chronologically and bound together in 14 unpublished volumes under the title: *Karl Barth. Inhaltsverzeichnis*, it was almost impossible to read the word "Glaube" without the word "Gehorsam" being used in the very same sentence. With almost annoying consistency Barth would speak of "faith and obedience" or the "obedience of faith." So much so, that it became impossible to comprehend what Barth said about faith, without comprehending its unity with obedience in Barth's thought. And related to the unity of faith and obedience, it also became abundantly clear that Barth spoke of justification and sanctification in a similar inseparable unity. While the questioner did not envision at the outset to embark on a study of Barth's ethics, and while this dissertation is not an explanation of Barth's ethics as such, the unity in Barth's theology between dogmatics and ethics, justification and sanctification, faith and obedience, had to become central in the design and approach, in order to give an accurate account of Barth's understanding of what Christian faith is.

Once this discovery was made, it soon became apparent that not only is faith and prayer, as well as faith and obedience, inseparably related in Barth's theology, but also obedience and prayer. While at first Barth's theology was perhaps viewed too narrowly by the questioner through the lens of the question what Christian faith is, now that the unity of faith and obedience was better understood, it became much easier to see the relation, not only between faith and prayer, but also between obedience and prayer. For instance, whereas the centrality of prayer, of invocation of God, in Barth's unfinished ethics of reconciliation, published posthumously under the title *The Christian Life*, was already clear to the questioner, suddenly it became (almost embarrassingly) clear that what Barth was addressing when he was speaking about invocation of God and the Our Father prayer, was the *ethics* of reconciliation, the *Christian life*.

Thus the design and approach of the dissertation were gradually transformed by Barth's theology itself. The passage that helped the questioner to make this new understanding concrete in the structure of the dissertation, was Barth's discussion of "The Christian under the Universal Lordship of God the Father" in the doctrine of creation of his *Church Dogmatics*. There Barth stated that faith is just as inseparably bound to obedience and prayer, and obedience to faith and prayer, and prayer to faith and obedience, as the three modes of being of the triune God are bound to each other, with clear distinctions between them, and yet with a unity that can never be separated. If on the one hand, these aspects of the Christian life were confused with each other, or the one consumed by the other, by not understanding the differentiation between them, or if on the other hand, they were isolated and abstracted from each other, we would commit a "modalistic heresy" according to Barth (Barth, 1960: *CD, III,3*: 246).

Whereas the suggested title of this dissertation in the research proposal was: "The impossibility of faith: A critical study of Barthian theology," it now changed to: "Prayer: the chief exercise of faith. The centrality of prayer in faith and obedience according to Karl Barth."

c. Structure

The chapters of the dissertation flowed from this understanding of the inseparable unity between faith, obedience and prayer:

1. Introduction: Why prayer?
2. Faith and obedience
3. Faith and prayer
4. Obedience and prayer
5. Faith and obedience and prayer
6. Conclusion: Prayer: the chief exercise of faith

Chapter 1: Introduction: Why prayer?

In the introduction it is explained why prayer has become the central part, the focal point of the dissertation. The researcher's quest to give an account of Karl Barth's understanding of Christian faith as a divine reality, rather than a human possibility, has not been abandoned or substituted by the question of what Christian prayer is. This dissertation does not wish to answer the question what Christian prayer is, as such.

What is shown by this study, is that in the theology of Karl Barth, prayer is the chief exercise of faith; prayer is the central element at the core of faith and obedience. In prayer, Barth said, we believe what we cannot believe by our own possibility, and we obey what cannot obey by our own power. In prayer, the divine reality of faith and obedience, overcomes the human impossibility of faith and obedience.

But already in the introduction it is also explained that it is not as if prayer is the new human possibility, overcoming the human impossibility of faith and obedience. "In prayer," for Karl

Barth, means “in Jesus Christ,” and it means “by the miracle and power of the Holy Spirit.” It is not the qualities of prayer which make it the chief exercise of faith, the centre of faith and obedience, but the fact that in prayer we are poor and empty-handed, asking God for everything we need in order to believe and obey.

Chapter 2: Faith and obedience

In the second chapter we move on to faith and obedience, that are impossible for humanity in Barth’s view. The three parts in this chapter are entitled:

2.1 The impossibility of faith and obedience

2.2 The unity of faith and obedience

2.3 The reality of faith and obedience

It is argued that the impossibility of faith and obedience that Barth stressed so heavily early in his life, especially in his commentaries on Romans, were never meant to be the last word in his theology. It is not as if Barth said that faith and obedience are impossible in his commentaries on Romans, but later in life changed his mind and said that they are in fact possible. When one reads about the impossibility of faith and obedience early in Barth’s theological career, for instance in *The Epistle to the Romans* or the *Göttingen Dogmatics*, Barth’s intention to press on to the divine reality of faith and obedience is already present. And when one reads what Barth said positively about faith and obedience in the latter parts of the *Church Dogmatics*, for instance in the doctrine of creation or the doctrine of reconciliation, written much later in his life, the impossibility of faith and obedience for humanity is not left behind, but still present.

So when, in the third part of chapter two of this dissertation, the reality of faith and obedience in Barth’s theology is discussed, the first part of chapter two, regarding the impossibility of faith and obedience, is not forgotten, but taken to its full implications.

The second part of chapter two, the unity of faith and obedience, is the hinge between the human impossibility and the divine reality of faith and obedience. It explains the unity of gospel and law in Barth’s theology, of dogmatics and ethics, of justification and sanctification, which necessarily then entails the inseparable unity of faith and obedience. It also addresses Barth’s opposition to a usage of the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms, which enables a division between different aspects or spheres of the Christian life. This ensures that the human impossibility always refers to both faith and obedience, and that the divine reality also always refers to both faith and obedience. Furthermore, in no sphere of life are we entering the realm of human possibilities and leaving behind the realm of divine reality. At all points we remain fully embedded within the human impossibility to believe and obey, and within the divine reality which brings about faith and obedience through the miracle of grace in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Chapter 3: Faith and prayer

In the third chapter the inseparable unity between faith and prayer in Barth’s theology is discussed. In this chapter a new word is introduced: “knowledge,” in the three parts:

3.1 Knowing God personally

3.2 Knowing God always anew

3.3 Knowing God in prayer

This is not the introduction of a new topic, but is due to the fact that Barth did not separate epistemological questions regarding how theology ought to be done, from the dogmatic and ethical content of theology itself. As is discussed in this chapter, epistemology and soteriology cannot be separated from each other in Barth's theology. The epistemological questions of theology cannot be completed before the task of theology itself – of talking about God – is undertaken. Therefore Barth's so-called "Prolegomena to Church Dogmatics," his doctrine of the Word of God, the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, was in fact not a word *before* he undertook his dogmatic task, but was already dogmatics.

It is argued in this chapter that for Barth, faith knows God. And even more, only faith knows God. There is no knowledge of God, or even steps towards knowledge of God, outside complete and total faith. Knowledge of God is relational knowledge, and therefore God can only be known personally, i.e., only be known in the faith which is a personal hearing of the Word of God, a personal receiving of God-self in God's Self-revelation.

The divine reality of faith, the fact that God alone can give God-self to be known by the gracious miracle of faith, means that in Barth's view the epistemological question of knowledge of God cannot be addressed outside the divine reality of faith. The fact that God can only be known because God gives God-self to be known by God's Self-revelation to faith, can only be known in faith. And the fact that God *cannot* be known by any human possibility, ability or capacity, is *also* only revealed by God-self. Both knowledge of God and ignorance of God, the extent and the way in which God can and cannot be known, are both revealed only by God's gracious Self-revelation, known only in the divine reality of faith.

The faith that knows God, according to Barth, is however never the possession of the believer. God does not give God-self to be known in faith once off, but continually. Therefore faith knows God always anew. Believers are at all times completely ignorant of God in our own cognitions, and yet simultaneously we know God completely in God's gracious Self-revelation to faith. Since God is not an idea, but a living Person, God gives God-self in God's Self-revelation never partially, but always fully, and never once off, but always anew.

And that is why God can only be known in the faith which is prayer. A faith which ceases to ask in prayer for God's presence, which ceases to ask always anew that God gives God-self to be known by God's Self-revelation, could not be real faith in Barth's view. While many have noted the central role of knowledge in Barth's understanding of faith, few have explained that the acknowledgment, recognition and confession with which believers know God, according to Barth, are in fact forms of prayer.

Chapter 4: Obedience and prayer

In the fourth chapter the inseparable unity between obedience and prayer in Barth's theology is addressed. Once again a new word is introduced: "freedom," in the four parts of this chapter:

4.1 Freedom to obey

4.2 Freedom to pray

4.3 Freedom to act

4.4 Freedom to respond

Once more, this is not the introduction of a new topic. The word freedom plays a central part in this chapter due to the inseparable relation between obedience and freedom in Barth's theology. It is simply not possible to address Barth's understanding of obedience, if one does not grasp its inseparable unity with Barth's understanding of freedom. For Barth, there is only freedom in obedience. It is only as we act in correspondence to God's action, that we are free. For Barth, true freedom is not freedom from obligation, but freedom for God.

Although the four parts of this chapter cannot be separated from each other, and they overlap each other, there is a logical correlation between the freedom to obey and the freedom to act, as well as between the freedom to pray and the freedom to respond. The freedom to obey is the freedom to act in reaction to God's action. The freedom to pray is the freedom to respond to God's Word. However, for Barth, the distinction between God's Word and God's action, and thus also between our reaction and response, between our obedience and prayer, is almost impossible to differentiate. In a sense, they are different ways of describing the very same reality of the Christian life which corresponds to God's life.

In this chapter the close relationship between *Anrufung* and *Rufung*, between invocation and vocation, between prayer and calling is addressed. Since we are called and claimed by God, we can only be free by obediently responding to that call with a life of prayer. Since God freely addresses us and acts for us, we can only be free by responding to God's Word and reacting to God's action, in a life lived for God, which entails a life lived for our fellow humanity.

The Christian life is a life lived in prayerful response and obedient correspondence to the life of God, who speaks and acts freely for the salvation of humanity. In the obedience of prayer, believers are free from all earthly powers and human causes, and thus free to give a witness to God's saving Word, God's saving action, which alone saves the world and is therefore the only source of hope for the world.

Chapter 5: Faith and obedience and prayer

In the fifth chapter the inseparable unity in Barth's understanding between all three aspects of the Christian life – faith and obedience and prayer – is addressed. The chapter is divided into four parts:

5.1 Living under the Lord

5.2 Faith: becoming a Christian

5.3 Obedience: being a Christian

5.4 Prayer: acting as a Christian

In the first part it is shown that for Barth the whole of the Christian life, in its totality, is lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Christian is in no way a better creature than any other human being, but lives a life in correspondence to the Lord of creation. And this life, which corresponds to God's reign over creation and over all human beings, is a life of faith and obedience and prayer.

Christians are not able to help ourselves or to help other human beings or the world. Only God can help us, the church, the whole of humanity and the world. We do, however, participate in Christ's Lordship by giving witness, in faith and obedience and prayer, to the fact that the world and all of humanity are helped, just as we, the church, are helped, by the reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ.

Faith, according to Barth, becoming a Christian, entails abandoning always anew the prideful attempts to help ourselves, to save ourselves, to justify ourselves, and to allow Jesus Christ ever anew to help and save us, to be our only justification.

We cannot believe by our own power, and yet Barth maintained that we are the agents of faith. By the grace, power and miracle of the Holy Spirit, what Jesus Christ does for us, is acknowledged, recognised and confessed in us.

Obedience, according to Barth, being a Christian, means serving Jesus Christ as the only Lord we must hear and obey in life and in death. It is to be liberated from the slothful disobedience of inaction and indecision, to a life of freely participating in God's action for humanity and the world.

Christian obedience is the liberation from all powers and principalities which make false claims on our lives, attempting to usurp Jesus Christ as the only Lord of heaven and earth. It is the freedom to serve Jesus Christ alone as the only Lord over humanity, the only Lord over the whole of life – not only over the church but also over the state – the only Lord over every aspect of our lives.

Christian obedience is the freedom granted to pray and ask in faith that God's will be done on earth as in heaven, also in our lives, since we are not able to do God's will by our own will and power.

Prayer, according to Barth, is the Christian act wherein we ask God to help us to believe what we cannot believe by our own power and to obey what we cannot obey by our own power. It is the primary act we are allowed and called to do in faith and obedience.

Prayer, said Barth, is to ask for everything we need to believe and obey. But we do not ask for everything because we have nothing. We ask for everything, because everything needed to believe and obey is already given to us. Because God already answers, because God already gives, because God already helps, because God already saves, we are allowed and obligated to ask everything from God.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: Prayer: the chief exercise of faith

In conclusion it is argued that this dissertation shows that although the Christian life was not the focus, or a separate topic, of Karl Barth's theology, it is precisely for this reason that Barth gave such a compelling account of what the Christian life looks like, when it is understood as a divine reality, as a life lived in correspondence to the living God, as a life lived in reaction to the acting God, as a life lived in response to the speaking God.

Christian faith, according to Barth, is a life lived under the all-encompassing lordship of Jesus Christ, who allows and commands us to ask in prayer that we will be enabled by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to believe what we cannot believe by our own power and to obey what we cannot obey by our own power.

d. Nature of argument

Not a historical study

This dissertation is not a historical study of the chronological development of Barth's theology. The aim of the argument is not to illustrate how Barth's theology emerged from and responded to his historical context. It will be clear to the reader that the historical context of Barth's theology is taken into account by the researcher, but it will be equally evident that how Barth's theology related to the historical context is not, in itself, the focus of the research.

It will be shown how Barth's theology spoke of the inseparable unity between faith, obedience and prayer within different historical contexts. The profound implications that Barth's understanding of the Christian life had for his historical context will become transparent during the development of the argument, but it is not the goal of the dissertation to explain this relationship.

Therefore the study is not ordered chronologically. In the very same section, the researcher will be able to jump between different periods in Barth's life, between completely different historical and situational contexts. This does not mean that the changes of Barth's *Sitz im Leben* are ignored, but rather that they serve to strengthen the argument that the inseparable unity between faith, obedience and prayer was of crucial importance in the whole of Barth's theology.

It will be argued that in ever changing historical developments, from the First World War to the rise of Nazism in Germany to the Second World War to the Cold War, in varying situations, from ministering to a blue collar congregation to being a controversial professor at the front of political struggles to living in a quiet little town and writing a mammoth magnum opus, and in vastly different forms, from dogmatic books to academic lectures to radio interviews to sermons in prison, Karl Barth gave a passionate witness to the inseparable unity between faith, obedience and prayer.

Literature study

This dissertation is a literature study, but it is not a literature critique. It is not an attempt to differentiate between the finer nuances in the primary literature, i.e., in Barth's thought. Nor is it an attempt to show how the secondary literature, that comment on Barth's theology, differ in their interpretations of Barth's theology.

The changing nuances in Barth's thought and the differing interpretations of his theology are taken into account by the researcher, but not placed in the focus of the study as such. The researcher is aware of the fact that Barth's theology does not at all points say the same thing, and also that the secondary literature do not agree with each other in how Barth's theology ought to be interpreted. However, the aim of the research is not to point these differences out.

This dissertation is a constructive argument regarding the inseparable unity of faith, obedience and prayer in the theology of Karl Barth. The changing nuances in Barth's thought, and the different interpretations of Barth's theology, are brought into harmony with one another in order to construct a synthetic argument that illustrates the ever present dynamic relationship between faith, obedience and prayer in Barth's understanding of the Christian life.

In the study of the primary literature, the researcher was not limited to a specific period of Barth's life or a specific work in Barth's theology. Rather than an in depth study of a few years in Barth's career, or of particular isolated documents, the research focused on emerging themes in the broad trajectory of Barth's life and thought.

Although the change in Barth's thought after his theological disillusionment in 1914, which caused a considerable change in the direction of his theology, is fully taken into account, the precise nature of Barth's thought preceding 1914 is not explicitly addressed, as will be reflected in the dates of the primary literature used.

In the secondary literature, a great many scholars have commented on Barth's understanding of faith, but few have made it the primary focus of their study. The scholars who have done so, compared Barth's understanding of faith to other theologian's understanding of faith, for example, M. Seils's work *Glaube* (1996), C. Van der Kooi's book *Als in een spiegel. God kennis volgens Calvyn en Barth* (2002) and P. Gallus' *Der Mensch zwischen Himmel und Erde. Der Glaubensbegriff bei Paul Tillich und Karl Barth* (2007).

Secondary literature on the inseparable relationship between Barth's dogmatics and ethics, i.e., the unity between faith and obedience in Barth's theology, emerged rather late. Some of the first books to illustrate this was Willis' *The Ethics of Karl Barth* (1971), R.W. Lovin's book *Christian Faith and Public Choices. The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer* (1984), N. Biggar's *The hastening that waits* (1993, 1995), J. Webster's work *Barth's Moral Theology. Human Action in Barth's Thought* (1998) and T. Gorringer's *Karl Barth. Against Hegemony* (1999). Some of the more recent literature include P. Nimmo's book *Being in Action. The Theological Shape of Barth's Ethical Vision* (2007), essays by different authors in *Commanding Grace. Studies in Karl Barth's Ethics* (2010), D. Haddorff's book *Christian Ethics as Witness. Barth's Ethics for a World at Risk* (2010) and the doctoral dissertation by A. Maßmann: *Bürgerrecht im Himmel und auf Erden. Karl Barth's Ethik* (2011).

Secondary literature on the centrality of prayer in Barth's theology has not been in abundance. Many scholars have acknowledged the importance of prayer in Barth's theology, but it has seldom, if ever, been the primary focus of research. A notable exception is the doctoral dissertation of G. Obst, namely, *Veni Creator Spiritus! Die Bitte um den Heiligen Geist als Einführung in die Theologie Karl Barths* (1998). Obst shows how prayer served as the presupposition of Barth's theology as a whole. As noted by the essays which supplemented the 50th anniversary edition of Barth's book *Prayer* (2002), the fundamental importance of prayer in Barth's theology has not been widely appreciated.

The contribution that this dissertation makes to the secondary literature on Karl Barth, is to illustrate the inseparable unity of faith, obedience and prayer in Karl Barth's theology, which has not been done before.

Prayer: the chief exercise of faith

The centrality of prayer in faith and obedience according to Karl Barth

“In the title of his chapter on prayer (*Inst.* III, 20)
Calvin calls invocation of God
the ‘chief exercise of faith’”
(Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43).

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A legitimate subject of study?

“Here we are, then, we Christians, looked upon as believers, as obedient servants, and as such faced with a new problem: that of prayer. Is it really a new problem? beyond faith and obedience? So it would seem. Calvin says that prayer deals with our life and our relation to the exigencies of this world. The question is as follows: I, who am a Christian, can I really live according to the word of the gospel and of the law, according to my faith and in obedience? Shall I be able to live thus in the midst of the necessities of my existence? – Yes, according to the gospel it is possible in the holiness of obedience to live that which is given us to live, that which we must live. In order to do this, we must listen to what is told us about prayer and ask God himself to come to our aid, to instruct us, to give us the possibility of walking in this path. Such a quest must be made in order that we may live. Prayer is this quest” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 9-10).

This study is an inquiry into the “chief exercise of faith” in the theology of Karl Barth. Karl Barth refers to this phrase which Calvin used in the title of his chapter on prayer in the *Institutes*, when he, Barth, is thinking out loud about the best term to use as a heading for his ethics of reconciliation, which he never finished, but which was published as lecture fragments under the title *The Christian Life*. The phrase is particularly apt for this study, since it denotes the unity of dogmatics and ethics, of faith and obedience, which is so prevalent in the theology of Karl Barth, by speaking of the *exercise* of faith, i.e., the *act* of faith, i.e., faith and obedience in unity as they are lived out in the Christian life.

This is not a study into Karl Barth’s understanding of faith *per se*, or a study of Karl Barth’s ethics *per se*, or even a study into the relationship between dogmatics and ethics, faith and obedience. Although the nature of faith, the nature of obedience, as well as the relationship between faith and obedience in the theology of Karl Barth will be discussed, the aim of this study is to understand the *chief* exercise of faith, the *primary* act of faith, the *basic form* of faith and obedience, the *fundamental attitude* in our dogmatics and ethics, according to the theology of Karl Barth, if there *is* such a thing to be found in Karl Barth’s theology.

But do we have any legitimate reason to inquire whether there is a chief exercise of faith, a primary act of faith, a basic form of faith and obedience, a fundamental attitude in dogmatics and ethics, to be found in the theology of Karl Barth? Is there really a problem which justifies this study? Should we not rather be content with the terms faith and obedience as sufficient words which contain within them all that Karl Barth wanted to say about the reality and actuality of the Christian life?

The inherent danger of a study like this one, is that it might lead to a new tyranny of concepts, something which Barth was very wary of throughout his theological career (Barth,

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1981: CL: 37). Bromiley argues that it would be a wrongheaded approach to Barth's theology to isolate one concept, to try and understand Barth's understanding of that one concept, and then to reinterpret all of Barth's theology with all its complexity in light of that one concept (Bromiley, 1979: 245-246).

The dominance of concepts like "faith" in the theology of 19th century, stemming from Friedrich Schleiermacher, as well as much of the liberal theology of the 20th century, or the word "decision" in the theology of existential theologians as well as pietism in the 19th and 20th centuries, was a danger that Barth wanted to avoid, since it had the potential of drowning out the true content of the gospel. The actual content of our faith can get lost if "faith" as such becomes the focus of our theology, just as the actual content of our decision, the thing which is chosen, can get lost if our "decision" as such becomes the focus of our theology.

Finding another concept with which to describe and understand the basic nature of faith and obedience, might lead in all kinds of dangerous directions.

It might be a flight from the actual content of our faith and obedience. Instead of asking what we believe or what we should do, we ask *how we can* believe and obey, and thereby try to avoid or postpone actual faith and obedience.

It might be an attempt to reduce the complex whole of the Christian life into a single, insufficient concept. The allure of simplicity might lead us to an understanding of the Christian life, which is in actual fact no longer the Christian life at all, but an isolation of one particular aspect of the Christian life, which becomes something different when separated from the rest of the Christian life.

Related to the previous danger, it might lead to a confusion or assimilation of concepts, whereby the particular nature of faith, of obedience and of the new concept under which the basic nature of faith and obedience are described, are no longer understood, but get merged into a meaningless whole. If our pursuit is a veiled attempt to replace a concept like "obedience" with a concept like "faith," or vice versa, or to replace faith and obedience with a new, third concept, we are treading on very thin ice.

But Barth affirmed in the passage at the beginning of this introduction, that this inquiry is a legitimate one. It is an inquiry which Barth undertook throughout his theological career, and one which he learnt from the Reformers, in particular from Calvin and Luther, but also from Anselm, from Paul, from Matthew 6 and Psalm 50, from his extensive exegeses of the Scriptures and studies of the Christian tradition.

The "quest" that Barth spoke of in that passage, is not a quest he endeavoured on later in his life, but the fundamental attitude with which he approached his theology from beginning to end (Obst, 1998: 12).

Because it is there

This inquiry is legitimate very simply because there *is* a third, integral, inseparable and yet distinctive and unique element to the Christian life; there *is* a chief exercise of faith, according to the Scriptures and the Christian tradition, and which is present throughout Barth's theological career. Faith and obedience simply are not sufficient to describe and understand the whole of the Christian life, without this third element, this primary act of faith.

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Barth was even bold enough to compare these three aspects of the Christian life with the three modes of being of the triune God. Each one contains the other two and are inseparable from them, but still each one is unique and distinct from the other two. To neglect any one of the three, or to try and understand and describe one of the three aspects, without reference to the other two, can only lead to a modalistic heresy (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 246).

Each of these three forms of the Christian attitude can never be understood without the other two, but should never be confused with or absorbed into the other two. Isolating the one, without reference to the other two, or trying to absorb the three into one, will inevitably lead to speculative abstraction and will not give an accurate account of the concrete reality of the Christian life.

This inquiry is therefore not based on the question of the possibility of faith and obedience, or as a veiled attempt to flee from the content and actuality of the faith and obedience of the Christian life. On the contrary, it is based on the content and actuality of faith of obedience. When the content and actuality of faith and obedience are studied, it becomes clear from the Scriptures and the Christian tradition, as it is shown in the theology of Karl Barth, that there is a third intersecting reality, without which faith and obedience cannot be properly understood. Our inquiry into the chief exercise of faith is not an attempt to flee away from the proper content and actuality of faith and obedience, but rather to come to a better understanding of faith and obedience, which are inseparable from this chief exercise of faith.

In fact, this chief exercise of faith makes an end to all attempts to flee from actual faith and obedience, since it enables us to believe and obey. It makes an end to the question how we can possibly believe and obey, by giving us the answer to that question. In the light of this third aspect of the Christian life, there remains no excuses to shy away from actual faith and obedience. It gives us the freedom to believe and obey. It does not grant us the freedom to choose whether we want to believe and obey, but the freedom of making it impossible for us to say that we cannot believe and obey. In this third element of the Christian life we can and we do believe and obey. In this chief exercise of faith, all questions regarding the possibility of faith and obedience are destroyed by the actuality of faith and obedience.

This third aspect of the actual Christian life, this basic form of faith and obedience, which intersects with faith and obedience, making it inseparable from them and yet completely distinct in character, is prayer.

Barth said:

“Prayer can be the recognition that we accomplish nothing by our intentions, even though they be intentions to pray. Prayer can be the expression of our human willing of the will of God. Prayer can signify that for good or evil man justifies God and not himself. Prayer can be the human answer to the divine hearing already granted, the epitome of the true faith which we cannot assume of ourselves” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 23).

Also:

“If faith is really the faith of the true Christian attitude, it is also obedience and prayer, and on the same presupposition obedience is faith and prayer, and prayer is faith and obedience” (Barth, 1960, *CD III,3*: 246).

Why prayer? Why single out this one act of the Christian life as “the epitome of the true faith”? Should we not be cautious of the danger that we might be so impressed with prayer as the chief exercise of faith, that we might lose sight of other, equally important and

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legitimate aspects of the Christian life, such as freedom, repentance, conversion, thanksgiving, faithfulness? Why should one particular act of faith receive precedence over other acts of faith? And why this act? This act of prayer?

Surely the other aspects of the Christian life can also be seen to have a certain precedence over prayer, not so? When Barth discussed the ethics of the doctrine of creation in *Church Dogmatics III,4*, the whole life of the creature before the Creator was described under the title of “freedom.” And in that context “prayer” was discussed as merely one of the ways in which the creature lives in freedom before the Creator (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 87-115). Barth acknowledged that “freedom” might just as well be sufficient to serve as a heading for the special ethics in the doctrine of reconciliation, but to avoid a tyranny of concepts, and because he felt that freedom was not a precise enough term to describe the command of God as Reconciler and the obedience of humanity as reconciled, he continued to look for another term (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 37).

Strength in weakness

The precedence of prayer over the other, equally important aspects of the Christian life, does not lie in the strength of this act, but in its weakness. And especially in prayer as petition, which is the essence of prayer, according to Barth. The strength of prayer lies in the fact that it can do nothing but ask God to give us what we lack and thank God that we have already received all that we need. True freedom is to pray to the God who has granted us freedom and ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to live in this freedom. True repentance and conversion is to pray to the God who has already forgiven us by grace and ask for forgiveness. True thanksgiving is to pray to the God who has already heard and answered all our petitions and to give thanks to God. True faithfulness is to pray to the God who remains faithful to us despite our unfaithfulness and ask the faithfulness of Christ to become our faithfulness. True faith is to pray: “Lord I believe, help Thou mine unbelief.” True obedience is to ask that God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven, and that God will grant us all that we lack in order to do God’s will (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43-44).

The strength of prayer lies therein that it holds fast to the poverty of our faith and obedience. Said Barth:

“I may even reach the point of asking myself, ‘Underneath it all, am I a Christian? My faith being small and my obedience slight, of what meaning are these words: “I believe, I obey”?’ Deep is the abyss. The core of our being is put to question at the very moment we believe and obey as well as we can. In this situation (which is the same for every Christian) prayer means going toward God, asking him to give us what we lack – strength, courage, serenity, prudence – asking him to teach us how to obey the law and accomplish the commandments, and then that God may instruct us how to continue in believing and believing yet more, and that he may renew our faith” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 10-11).

Barth was not interested in prayer *as such*; in prayer as a great and noble human achievement which should be studied for its own sake. Prayer is feeble. Just as feeble as all our faith and obedience. The only strength of prayer, lies in the fact that it knows its own feebleness, as well as the feebleness of its own faith and obedience, and asks God to complete our incomplete Christian life.

For Barth, Christian prayer is always petitionary prayer, empty-handed prayer, the prayer of a beggar, and as such, prayer is precisely what God expects of us. Barth said:

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..in its decisive sense prayer obviously consists less in man offering something to God and doing something for Him than in turning to Him, seeking, asking and accepting from Him something he needs. Yet how can we understand this properly without perceiving at once that perhaps the very highest honour that God claims from man and man can pay Him is that man should seek and ask and accept at His hands, not just something, but everything that he needs?" (Barth, 1961, *CD III*,4: 87)

Paul's letter to the Romans was very influential in Barth's theology. It was in the two attempts at a commentary on Romans, early in his theological career, that Barth forged his way into the new direction that his theology was about to take, and which made people take note of his theology. And right in the centre of Paul's epistle to the Romans, Barth found Paul speaking about prayer. But Paul speaks of prayer, not as the pinnacle of humanity's achievements, but as the last sigh at the end of humanity's possibilities. The prayer that Paul is speaking of in Romans 8, as Barth saw it, was not some immediate or elevated "communion with God," some profound form of piety. It was not because of the sincerity, heroism or power of prayer, that it played such a central part in Paul's letter. Prayer is not the great leap that humanity can make towards God. The only significance of prayer is that it looks away from the one at prayer towards the God addressed in prayer (Barth, 1933: *R*: 316).

Barth said in his book *The Epistle to the Romans*:

"We wait: but, because we wait upon God, our waiting is not in vain. We look out: but, because we have first been observed, we do not look out into the void. We speak: but, because there emerges in our speech that which cannot be uttered, we do not idly prattle. And so also we pray: but, because the Spirit maketh intercession for us with groanings which ... are beyond our competence, our prayers and groanings are distinct from that groaning which is weakness – and nothing else" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 317).

Not the cart before the horse

Compared with the totality of his work, Barth did not write all that much about prayer, or faith, or obedience. Breaking away from the liberal theology of the 19th and 20th centuries, fathered by Schleiermacher, Barth did not set out to write a theology which uses the religious faith of humanity as its starting point. In stark contrast to "doctrines of faith" written by modern Protestant theologians, wherein faith serves as the beginning and end of its entire theological framework, Barth wrote only a relatively tiny chapter on the act of faith, and only near the end of his *Church Dogmatics*, in volume IV, part 1 (Busch, 1975: 379).

But in a very different way, all of Barth's theology was in actual fact about faith, since his theology was focused on the content and actuality of the Christian faith, rather than the possibility of the religious phenomenon, known as faith. At first it almost seemed as if there was no place for the concept "faith" in Barth's theology, as he wrote extensively on the impossibility of faith for humanity, especially in his commentary on Romans. But gradually it became clearer that his theology was deconstructing the human possibility of faith, in order to reconstruct actual Christian faith, which is not an abstract human possibility or religious phenomenon, but which can only be understood in relation to its actual content. Instead of writing yet another "theology of faith," Barth was doing all of his theology upon the presupposition that the Christian faith is real and has actual content, and that its reality is dependent upon that actual content.

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And yet not an afterthought

In much the same way, Barth did not set out to write first dogmatics and then ethics, i.e., to set forth the Christian faith and then to discuss the Christian life. Throughout his theology he wanted to understand dogmatics and ethics, the Christian faith and the Christian life, justification and sanctification, faith and obedience, as two sides of the very same reality. And that is why, for quite some time, Barth was accused by many of merely being a dogmatic theologian who did not write about ethics. It was only much later, after his death, that the unity of his dogmatics and ethics became more widely recognised and understood.

Haddorff affirms that even though several publications in the previous two decades have clearly shown the unity of Barth's theology and ethics, namely Gorringer's *Karl Barth*, Biggar's *The Hastening That Waits*, Webster's *Ethics of Reconciliation*, as well as his book *Moral Theology*, Clough's *Ethics in Crisis*, Nimmo's *Being in Action*, and McKenny's *Analogy of Grace*, many still perceive Barth as a dogmatic theologian, whose theology is removed from the ethical issues concerning the world. According to Haddorff, each of these publications have attempted to illustrate in differing ways the ethical nature of Barth's theology as well as the theological nature of his ethics. But despite these efforts, Barth is still often misunderstood as if he was either disinterested or oblivious regarding the world's problems (Haddorff, 2010: 2).

The irony, however, is that Barth was also criticised, especially by Lutheran theologians, of being moralistic. Since Lutheran theology focuses on justification by faith alone, the Lutheran theologians immediately understood the ethical side to Barth's theology, which always held onto the Reformed understanding of justification and sanctification as two sides of the same coin (Webster, 2000a: 161). Martin Marty says that he, as a Lutheran student at a conservative seminary, was often warned against Barth's theology, because of the way in which Barth mixed the gospel and the law, which is the primary error of Reformed theology according to the Lutheran school of theology. However, Marty adds, despite the warnings, it was clear that his professors had great respect for Barth (Marty, 1986: 102).

Thus, although Barth wrote comparatively little on ethics, the whole of his theology was based upon the unity of dogmatics and ethics, justification and sanctification, the Christian faith and the Christian life, faith and obedience.

D.L. Migliore affirms that although interest in and understanding of the ethical aspect of Barth's writings has come to the fore much later and much sparser in the reception of Barth's theology, it was present in his own mind right from the start. The *Church Dogmatics*, Migliore asserts, was not just an attempt at reconstructing the whole Christian faith from a Christocentric viewpoint, but doing exactly the same to Christian ethics. He even quotes a speech of the young minister Barth in 1911, many years before the *Church Dogmatics*, given to the factory union in Safenwil, where Barth equated Jesus with the social justice movement. Although Barth's understanding of Christian ethics would still develop greatly in the years to come, the inseparability of Christian faith and Christian ethics was already present. Migliore also reminds us that the initial event that sparked Barth's quest to reconstruct Christian faith and ethics, was the First World War and the support that German theologians gave to Germany's war policy. The realisation that theology is not an innocent endeavour, but that bad theology can result in literal cannon fire, lay at the root of the theological work that kept Barth so busy for the rest of his life. Right at the end of his life, when Barth was thinking about the Christian life, he made it clear that the kingdom of God is not merely something we wait for, but something that we pray and work for, something that we haste towards. Thus for Barth, from very early to very late in his theological career, Christian faith and Christian ethics were always inseparable, even if for many years the ethical side of his theology went largely unnoticed (Migliore, 2010: 1-3).

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In recent years more and more theologians have come to grasp the fundamental importance of faith and obedience in the theology of Karl Barth, although he did not write a “theology of faith” or a separate “Christian ethics,” and the relation of faith and obedience in his theology has also received more and more attention. But it is not that widely recognised that his theology was also a theology that began and ended in prayer. I.J. Hesselink illustrates this point by indicating that three of the earlier comprehensive studies on Barth by G.C. Berkouwer (*The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*), Hans Urs von Balthasar (*The Theology of Karl Barth*) and Herbert Hartwell (*The Theology of Karl Barth. An Introduction*) make no mention of prayer in their indexes. Hesselink says:

“As far as I know, Karl Barth has never been called a man of prayer” (Hesselink, 2002: 74).

Although Barth did not write a “theology of prayer” by any means, his theology was definitely a liturgical theology. Don E. Saliers puts it quite strongly, by saying:

“Whatever else is said of the monumental legacy bequeathed to the world by Barth’s life and work, this must be emphasized: his theology and his life manifest what it means to ‘begin and end in prayer’” (Saliers, 2002: ix).

Saliers correctly argues that Barth was not concerned with writing a “theology of prayer,” but rather to understand all of theology as liturgical in nature, i.e., orientated by prayer, i.e., beginning and ending in prayer (Saliers, 2002: ix-x).

Late in his life, Barth told students in America that prayer is not an afterthought of theology. It is not something which occurs in parallel to the work of theology, but to do theology is to pray, and to pray is to do theology. Barth said:

“The first and basic act of theological work is *prayer*... But theological work does not merely begin with prayer and is not merely accompanied by it; in its totality it is peculiar and characteristic of theology that it can be performed only in the act of prayer” (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 160).

Therefore, we should not be surprised that Barth at times moved seamlessly and without warning from dogmatics to doxology, and once again from doxology back to dogmatics. Saliers says that this movement reminds one of Augustine’s *Confessions* and also of Paul’s New Testament letters (Saliers, 2002: xiii).

Although the influence of Augustine and Paul on Barth cannot be disputed, it is from Anselm that Barth learned this freedom to move between dogmatics and doxology. It is from Anselm that Barth learned that if theology has any hope of giving a true, scientific account of its object, God, it has to be done in the attitude of continuous prayer: asking God to reveal God-self by grace, for without this free and gracious act of God, all our theology will remain null and void (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 37-39; Barth, 1963: *ET*: 164; Busch, 1975: 206).

Attitude or object of study?

But even if all theology is to be done in an attitude of prayer, this does not mean that prayer should also become the object of our theological study. Is it not perhaps better that prayer should only remain the attitude with which our theological study is done, rather than making it an object of research? Are we not making the same mistake as the liberal, existential and pietistic theologians of the previous two centuries, i.e., studying human attitudes and actions

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in relation to God, rather than studying the God in relation to whom we live and act? Are we once again making ourselves guilty of Feuerbach's accusation that theology has nothing to say about God, but only speaks about humanity's pious ambitions, thus creating an idol according to its own attitudes and actions?

Yes, we will definitely make ourselves guilty of this error, if our study of prayer impresses us with all the different modes, forms and disciplines of prayer; if it impresses us with all the different possibilities, capabilities and capacities that prayer opens up to humanity; if it deludes us into thinking even just for one second that prayer is a human attitude or action whereby we can achieve anything whatsoever. If this study only inches in that direction, it will most certainly be moving in the opposite direction than that of Karl Barth's theology and will be a false representation of his theology. One might get caught up in the beautiful things that Barth wrote about prayer on various occasions, and lose sight of the whole trajectory of his theology and in the process completely distort his theology. May the Holy Spirit steer this study clear of such illusions.

Prayer can and may never be the true object of theological work. Even if we use the term "God" quite often, but in the end it turns out that the triune God of whom the Bible speaks and which the church proclaims, is not the true object of our study, but in actual fact prayer, as a human attitude or action, as a form of human piety, as a religious phenomenon, is the object of our study, and "God" is merely a convenient term which we use in relation to this human reality, but which is stripped of all its proper content and meaning and thereby not the concrete and real God at all, but just an empty and meaningless term, a signifier signifying nothing, then we have strayed far, far from the true task of theology.

And yet, prayer does not only have to be the attitude with which we do theological work, but it can and must become an object of theological study, as it did in the theology of Karl Barth. But then it must always be studied and understood in relation to the true object of all theological study, i.e., the triune God attested to in the Bible and proclaimed by the Church. If prayer is studied in relation to humanity, as a human phenomenon or achievement, which only relates to an abstract and empty concept of "God" as the counterpoint of this human act, it will not be understood at all. It is only in relation to the concrete and real God of the Bible and of the church, that prayer can be properly understood.

It is only in so far as prayer is the gift and command of the triune God, that it is an appropriate object of theological study. It is only in so far as prayer is part and parcel of the gospel and the law, of justification and sanctification, of faith and obedience, of the creation, reconciliation and redemption enacted by the triune God for the sake of humanity, that it can be a proper object of theological study. It is only on the basis of the saving act of God that this act of faith can be correctly studied and understood.

If understood in any other way, isolated and separated from the concrete reality and action of the triune God for the sake of the world, it would be the silliest, most insipid human action, and it would not be worthwhile to waste one second on the reflection or study of this pathetic human endeavour.

Private matter of faith?

The quotation at the beginning of this introduction is taken from seminars that Barth delivered on the subject of prayer in the years 1947-1949, in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. In these times – two years after the end of World War II in which Barth himself volunteered to be a soldier in the Swiss army, two years after the fall of the German Third Reich and the death of Adolf Hitler, the struggle in which Barth was intimately involved from the early

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1930's as one of the earliest protesters against the danger and heresy of Nazism, being almost the sole author of the Barmen Declaration, being banned from Germany in 1935 after refusing to pledge allegiance to Hitler at the beginning of his lectures in Bonn, and still, in the years after the war, very much involved in debates regarding the restoration and rearmament of Germany – in these times, Barth found it necessary and useful to give seminars on the subject of prayer. In these times, Barth considered this – seen from the human side – silly, insipid, pathetic human action, as a relevant and important object of theological study, worthy of careful attention.

Was Barth, as he was accused of doing on more than one occasion, retreating behind a Chinese wall, doing theology “as if nothing had happened,” as he was fond of saying? Was Barth overcoming his earlier distaste for Pietism and becoming Pietistic himself, busying himself with private or ecclesial matters of faith, which has no bearing on the outside world? Were these seminars an example of a theology which isolates itself from the larger questions troubling the world and humanity, and rather concerning itself with “matters of the soul”?

To the contrary, it is precisely the relation of the Christian and the Christian community to the outside world and the large issues of the day, that are addressed in these seminars. It is precisely the concern of Calvin, i.e., how the Christian and the Christian community live within the world, within the realities of the present time, that Barth addressed. As Barth said of Calvin:

“Calvin says that prayer deals with our life and our relation to the exigencies of this world” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 9).

It is in times of peace and prosperity that prayer might seem to be an irrelevant or unnecessary object of study. It is within a liberal theology and the cultural hubris of Western enlightenment, which is overconfident about the possibilities and capabilities of humanity, and which misunderstands prayer within this theological framework as a human achievement, that prayer might seem too small a subject to speak to the issues of the day.

However, in times of turmoil, struggle and war, the relevance of prayer is easily understood. In the light of the failures of humanity, and especially of the German nation, the epitome of Western enlightenment and Christian faith, prayer can be seen as a profound object of study, speaking clearly to people disillusioned about the possibilities and capabilities of humanity.

This is what Calvin and the Reformers understood better than modern theologians. Because they still had a Theocentric worldview, because they had seen first-hand the dangers when the church starts to replace the action and salvation of God with its own works and merits, because they were not part of the dominant theology and culture of the day, but banned from the Catholic church, displaced as refugees and persecuted as heretics, because they faced such severe times of turmoil, struggle and war, it was impossible for them to understand prayer as a human achievement. And therefore the importance and relevance of prayer as part of the life of the Christian and the Christian community within the world, who is in constant need of God's action and salvation, was self-evident to the Reformers.

In the introduction of the book *God in Action*, which contains different addresses by Barth made to different groups in 1934, a time of great turmoil, Josias Friedli, an American, says that American theologians had a new found interest in the basic problems of theology at that time, due to the Great Depression. Whereas Americans are known for their optimism and faith in almost automatic, inevitable progress, the Great Depression caused great confusion and a feeling of powerlessness. It is in times like these, Friedli says, that we question the basic tenets of our faith. Augustine's *Confessions* was written while the Roman Empire was

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crumbling, and Calvin's *Institutes* was written in a situation of persecution and exile. It is in these "creed-making" times, rather than "creed-reciting" times, says Friedli, that we are able to see the relevance and critical importance of the most basic beliefs of our faith, which seem so dull and irrelevant in times of prosperity and peace. When we still have confidence in our own plans, in our own abilities, in our own efforts at improving the world, we are not open to a theology that looks to the action of the living God. Barth's theology arises out of times of intense turmoil. But, Friedli adds, Barth's engagement with the great battles of his time allowed him to look beyond the political, social and economic issues of the day, toward God's action in the world, to which the church must give witness, and which is our true source of hope, rather than human ideas, institutions or movements (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: ix-xii).

About the difference between his theology and that of the 19th century, Barth said:

"We have lived through harder times, have endured worse things than they did, and we are thereby, strangely enough, made more free. We are removed from certain battles and involvements in which they were caught in the course of their opposition to and conversation with their apparently sunny age. We can breathe more freely, just because the air has become more raw. Modern man can no longer impress us, as he impressed them, in the light of his performances in this century" (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 16).

In times such as these, when humanity's need of God's saving action is clearly seen and understood, the crucial necessity and public relevance of this otherwise seemingly pathetic, useless, private and irrelevant act of faith, is also more easily understood. When prayer is understood as a gift and command of the triune God, as part and parcel of the gospel and the law, of justification and sanctification, as the centre of our faith in and obedience to the triune God, who alone can save humanity from itself, who alone can reconcile, redeem and recreate humanity and the world by God's own free and unmerited gracious action, then it most certainly becomes a subject worthy of close theological study.

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Barth continually spoke of faith and obedience in unison. He frequently used the phrase “obedience of faith.” According to Barth, there simply is no faith without obedience, nor obedience without faith. Any separation of faith and obedience functioned as a warning sign for Barth that there was a dangerous theological error at work. However, to rightly understand the inseparable unity of faith and obedience in Barth’s theology, we must comprehend that for Barth, faith and obedience are not human possibilities, but part and parcel of one, gracious divine reality.

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Already in Karl Barth’s first attempt at a dogmatics, while lecturing at Göttingen, he saw faith and obedience as two inseparable parts of the one response to God which humanity cannot give by its own capacity or ability, but which humanity can and indeed does give within the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. This is what Barth said of the subjective possibility of revelation, i.e., of the faith and obedience by which humanity receives and accepts and responds faithfully to the revelation of God in the incarnation:

“With what I have tried to formulate here I have had in mind the miracle of the Holy Spirit who creates faith and obedience in us and thus places us before God. He ‘creates’ them. That is to say, as he creates the world out of nothing, and as he makes a part of human nature in the body of the virgin the dwelling of the Logos, so he makes a piece of broken humanity into human knowing and doing, with himself in his revelation as the object. As in creation and the incarnation, so here, too, we have a *miracle*, an event which has its only ontic and noetic basis in the freedom and majesty of God” (Barth, 1991, *GD*: 176).

Why so difficult?

Why is this necessary? Why describe faith and obedience as a “*miracle*” (Barth’s emphasis)? Why equate it with the creation of the world out of nothing? Why equate it with the virgin conception? Is it necessary to describe faith and obedience in terms that are so offensive and difficult to accept for modern spirituality and theology? Why not rather describe it in more acceptable and accessible terms? Is it really necessary, and is it helpful, to describe faith and obedience as such an impossible reality, such an unattainable goal, as something which is always out of humanity’s grasp? Would it not be much more instructive and helpful to describe faith and obedience as a human possibility? When Barth is writing about faith and obedience as the “subjective possibility of revelation,” why then insist that faith and obedience is in fact a human impossibility? Why not rather describe faith and obedience as a natural capacity of humanity which must be discovered, uncovered, recovered, brought to the fore? Or, if the corruption of our nature must be emphasised so strongly that faith and obedience cannot be described as a natural capacity, then why not describe faith and obedience as an existential decision, a leap of faith into the void, which must be made and can be made in the face of our human inabilities?

For Barth, faith is not based upon knowledge, nor does faith evolve or grow from a little faith to a lot of faith. Faith does not progress from knowledge of God, which is naturally given within the creation or within the human being, i.e., in general revelation, to faith in Jesus Christ given in the particular revelation of the Bible. Barth was convinced that the New

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Testament is very clear about the fact that faith is miraculously born out of utter unbelief. Faith in the New Testament comes in the form of a completely gracious, utterly miraculous conversion from sheer unbelief to full blown faith in Jesus Christ. There are no in between stages or phases. There is no middle ground. In Barth's theology, the only realities are faith and unbelief, only obedience and disobedience, only judgment and grace, only being an enemy of God and being a friend of God. Faith is not something which occurs when humanity makes a move toward God, but the gracious miracle which occurs when God moves toward humanity. Believers know that before faith there was nothing but unbelief. Unbelievers might think they lack a little faith to believe in God, but believers know that we lack all of faith, but for the gracious revelation of God, whereby all of faith is established and sustained (Molnar, 2010: 72).

The deception of human possibilities

Barth was very wary of the word "possibility." When he discussed the subjective possibility of revelation, he wanted to be absolutely sure that he was not describing something which merely has the appearance of a possibility, something which seems attractive, alluring and accessible at first glance, but which turns out to be unsustainable, which is a dead end, which is, in the end, in fact, perhaps the very root of unbelief and disobedience. Barth was very much aware of the fact that human possibilities are very deceiving. Something which might seem accessible, attainable and available to all, often turns out to be the very thing that is utterly inaccessible, unattainable and unavailable to all, while the very thing that might at first glance seem inaccessible, unattainable and unavailable to all, might turn out to be the thing which is completely accessible, attainable and available to all.

Barth wanted to make it clear in his *Göttingen Dogmatics* that the subjective possibility of revelation is not a *religious* possibility. He did not actually want to discuss religion at all, and the only reason he brought this term into the discussion, was in order to discard it, and to explicitly explain that this is *not* what he means when he is talking about the subjective possibility of revelation (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 181-191). Barth explained in his *Göttingen Dogmatics* that if he was doing modern dogmatics, the title of the section on the subjective possibility of revelation would be "Religion." But this is not what Barth had in mind when he was talking about the subjective possibility of revelation, when he was speaking about faith and obedience (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 173).

Religion inverted

Molnar argues that Barth turned the modern understanding of religion upside down, by claiming that true religion is not found in the right human worship or service of God, but rather in God's action and Word towards humanity. The Bible, according to Barth, does not contain the correct thoughts about God or words that we should say about God or to God, but rather God's Word to humanity, God's movement and action towards humanity, God's revelation of God-self, God's giving of God-self for humanity. Religion, as it is understood generally, asks the question how we can reach God, how we can think rightly about God and act correctly towards God. But the Bible, according to Barth, reveals that this question is wrongheaded, since we as human beings are unable to reach God, but God has graciously reached out to humanity. The quest of religion to seek and find God is annihilated by the faith established through the Word of God, the faith that God has already sought out and found us in Jesus Christ (Molnar, 2010: 73; Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 43).

The Bible does not contain the history of humanity, but the history of God, it does not show us the virtues of humanity, but the virtue of God, it does not tell us how humanity views God,

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but how God views humanity. And therefore faith in the Bible means faith in God, which means to discard all of our faith in humanity, in religion, and even in our own faith. Faith does not believe in itself, but in God and in God alone (Molnar, 2010: 80; Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 51-52, 57).

This faith is not a religious possibility. Barth said that Peter did not confess that Jesus is the Son of God based upon his own religious knowledge, but because God miraculously and graciously revealed it to him. The moment that Peter questioned Jesus' road to Calvary, he was speaking from his own knowledge and understanding, from his own religious ambitions, not from the thoughts of God revealed to him, but from the thoughts of religious people, and therefore reprimanded by Jesus as speaking the words of Satan. This shows how sharp the distinction between revelation and delusion is, between the truth and lies, between faith and religious knowledge. It balances on a knife's edge. The one moment Peter is speaking the truth in faith, graciously and miraculously revealed to him by God, and the next he is speaking lies on behalf of the devil, born from his own religious knowledge and understanding. Jesus, through the resurrection, brought life from death, and thus established what religion cannot possibly achieve, i.e., reconciliation between God and unbelieving humanity. Therefore faith is born out of unbelief, resurrected from death (Molnar, 2010: 75; Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 80, 82-83, 85-86).

Faith is the complete acceptance of the sovereignty of God, of the unmerited grace and miraculous revelation of God, of the Word of God that became flesh in Jesus Christ. Unbelief is the rejection of these, claiming some authority for humanity, claiming some merit and knowledge on the part of religious humanity, claiming some other sources of revelation which should also be heard and obeyed next to the one Word of God found in Jesus Christ and attested to in the Bible. Once you enter the strange new world of the Bible, you are immediately confronted with the absolute claim of the sovereignty of God, of the miraculous revelation of God, of the gracious movement of God towards humanity, of the Word that became flesh, which can only be accepted in faith and obedience, or rejected in unbelief and disobedience (Molnar, 2010: 77; Barth, 1934: *KB*: 25-26).

For Barth, sin, or disobedience, is equated with unbelief, and unbelief is the same as faith in yourself, in your own religious abilities and achievements. Sin, i.e., unbelief and disobedience, is essentially pride, since it refuses to accept the absolute sovereignty of God, the unmerited grace and miraculous revelation of God found in Jesus Christ alone (Molnar, 2010: 78-79; Barth, 1956: *CD IV, 1*: 483, 485).

Pride is the primary manifestation of unbelief and disobedience (Bromiley, 1979: 186). That is why Barth could say that religion, all religion, also the Christian religion, is in essence unbelief, since it seeks knowledge of God in religious thoughts and service of God in religious acts, rather than in Jesus Christ, who is the only truth and revelation of God, the only reconciliation and relationship between God and humanity (Molnar, 2010: 90).

The world beyond human possibilities

"The strange new world within the Bible" that Barth rediscovered after his disillusionment with the failings of modern Protestant theology in 1914, when 93 German intellectuals supported the German war policy (Busch, 1975: 81), was a world beyond religion, morality, history and philosophy. Although all these elements could be found within the Bible, Barth now saw them merely as elements within a completely alternative reality. Suddenly the Bible, for Barth, now longer contained human thoughts about God, but God's thoughts about humanity, not what people say about God, but what God says to us. The Bible does not tell us how we are to seek and find God by the means of our religion, morality or philosophy, but

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how God has sought and found us in Jesus Christ. The Bible is not concerned with human history, but with God's history, with salvation history. The Bible does not provide steps to walk closer to God, but gives witness to the fact that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. The Bible does not teach us how to love God, but that God loved us first, and that we are reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. In the Bible we do not find the word of humanity about God, but the Word of God to humanity (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 41-43; Busch, 1975: 101).

It dawned on Barth that the theology stemming from the nineteenth century was more interested in the Christian faith than the Christian message, more interested in humanity's relationship to God than in God's actions towards humanity, or, as Melancton phrased it, more interested in the *beneficia Christi* than in Christ (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 23).

This was Barth's great and startling rediscovery when writing and rewriting his commentary on Romans, namely that humanity's thoughts about God are eternally less significant than God's thoughts about humanity (Metzger, 2003: 13). Barth realised that nobody is disturbed by the sceptic's question whether God exists or not. Nobody is bothered by the sceptic's doubt. Life can go on as usual. But when God speaks, everything changes. Confronted by the actuality of God's existence, life becomes truly dangerous, and questions become truly serious. Only then are we faced with the real questions of faith and unbelief, of life and death, of hope and despair (Metzger, 2003: 12; Busch, 1975: 91). Even before we can ask the question if God exists, God has already touched us. Our scepticism always arrives too late (Van der Kooi, 2002: 19).

Barth discovered that modern humanity is no longer asking the question of God's existence in earnest, as a matter of life and death, of judgment and grace, of utter despair and ultimate hope. Rather, when modern humanity saw fit to ask the question of God's existence, it was asked as an interesting question regarding the meaning of the word "God" and the significance of that abstract concept in our modern lives (Van der Kooi, 2002: 17).

When worlds collide

In his first commentary on Romans, Barth established the discontinuity between our world and the kingdom of God, between the works of humanity and the works of God. God's kingdom does not become manifest by the gradual perfection of human culture, but stands over against human culture as a wholly new reality, and is established by God alone, *against* human culture. But at the very same time, notes Metzger, in his lecture in Tambach in 1919 on: "The Christian's place in Society," Barth affirmed that we find parables of the kingdom of God in human culture. Even then, while still in the midst of his dramatic attack upon human culture, Barth said, in typical Barthian fashion, that Christians can allow ourselves to be even more romantic than romanticists and even more humanistic than humanists. Barth was not contradicting himself, says Metzger, but understood that human culture can be appreciated if seen from the viewpoint of the Creator and Re-creator, if we do not try to divinise human culture, but see it as God's creation, which is fallen, but which will be redeemed by God's recreation. The problem, for Barth, was not the appreciation of human culture, but its divinisation, its self-reliance, its attempts to be its own creator. Therefore Barth emphasised the discontinuity between God and humanity, between the kingdom of God and human history, even more fiercely and negatively in his second commentary on Romans (Metzger, 2003: 14-16).

Haddorff affirms that Barth was neither optimistic nor pessimistic about human culture. In the light of Christ, believers can neither give an unequivocal affirmation of culture, nor an unequivocal denial of culture. We are to affirm culture corresponding to God's Yes to humanity, and we are to deny culture corresponding to God's No to all human attempts at

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being divine, both simultaneously. Our actions can never ever be equated with God's action, but they can be a parable of God's action, analogously corresponding to God's action (Haddorff, 2010: 64).

What Barth was attacking in both his commentaries on Romans, and also in his Tambach lecture which happened between the two, and which was given at a conference of religious socialists, was the wrongheaded attempts to equate the kingdom of God, the will and action of God, with our own human ideals and movements. Even our noblest causes, says Haddorff, whether they are attempts at establishing freedom through democracy, justice through social revolution, morality through reformation, or whatever noble cause we might be pursuing, cannot be seen as divine in any way. This, however, is not cause for pessimism, but rather for hope, since God's gracious will and action will prevail despite the incompleteness and imperfection of our human causes. To the confusion of his socialist hearers at Tambach, Barth emphasised that our "movements" are in fact momentary instances in God's movement, and are therefore like the picture of a bird in flight. We cannot view our "movements" as absolute, since they are merely a momentary glimpse of God's greater movement. Our actions are always a response to God's prior action and an anticipation of God's eschatological action that is still to come. We can both affirm the social order, on the basis of God's prior action, and be critical of it, on the basis of God's future action. But once we divorce our momentary, provisional actions from God's eternal action, we will either fall into the despair of pessimism or the hubris of optimism (Haddorff, 2010: 63).

It is important to note that Barth explained in his lecture at Tambach that the word "Christian" in the title, "The Christian's place in society," does not refer to Christians, but refers to Christ (Busch, 1975: 110-111). That does not mean it excludes us, Christians, but it means that what Barth was referring to, was not what we, Christians, are within ourselves, but what Christ is within us. The "Christian" that lives faithfully and obediently within society, is "Christ in us" manifesting in our lives, as stated in Galatians 2:20: "...I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." This means that this word, "Christian," is also to be understood in a much broader sense than the church. Since Christ died for all of humanity, breaking down the walls between Jews and Gentiles, between so-called Christians and so-called non-Christians, the community of Christ has no walls, it has no inside or outside. We will try in vain if we look for true Christians in society, since the only true Christian is Christ, who died for all, who reigns over all, and who will one day be all in all (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 273-274; Maßmann, 2011: 34).

Barth's two commentaries on Romans had a major influence on his own theology and on the theological world. It is, according to Hauerwas, actually quite surprising, since Barth only tried to emphasise the rather obvious point, which Paul makes in the epistle to the Romans, that God is God, that humanity is not God, and that the problems we experience in the world are due to the fact that humanity thinks of itself as God. This was a "new" idea to liberal Protestant theologians, who, for the previous 200 years, regarded religious humanity as the centre of the Christian faith, rather than God. The theological and ethical implications of this claim, that God is God and that humanity is not God, haunted and motivated Barth's life and work up until his death (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 152).

Haddorff sees Barth's *Romans* not so much as an exegetical commentary, but rather as a theological argument against the backdrop of the Pauline text. With Paul's help, Barth was emphasising the wholly other righteousness of God which confronts the utter sinfulness of all human endeavours, even our greatest achievements. Any and all human attempts to arrive at the "good" by our own knowledge or actions, unaware of our own ignorance and total corruptness, fall under the judgment of God. According to Haddorff, Barth used this understanding of Paul to continue his critical attack upon "religious individualism found in liberalism (and Pietism), capitalism, militarism, political nationalism and patriotism, religious

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socialism, and established forms of religion (i.e., Christendom), all themes that Barth had been struggling with since 1913” (Haddorff, 2010: 61).

It is not all bad

Later in his life, Barth conceded that although it was correct and important to speak so negatively about the discontinuity between God and humanity in *Romans II*, by emphasising the divinity of God so strongly, he did not then take into full account also the humanity of God, whereby the discontinuity between God and humanity is overcome, not from humanity’s side, but from God’s side, through the incarnation (Metzger, 2003: 35, 39).

Only a few years after his Tambach lecture, as Barth once again reflected on “Church and Culture,” Barth already moved closer to this understanding, as he described the “parables” of the kingdom of God that we find in culture, not on the basis of the Word of God, as a rather abstract, philosophical Logos, which enters the human sphere, but as the living Word of God, i.e., God made flesh in Jesus Christ (Metzger, 2003: 51).

Haddorff says that this lecture of Barth on the relationship between church and culture, dispels the notion that Barth rejected the use of any other scientific disciplines in theological and ethical discernment. Since parables of the kingdom of God are to be found in the world, and not only in the church, but also outside the church, the theologian is free to “eavesdrop” on other sources of knowledge within the world. In fact, Barth said that at no point can the church isolate itself, ignore the world or pretend to stand apart from the society and culture within which it lives. The church is part of the stream of culture, and must be open to encounter parables of the surprising otherness of the kingdom of God in and outside the church. Openness to the voice of the *other* within the world, is essential in remaining open to the true Other, the wholly Other, who confronts humanity in unexpected ways in and outside the church (Haddorff, 2010: 127-129).

As Barth’s understanding developed that the human being, Jesus Christ, is the Word of God, Barth could over time speak more positively about humanity’s faith and obedience. Because Jesus Christ is the Word of God, God’s prophet, priest and king for humanity, the unknown God is known in faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ. Only in so far as the church believes and obeys this Word of God, Jesus Christ, the only source of reconciliation between God and humanity, can God’s gracious coming to humanity be made known in our words and actions, in our religion and culture. In this way, says Metzger, Barth affirmed that humanity with its religion and culture, can bear witness, can be a sign that points toward the gracious reconciliation established between God and humanity from God’s side. This is the best and the most it can do. As soon as it tries to do more, as soon as it regards itself as a source of revelation, it becomes an idol (Metzger, 2003: 52-53)

For all Barth’s opposition to Emil Brunner’s search for a “point of contact” between God and humanity, which culminated in Barth’s fierce critique, *Nein!*, which ended their debate as well as their friendship, Barth actually proposed that there *is* such a point of contact between God and humanity, i.e., Jesus Christ. If the search for something divine within nature, within humanity, could be abandoned, Barth was eager to admit that from God’s side, from the side of grace, such a point of contact has indeed been created in nature, in humanity, in the incarnated Son of God, Jesus Christ. Although human nature is not divine and should never be seen as divine, it should also not be viewed as secular, as if it is without the divine. Because in Jesus Christ, human nature is taken up in the divine life of God. Thus, argues Metzger, Barth attempted not only to emphasise the de-deification of human nature, but also the de-secularization of human nature (Metzger, 2003: 57, 61, 63).

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The pointing finger

Although Barth did not deny or reject religious experiences within the human world, he said that they only function as signs, pointing to another reality. Speaking to a group of Methodists, Barth radicalised their understanding of the experience of salvation, by saying that the true experience of salvation is to be found in the event of Golgotha. Our own experiences of salvation are completely empty if they do not participate in that experience (Busch, 1975: 447).

According to Barth, the Bible is not ultimately concerned with religion, but with reality, not with history, but with truth. Barth compared all the religion and history, all the morality and philosophy, all the faith and obedience we find in the Bible, to the pointing hand of John the Baptist in Matthias Grünewald's painting of the crucifixion (that hung in front of his desk in his office), which points away from itself toward the crucified Christ. We can analyse the pious experiences and actions of the Biblical characters with all our modern knowledge of psychology, sociology and anthropology, we can try to understand it by means of historical criticism, but that to which it is pointing, the reality which is the real object of the Bible, i.e. the Word of God towards humanity, is beyond the science of religion, and can only be heard in faith. Only when religion is able to continually discard itself, only when religion is able to cease all its efforts to move closer to God and welcome God's movement toward humanity, only when religion dispenses its words about God and listens to God's Word to humanity, only then will religion be able to point beyond itself to the reality of God. But as soon as religion becomes aware of itself, as soon as religion takes notice of its own religious experiences, as soon as religion becomes intrigued by its own history, as soon as religion turns its gaze toward its own faith and obedience, it turns in upon itself and becomes idolatry. The Bible's polemic is not against the godless world, but against the religious world, against all the relative powers and authorities which are elevated as absolute powers and authorities, while God alone is to be worshiped in God's absolute power and authority. The Bible, seen from above, contains the acts of God to reach out to humanity, while seen from below, it contains merely the failed efforts of humanity to reach out to God, which is impossible. Near the pointing finger in Grünewald's painting are the words from John 3:30: "He must become greater; I must become less." The church, the community of faith, those who hear the Word of God, are not the focus of the Bible, but the One who is heard, the One who is speaking, the Word made flesh, the Lord of the church, the One without whom all our faith and obedience will come to naught (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 65-70, 72, 75-76; Jüngel, 1986: 59-60).

At a student conference in Aarau in 1920, Barth said that the polemic of the Bible, in stark contrast to contemporary religious scholars, is not against a godless world, but against a religious world. Even the Old Testament is filled with the constant refrain that God does not desire sacrifices. But what does God desire then? The Old Testament can only give preliminary, mysterious, negative answers to this question: obedience, justice, love, open ears, gratefulness, the fear of the Lord, a broken heart. Then in the New Testament one sacrifice makes all other sacrifices unnecessary. In the Old and New Testament we find heathens with more faith and obedience than Israel or the church. Why? Because what the Bible is pointing to, is not religion or religious experiences, but it is pointing to God. What the Bible is attacking, is not a God-less world, for God is present in the world, but a religious world, which tries to be its own god (Barth, 1920: *KB*: 155).

In 1921 Barth preached from Matthew 11:28, a sermon on confession of sin. In this sermon, Barth said that the church is often the greatest stumbling block in hearing Jesus' call: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." The only way to respond to Jesus' call, is with gratitude, confession of sin and prayer. The only way to respond to Jesus' call, is empty-handed, by letting go of all that we are carrying, with nothing

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to bring to Jesus, except our burdens. But the church is often the one who gives people things to carry, whose voice calls people to do exactly the opposite of what Jesus calls them to do. Barth said that if we want to hear Jesus' call, we have to shut our ears to other voices, even, or especially, to the voice to the church, telling us to carry things that Jesus is telling us to put down (Barth, 1921: *KB*: 230-231). Jesus calls us, not to bring anything, but to bring ourselves, our empty-handed, tired, burdened selves. We can only come to Jesus in the faith that we are called to bring nothing, only ourselves. Faith begins with the realisation how little faith we have, and how little faith we need. Faith begins with the prayer: "Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief!" Faith begins with the revelation that Jesus does not see us as strong and capable, but as tired and burdened, and that Jesus calls us as such (Barth, 1921: *KB*: 232-234).

Beyond humanity?

To some of Barth's contemporaries, notably Paul Tillich, Barth's theology did not only point beyond human possibilities, but beyond humanity itself. Tillich, and others, wanted to know how God encounters humanity within our humanity, and thus also within modern culture.

Gallus argues that Barth and Tillich never really were in conversation with each other, but rather passed each other by. Tillich viewed Barth mainly through the lens of *Romans II* and *Nein!*, and criticised Barth for having a false dialectic. In Tillich's view, there was not a real encounter between God and humanity in Barth's theology, since Barth did not allow for any "point of contact" (Emil Brunner's phrase) or any "correlation" (the term Tillich preferred) between God and humanity. The supposed dialectic or encounter that Barth spoke of, was in fact beyond humanity, completely outside humanity. Humanity was not involved in the battle between good and evil, between God and the devil, between sin and grace. For Tillich, Barth was a supra-naturalist, whose starting point from revelation, "from above," actually meant that his theology did not concern humanity. For Barth, Tillich did not have an appreciation of the development of his theology. While Tillich emphasised that the Yes and No of theology must be seen together, he did not see that in Barth's theology God's No to humanity, which he emphasised so greatly in *Romans II* and *Nein!*, stood in service of God's Yes to humanity. Tillich understood that faith for Barth is an impossible possibility, but he thought that was all that Barth had to say about faith. It took Tillich very long to see that Barth wrote extensively about the positive content of actual faith (Gallus, 2007: 555-557, 559-560, 562).

According to Gallus, Tillich viewed humanity's ability to seek God as a human possibility, as a residue of the *imago Dei* which was not annihilated by humanity's fall. For Tillich, a true encounter between God and humanity was dependent upon this positive correlation between God and humanity. Without the human possibility of asking after God, all human responsibility and thus the possibility of ethics is rejected (Gallus, 2007: 560-561). Later in life, when arriving in the USA, Tillich had to differentiate himself from the "neo-orthodox" theology of Barth. This caused Tillich to become more acquainted with Barth's other works. Tillich's critique of Barth softened, and finally Tillich saw his philosophical theology "from below" as a necessary supplement or opposite pole to Barth's "kerygmatic" theology "from above" (Gallus, 2007: 555-556, 562).

Who is asking the questions?

Gallus argues that for Barth, the problem with Tillich's theology was not necessarily the fact that it was done "from below," but rather that it did not only seek its answers in the Bible, but also in church history, in the history of culture, in the history of religions. What bothered Barth above all, was the fact that Tillich sought answers for philosophical questions. Whether

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Barth's critique was fair, is disputable, since Barth had an even more superficial and eschewed understanding of Tillich's theology, than Tillich had of his. Since his commentary on Anselm, and perhaps even before that, Barth had forsaken the effort to force the Bible to answer the questions of philosophy. By allowing philosophy to pose the questions, Barth felt that a fundamental decision had already been made to accept the modern worldview as normative for theological answers. For Barth, there was no guarantee that theology's answers could be made to fit into philosophy's questions. And therefore Barth was not concerned with the efforts of Tillich, but concerned himself with the endeavour to let theology's answers pose its own questions. For Barth, theology could be done "from below," from the viewpoint of humanity's need, as long as humanity's need is found within the Bible, and not within philosophy. Barth would even be able to speak about the "correlation" between God and humanity, as long as that correlation is not sought in humanity's ability to seek God with its philosophical questions, but in the covenant God made between humanity and God-self. This Biblical correlation between God and humanity, however, is foreign to Tillich's theology (Gallus, 2007: 564).

The problem, for Barth, when one tries to make faith relevant to modern, secular culture, as many of his contemporaries attempted to do, like Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann, is that either Christ or culture will ultimately become the starting point, the dominating framework that sets the criteria for faith and obedience. Either Christ or culture will become the sovereign authority which reigns over the other. And with such a passionate drive to make the gospel acceptable to modern, secular people, as Bultmann and Tillich had, was it not inevitable that culture would in the last analysis reign over Christ in their theologies? Perhaps they succeeded in making the Christian faith once again relevant and palatable to modern humanity, but over time Barth had to distinguish his theology from theirs, as he became more and more wary that in the dialectic theology of Bultmann and Tillich it could not be said for certain whether Christ reigned over culture or culture reigned over Christ (Metzger, 2003: 79-80).

While Tillich found Barth's starting point with God supra-naturalist, and he felt that it made a real encounter between God and humanity impossible, Barth found Tillich's starting point with humanity anthropocentric (Gallus, 2007: 566). Gallus argues that the most fundamental difference between Barth and Tillich, was in Barth's understanding of humanity's total depravity in sin, making faith and obedience impossible for humanity, and the anthropological optimism in Tillich's soteriology, which meant that humanity's possibility to seek God, was not destroyed by sin (Gallus, 2007: 574).

Perhaps the difference between Barth and Tillich was less the difference between starting "from above" and starting "from below," than it was a difference between letting the Bible question modern humanity and letting modern humanity question the Bible. Barth could do a theology "from below" and Tillich could do a theology "from above" and they would still not be speaking to each other, since the true battle for a starting point was not between "above" and "below," but between the Bible and modern philosophy.

Furthermore, the political divide between Barth and Tillich should not be underestimated. Although Tillich was initially positive about Barth's dialectic theology, it was in the 1930's that Tillich began to describe Barth's theology as "supra-naturalist," since it did not allow for any correlation between human history and God's revelation (Gallus, 2007: 555). And it was in the 1930's that Barth's attack upon his theological friends became increasingly fierce, culminating in his book *Nein!*, wherein he completely rejected Brunner's "point of contact" between God and humanity. These were the times wherein Barth felt urged to differentiate himself from every theologian who could not say with the clearest and most unambiguous voice that there is no secondary revelation of God outside Jesus Christ, as the Nazi Party proclaimed itself to be (Busch, 2004a: 31-32, 67).

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The end of possibility, the beginning of life

In Barth's view human possibilities or religious possibilities are not true possibilities. It may have the appearance of a possibility, it may have the allure, the attraction of a possibility that is accessible to all. But it ends in disaster. It leads to death. The life of religion leads to death. It is only in the death of human possibilities, in the death of religious possibilities, that a resurrected life of faith and obedience can begin. It is only at the end of the old world order, at the end of all human thought and action, at the end of human history, when this heaven and earth have passed away, that the possibilities of the new order, the new creation, the new humanity, the new heaven and earth can come to life. We must die with Christ in order to be raised with Christ. It is only at the end of faith in humanity that faith in Christ can begin (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 80, 82, 91).

Barth did not take this position lightly, but he was convinced that it is the only position the church can take. He understood fully that this position places a severe judgment on all our thoughts and actions. For him, the cross of Christ was not primarily a stumbling block and foolishness for unbelievers, but for believers, since it places a question mark over all our faith and obedience. The cross is a stumbling block and foolishness for the church, since it exposes our purest faith as unbelief and our greatest obedience as disobedience, it exposes how self-reliant our religion has in fact become. The cross is the source of our "greatest shame, confusion, and restraint," since it places all our thoughts and actions under the critical judgment: "Behold, I make all things new." All our words about God, all our moral, social and political actions, all our evangelism and service, fall under this judgment, and therefore the only way to respond to the Word of God spoken to us, to the Easter message that confronts us, to the completely new order facing us, is "to have it, to show it, to live it" (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 85-86).

We do not need to believe in the miracles of the Bible. The miracles in the Bible are not of importance, since they also point beyond themselves to *the* miracle. They point to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, to the whole new world order, the new heaven and earth, the new creation, the strange new world of the Bible, wherein all human possibilities have come to an end and only God's reality remains, where humanity's death is conquered by God's victorious life. Faith is not to believe in miracles, but to stand upon a whole new, miraculous reality. Faith is not to believe that impossible things can happen, but to live by the impossible new reality of the resurrected Christ. Whether it be the resurrection of Lazarus or the forgiveness of sins, both are equally unbelievable and impossible, except within the completely new world order established by Christ's bodily resurrection from the dead. There is in actuality only one religious experience, Barth said, namely our bodily resurrection from the dead. If our faith and obedience do not stem from this first primary experience, and point toward it, they can only lead to death. But if our faith and obedience do indeed begin with our burial and resurrection in Christ, they exist within the new life, the new creation, which has begun in Christ (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 91-94).

Standing where we cannot stand

In order not to be deceived by the mere appearance of possibilities, human or religious possibilities which are not true possibilities, Barth held fast to the theological starting point that "we precisely who cannot stand before God do stand before God" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 177). It is this theological starting point, which determined Barth's understanding of "possibility." It is this theological starting point which made Barth's understanding of "possibility" so stringent, so paradoxical and perhaps tedious and unnecessarily difficult to some. But it is precisely at this point where paths divide.

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If “possibility” is seen from the viewpoint that we who cannot stand before God do stand before God, then it means that any true possibility has to be a possibility wherein (a) humanity remains humanity and (b) God remains God (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 180). As soon as we depart from the fundamental belief that we who cannot stand before God do indeed stand before God, we are no longer speaking of humanity and then we are no longer speaking of God, and therefore we can talk endlessly about all the possibilities of humanity, but it will all come to nought, since we will no longer be speaking of the encounter between true humanity and the true God. As soon as the qualitative distinction between God and humanity is blurred and we start speaking in terms of a natural connection between God and humanity, then all hope is forsaken of a true encounter between God and humanity.

Barth made the distinction between humanity and God in the encounter very, very clear, in order to ensure that we are truly speaking about God, truly speaking about humanity, and truly speaking about an encounter between the two. In this lengthy quote, Barth eloquently rejects any notion that God is merely an extension of humanity:

“Again, we must be able at any moment to distinguish God from ourselves and our states and activity, and we must be ready to do so. Being with God has to mean being with another, with one who is inalienably other. A God who is merely the extension of our own life impulse or the incommensurable background of our own *élan vital* is in no case God. The truth and power of the relation at issue depend on its really being a relation; indeed, a relation in which God confronts us in qualitative and not just quantitative superiority. We have to understand and assert this qualitative distinction so radically that there can be no question of any erasure of the boundary. Finally, in this relation God must confront us in a relation of Creator and creature, that is, as person and not merely basis or cause, as Spirit who as in the virgin birth does not need to generate but only to command and bless, only to create. *His work, the new qualification of our human frailty that is called faith and obedience and is pleasing to God, can have nothing in common with an event of nature.* Relevant here is neither a mechanical relation of cause and effect, of pressure and impress, of a great and small quantity, nor the organic one of growth in its various stages or of life in its various forms. If what we call God is not safeguarded in the sense of not being an ‘it’ but a ‘he,’ Spirit, person, then there can be no question of that reversal, that is, of conversion. We can be converted to God only if God himself is really on the scene” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 179, *my italics*).

For Barth it was questionable whether the “faith” that the theology of the nineteenth century spoke of, was indeed the Christian faith. The attempts made by these theologians to understand faith within the subjective categories of humanity, in terms of its own spiritual life or self-awareness, transformed faith into something which is not fully dependent upon God, but which is self-sufficient, a human possibility independent from God. Faith was understood to be grounded in itself. It had no object outside itself, no *vis-à-vis*. It was not faith in God, but faith in faith. It was not the relationship between God and humanity, but humanity’s relationship with itself, or at the most, humanity’s relationship with its highest ideals or deepest longings (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 25)

Barth was only interested in a possibility born in a true encounter between God and humanity, in an encounter which does not merely have the appearance of an encounter, but which is real on both sides, and also real at every moment. And therefore the further criteria of this possibility are that it must entail (c) human action that is truly active and truly human and (d) that there is an “indestructible flexibility in the realization of this relation” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 181), meaning that the relation “must be renewed every moment both by God’s work and word and in our knowing and doing” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 180). “The relation has to be a conversation, a drama, a struggle...” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 180).

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Mere spectators?

Barth's emphasis on the fact that humanity cannot stand before God, that we are "poor, miserable, naked and empty with reference to God, people in a contradiction from which we cannot break free," (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 177) does not mean that humanity is passive in the encounter. To the contrary, Barth emphasised the paradox that we who cannot stand before God, do indeed stand before God, and indeed on our own two feet. Humanity is *active* in the encounter, otherwise it is not a real encounter. In another long quote, Barth beautifully explains that just as God is not an extension of humanity, so humanity is also not an extension of God, but God as well as humanity is fully active in the encounter. Barth said:

"As our existence in contradiction – we must constantly stress this – is not just something we suffer from but our own *act*, so our encounter with God must be not merely something that comes upon us like fate or a roaring hailstorm. If this encounter means question and answer, speaking and hearing, giving and receiving between us and God, then we must be actors in the relation. We must not be mere leaves growing on the divine tree or floating in the divine breeze, nor must we be drops in the divine ocean, nor stones rolled down by the divine avalanche, nor wheels driven round by the divine motor. *On such views* the relation is much too continuous, much too much on the same level. And *standing before God is taken with far too little seriousness*. If fellowship between God and us is to mean anything, then it must mean that we in our sphere turn no less to God than God turns to us in his sphere. Revelation is really present only in action, we laid down already in § 3.III.2. We must apply this on the subjective side too. There has to be a recognition, an acceptance, an acknowledgment, a respecting, a bowing down. *This is why there has to be faith and obedience*. This is why expressly there has to be knowledge and action, not just sinking and vanishing, not just stillness and passivity, not just a "feeling of absolute dependence" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 179-180, *my italics*).

Barth was here continuing his polemical attack on modern theology, founded in his view by Friedrich Schleiermacher (from whom the quotation "feeling of absolute dependence" comes), and in his discussion of the concept of religion he is explicitly showing the difference between his theology and modern theology. For Barth, modern theology could not speak of a real, active encounter between God and humanity, since in its religious optimism, it viewed God and humanity on the same plane, as an extension of each other. Therefore modern theology was not really speaking about God, but only about humanity in elevated terms, nor of an encounter between God and humanity, but of an encounter between humanity and its ideal self.

Religious optimism

It is rather remarkable how apt Barth's polemic is today. Barth's attack on the religious optimism of his day almost seems as if it is addressed at the popular literature on spirituality today, although it precedes it by almost a century. Perhaps this is a polemical discourse that has never left the church and never will. Especially in contexts of prosperity and peace, the church is always tempted to overestimate its own religious possibilities, as well as the possibilities of humanity, of culture and education. In the temptation to become more "relevant," to speak in terms that are less paradoxical, less obscure and offensive to the cultural hubris of the day, the church is tempted to forsake its proclamation of the God who alone can save this world by God's gracious and free action – which is in actual fact the most relevant message there is – for a more "relevant" message, of how humanity can better itself by its own efforts.

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Is the term that serves as a similar flag today, in comparison to the term “religion” in Barth’s day, not the term “spirituality”? Perhaps in academic circles “religion” still serves as a flag for this retreat into a God-less theology, but in popular culture “spirituality” seems to be the term of choice when people long for a theology where God as object can be discarded, and all that is needed is the possibility of humanity.

The term “religion” was for Barth not beyond redemption, especially if it is understood in the same way as the Reformers used it. But in Barth’s view the term served in the previous 200 years as a flag under which theologians retreated who no longer had the courage to speak about the object of theology, the Word of God, choosing rather to speak about the history of religion, or the psychology of religion. And therefore the term had become too problematic for Barth and could serve no good purpose in his theology (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 182).

Migliore notes in the foreword of Barth’s *Göttingen Dogmatics*, that the title of the Göttingen lectures: *Instruction in the Christian Religion*, might be deceiving. Barth used this title with reference to the title of Calvin’s dogmatics: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, after the Göttingen faculty would not allow Barth to lecture on dogmatics proper, since he was an honorary professor who was appointed with the task of teaching *Reformed* theology. Barth appealed to the authorities in Berlin, who ruled against Barth and in favour of his Lutheran colleagues. Barth then used Calvin’s title as an “alias,” but told his students that the title reads “Prolegomena to Dogmatics” on *his* manuscript, since there can be no such thing as *Reformed* dogmatics, but only *Christian* dogmatics, which is undertaken from within a specific tradition (Migliore, 1991: XV-XVI).

The optimism of the young Barth

Religious optimism is a very attractive option, which is very tempting. It is an option which Barth embraced completely as a student and young minister.

In his university years the main influences on Barth were Immanuel Kant, Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Herrmann, and he also had contact with theologians such as Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch (Metzger, 2003: 5).

As a student Barth experienced a conversion of sorts while reading Kant and swallowed the theology of modern Protestantism with hook, line and sinker. At the end of his studies Barth was, in his own words, a complete product of Marburg. He was more versed in and convinced by the theology of modern Protestantism than anybody he knew. Like the famous horseman who crossed the frozen lake Constance on horseback without even realising it, so complete was the young Barth’s faith and commitment to modern Protestant theology, without even a hint of suspicion about the dangers that lurk beneath. The young Barth could preach with enthusiasm that faith is an event that takes place in our hearts, that every person is called to be true to him- or herself, that knowing yourself is knowing God (Busch, 1975: 35, 46, 54).

To speak of faith and obedience in such anthropological, philosophical and psychological terms, in terms of human or religious possibilities, in such a way that God as object is not really needed, is a very alluring option to do “relevant” theology in an atheistic, secular age.

Barth’s departure from this theology occurred with his disillusionment in 1914, when 93 German intellectuals, of whom many were theology professors that Barth looked up to, issued a manifesto wherein they supported the German war effort (Busch, 1975: 81). Barth recalled this day in August of 1914 as a fateful “black day” in his personal experience. The public support given to the war policy of Wilhelm II by these 93 esteemed scholars, including

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some theological teachers that Barth admired greatly, was a horrific shock to him (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 12-13).

For Barth, his entire worldview, his complete philosophical frame work, the unspoken assumptions with which he read the Bible, prepared sermons, understood dogmatics and ethics, the theology as a whole wherein Barth found himself and which he deemed to be trustworthy, was shaken from the ceiling to the basement. Everything he thought he knew, every German theologian he previously trusted, was suddenly brought under suspicion. Theological words, sentences and arguments that seemed innocent, good and pure, were no longer to be trusted (Webster, 2000b: 3).

What one must understand, is that Barth's opposition to modern Protestant theology did not come lightly. It was precisely because of Barth's affinity for it, because of Barth's full acceptance of it, because of his absolute trust in it, that he rejected it so fiercely and thoroughly, when he discovered that he had been deceived and deluded by it (Schwöbel, 2000: 19).

A modern critic of modernism

Jonker makes a good argument that Barth himself was a thoroughly modern theologian. Barth's turn away from the liberal theology of modern Protestantism, did not come about while studying the pre-modern theologians of the Reformation or the 17th century. That happened later. Barth's turn away from the liberal theology of modern Protestantism occurred because of the inherent failures in modern theology itself. Rather than returning to orthodox theology, which Barth always denied, his theology attempted to do modern theology in a completely new way. All the issues confronting the modern world, all the modern assumptions about humanity, were front and centre in Barth's mind as he searched for a new way to do theology in the modern era. Barth's theology had the same concern of relevance in a modern world, than did liberal theology. According to Jonker, Barth was a modern theologian through and through, but one who saw the problems of modernity and wanted to address those problems critically (Jonker, 1988: 33-34).

Jonker is in agreement with other scholars who claim that Barth did not wish to undo the Enlightenment, but rather to radicalise the thinking of modernity by rethinking the whole Christian message in the light of the central themes of modernity, i.e., freedom and autonomy. Barth, however, took a critical stance toward modern thinking, and grounded human freedom and autonomy not in humanity itself, but in the freedom and autonomy of God (Jonker, 1988: 37).

When Barth was discussing some of the mistakes the 17th century orthodoxy made regarding the doctrine of sin and the law, and even some errors of the Reformers (most especially for Barth, in placing the doctrine of sin before soteriology, rather than deriving the knowledge of sin from the knowledge of grace), Barth said the slogan "Back to..." is never a good slogan. Whether it be "Back to orthodoxy," or "Back to the Reformers," we will not do justice to these theologians by merely affirming their theology. We will pay these theologians greater respect, said Barth, if we do not merely affirm them, but also depart from them, where we must do so, in order to move forward (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 372).

Barth found to his great dismay that the cultured humanity of the West, together with the modern Protestant theology that supported it, was morally bankrupt, and thus his focus shifted from the abilities of cultured humanity, to the actions of God. Another important influence on Barth at this time, was his contact with Christoph Blumhardt in 1915, whose theology focused on the radical new world order confronting humanity, namely the kingdom

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of God. Furthermore, Barth's struggle to preach to the blue collar workers in his congregation in Safenwil, where the liberal theology he embraced as a student, did not seem to speak to their concrete battles, reinforced Barth's theological turn toward the Word and action of God-self, rather than the words and actions of religious and cultured humanity. Although Barth was very much influenced by Socialism, and helped to organize a labour union in Safenwil, he had a growing suspicion that the socialist movement was prone to equate their social agenda with the kingdom of God, which left Barth dissatisfied, and made him look for a more radical understanding of God's coming kingdom (Metzger, 2003: 10-11).

Support for the German war effort of 1914 did not only come from liberal theologians, but also from the proponents of religious socialism, which made Barth equally suspicious of the theologies underlying liberal theology *and* religious socialism (Haddorff, 2010: 59-60).

Barth realised that the unethical behaviour of his theological mentors was not incidental, it was not merely the wrong ethical application of a sound theology. Barth became convinced that the problem lay in modern Protestant theology itself, and that the root of its mistake went all the way back to Friedrich Schleiermacher, who, for Barth, was the father and most brilliant exponent of modern Protestant theology (Busch, 1975: 81-82).

Barth's good friend Eduard Thurneysen suggested that they had to find a wholly new foundation for their theology, one that does not start with humanity's religious experience, as they learnt from Schleiermacher. In order to find the God that does not simply underwrite the moral codes already assumed by religious humanity, they had to begin with the strange new world found within the Bible. The God that liberal theology worshipped, was to their mind exposed by the First World War as an idol, unable to stop religious humanity's unethical decisions. In order to be able to do God's will, we have to worship the God that is able to go against our will. If God was not merely to be an extension or the best version of ourselves, then God had to be a wholly Other who stands over and against humanity, and especially over and against religious humanity, since we are the ones who claim to be doing God's will (Gorringe, 1999: 36).

In the 20th century, the "relevant," subjective, God-less theology stemming from Schleiermacher, turned out to be toothless when faced with world events such as World War I, Nazism, World War II and the Cold War. The very same "relevance" of modern theology, then became its irrelevance, since it was completely co-opted into the cultural stream of the day and unable to speak critically and prophetically when that stream started flowing in the wrong direction.

The way that Barth related to his context, the "relevance" of his theology to the surrounding world, was more often than not, to be found in the way that he contradicted it. The world was not helped by simply agreeing with it, and even less by giving divine sanction to its ideals and desires. The world was only truly helped, Barth felt, by showing to what extent the Word of God *contradicts* our human ideas, to what extent God is *against* our human ambitions (Jehle, 2002: 14).

It would be a colossal error, according to Gorringe, to think that Barth's theology was not addressing his context. Engaged in a fierce battle with the spirit of his time, and with no romanticising of the 4th or the 16th century, Barth tried to let the Word of God speak directly against the *Zeitgeist*. Even with respect to the most theoretical theological debates regarding the trinity, Gorringe is convinced that Barth was addressing the present world in "every sentence" (Gorringe, 1999: 107-108).

Metzger also argues that Barth was a modern theologian, despite the accusation made by Paul Tillich that Barth had a "kerygmatic" theology, which did not address the modern cultural context. Schleiermacher, and the modern Protestant theology that followed him,

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attempted to give theology a place within the worldview of modernity. Barth, however, did not attempt to view the Word of God in the light of contemporary culture, but rather to view contemporary culture in the light of the Word of God. One could perhaps say that for Schleiermacher Christianity served as a means for humanity to become more cultured, whereas Christianity, for Barth, served as a means for culture to become more human. Barth believed that this can only happen if the anthropological turn in modern thought, beginning with Descartes and completed by Kant, which caused modern Protestantism to focus on believing humanity, rather than on the God in whom we believe, had to be reversed. Otherwise our theology will always just reaffirm our culture, and our culture will not be confronted by God, who alone can make our culture more human (Metzger, 2003: xix, 3-5).

Although Barth's theology was a theology of the Word, Metzger reminds us that it should never be forgotten that this Word is the gospel, the good news spoken to the world, and thus most definitely a theology for the world. Barth's theology of the Word shattered all attempts of natural theology to divinise culture, but it did so, not to discard culture, but rather to humanise it (Metzger, 2003: 81).

A pessimistic theology?

In contexts of relative prosperity and peace, it is difficult to understand Barth's attack on all forms of natural theology, i.e., a theology wherein there is any suggestion that people have a natural capacity or ability to better their own situation, to save themselves, to become anything more than lost sinners. In the "sunny age" of Schleiermacher, or perhaps – God-willing – the 21st century, Barth's brutal attack upon even the smallest suggestion of a natural theology – epitomised by his harsh attack on his friend Emil Brunner in the book *Nein!*, which refuted Brunner's insistence on a "point of contact" between God and humanity – seems unnecessary, hard-headed and even obscurantist.

Even Barth admitted later, in 1956 at a conference in Aargau on "A new humanism," in his lecture entitled "The humanity of God," that God's divinity includes God's humanity (Busch, 1975: 423-424). Barth conceded that he had perhaps "boxed" people's "ears" too hard with the impossibility of faith and obedience in his earlier life, especially in his commentary on Romans. Now, after the world wars, Barth could also consider the merits of humanism. But still, he maintained, that even when he and his colleagues formulated the qualitative difference between God and humanity too strongly and negatively in those earlier years, "we were wrong exactly where we were right." Being so overwhelmed with the deity of God, Barth and his colleagues spoke of God's deity, of God's wholly otherness, in absolute terms, and thus abstracted it from God's humanity. Barth admitted that in his excitement to emphasise the deity of God 40 years earlier, the God he spoke of then sometimes seemed more like the abstract God of the philosophers than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 41).

"The humanity of God" means for Barth God's turning towards humanity. It refers to the God who speaks to humanity in promise and command. It refers to God's free and gracious decision to be no other God than the God of humanity. This, for Barth, was not a change of direction in his theology, but a distinction. 40 years earlier the humanity of God was moved to the periphery and the deity of God was placed in the centre of Barth's theology. What Barth said about God's deity 40 years earlier could not be the last word, just as what he was now saying about the humanity of God, could not be the last word. What remained the same, the direction that did not change, was the understanding that God's humanity can only be derived from God's divinity (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 33-34).

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What theology did in the past two or three centuries, according to Barth, not only liberal theology, but even orthodox theology, was to derive God's divinity from humanity's faith and obedience. The new direction that Barth took after 1914 and that he still pursued 40 years later, was to speak of God, who is the Lord, the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer of humanity, who stands over and against humanity, who claims humanity, whose Word must be trusted in faith and whose work must be followed in obedience, rather than to speak about humanity's faith and obedience, and to derive an idolatrous image of God from that (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 36). Barth had no intention of saying something different or new, but to say the same thing even better and clearer than before, namely that we do not find the true God by examining humanity's possibilities, but that we find true humanity by examining the reality of God (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 38).

Even then, even 40 years earlier, Barth and his colleagues were not completely ignorant of the fact that the divinity of this "wholly other" God, the divinity of the living God, were to be found in God's Word and actions towards humanity (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 42). What they then suspected, Barth could now say unambiguously, namely that God's deity includes God's humanity. In Jesus Christ God is with humanity and humanity is with God (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 42-43).

The God of Schleiermacher cannot turn towards humanity, be gracious towards humanity or help humanity, since this God is already posited within human experience. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, however, can be the God of humanity (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 49). Even if it means that humanity gets crippled in the struggle with God, as Jacob was, the encounter is real and therefore the blessing that God bestows upon us, as God bestowed on Jacob, is also real.

The implication of the humanity of God is that we have to think of *every human being*, no matter how evil or pathetic, as someone to whom Jesus is a Brother and God is a Father. If we do not recognise someone's human rights and human dignity, we deny that Jesus is our Brother and that God is our Father (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 50).

What we *can* say

Even a decade before this lecture, in 1946, when speaking in the semi-ruins of Bonn, Barth said that when the Apostles' Creed speaks of "God in the highest," we must understand that this does not refer to a God who is quite other, a God completely apart from our existence as human beings. Indeed, it does mean that God is in no way to be found within human possibilities or dispositions, that God can in no way be found by means of human seeking, by our own feeling or thinking, but only by God's Self-revelation. However, it is precisely this God, who cannot be found by humanity, who has found humanity. It is precisely this God, to whom we cannot draw near, who has drawn near to us. This God has nothing to do with all the gods we find by means of our human attempts to find God or to be like God by ourselves, but still has everything to do with us, since God united God-self with humanity. Saying with the creed "I believe in God," we must know that it is this God, God in the highest, who cannot be found by humanity, but who has come down to us, who is God with us, who has become "our God" (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 37).

Jenson argues that around 1930, with Barth's book on Anselm, as well as his essay "Fate and Idea in Theology," Barth began to find a way to say positively what he had been saying negatively up to that point. Barth had to do so, for as a professor in theology, he had at one point or another to start saying what we *can* say about the relationship between God and humanity, and not only what we *cannot* say about this relationship. But furthermore, people cannot live by negations alone, they cannot only live *against* something. People must also

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live by affirmations, they must live *for* something. This, says Jenson, is what divided paths for the dialectic theologians. Although they were united in what *cannot* be said about the relationship between God and humanity, when they had to start saying what *can* then be said, they found themselves to be on different routes (Jenson, 1969: 68).

What Barth could now say more clearly, was that our faith and obedience can never reach God, not because God is so far away from humanity, but rather because God has drawn so near to humanity. Faith in religion, faith in our own faith and obedience, is the attempt to reach out to a god who is far away, and thus founded upon unbelief in God's nearness. The error of unbelief, the fallacy of faith in religion, is that it assumes that human beings begin their lives apart from Christ, and must move toward Christ by faith and obedience. Thus Barth did not withdraw "one word" from *The Epistle to the Romans*, says Jenson. The radical judgment over all the attempts to reach God by faith and obedience still stood firmly. However, now Barth indicated that this judgment on humanity's reliance upon its own faith and obedience, was not due to the "infinite qualitative difference between time and eternity," but rather due to the nearness of Jesus Christ to humanity. By replacing the philosophical concept "eternity" with Jesus of Nazareth, Barth could now give positive content to his theology, without minimizing the radical relativity of humanity's faith and obedience (Jenson, 1969: 71).

In his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth made it clear that to say that God is everything and humanity is nothing, is not only an oversimplification, but in fact erroneous. God is indeed everything, but God is everything *so that* humanity is not nothing anymore, so that humanity may be God's creatures, God's people, God's faithful covenant partners, even God's co-workers and God's co-creators. Because God is everything, humanity is much more than we can ever dream or hope for. Humanity *is* this new creation. It is not a possibility or an opportunity, it is not just something which is placed before humanity or which could be applied to humanity, but it is done for and with humanity, it is humanity's new reality. It derives, however, in full from all that God has done for and with humanity. The image that Barth uses to illustrate this point, is that of the foam produced by a waterfall plunging from high in the mountains. The foam is real, and it is truly elevated to new heights, but it finds itself in this new position because of the power of the waterfall from above (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 88-90).

In the third part of his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth said that humanity is dark, is in darkness and that there is darkness in humanity. Humanity loves the darkness and wants to remain in the darkness. God attacks the darkness, attacks it with the aim of destroying it. But God does not attack humanity. God's aim is not to destroy humanity, but to bring humanity into the light (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 251).

Saying No in order to say Yes

Webster says that a "turning" of Barth from a negative to a more positive theology, should not be over-emphasised. From the beginning, from the first edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth was learning to say "No" to humanity *in order* to say a much more resounding "Yes" to humanity (Webster, 2000a: 22-23).

McCormack makes a good case that Barth did not suddenly turn to a neo-orthodox theology in 1931-1932, when he began his *Church Dogmatics*, but that Barth employed a "critically realistic dialectical theology" from 1915 until the end of his life (McCormack, 1995: vii; 464). While Barth even made some theological choices in the years of 1911-1914, which prepared the way for his new direction in 1915, from that year onward Barth was concerned with a theology which was grounded upon the real, living God, who is revealed by God's own

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speech and action. And although Anselm's analogy of faith, which Barth discovered between 1927 and 1931, allowed him to speak more freely and unapologetically about the Word and action of God, it did not signal a directional turn or fundamental shift in his theology, as has been suggested by some (McCormack, 1995: ix, 5-9).

Barth's motivation to speak so negatively about the impossibility of a relation between God and humanity in his commentary on Romans, was to emphasise the freedom and primacy of God, that it is *God* who takes the initiative of grace to move towards humanity, and not the initiative of humanity (Green, 1989: 18).

It was the "maybe" and "not so bad" of accommodating theologies that bothered Barth, since all its apparent human possibilities ended up in peril. Barth rejected all possible points of contact between God and humanity, in order to arrive at the real, true, sure and certain encounter between God and humanity. Barth said "No" to all the attempts to find a divine possibility within humanity, in order to say "Yes" to the reality of God which confronts humanity in its "wholly otherness." Barth said "No" to all the notions of God as merely superlatives of human possibilities, in order to say "Yes" to the living God. When confronted with the true, living, "wholly other" God, humanity is placed under the *krisis* – the judgment – of God. In a time when nobody wanted to hear about the judgment of God anymore, Barth felt he had to talk about the judgment of God, in order to truly comprehend the grace of God. Barth's "No" to humanity's history, culture and religion, Barth's "No" to humanity's faith and obedience, was not directed against humanity, but against humanity's self-sufficiency and self-justification. Barth rejected humanity's attempt to step away from under the judgment of God, whereby it was also stepping away from under the all-sufficient grace of God. Barth was not against faith, but against faith in faith, against faith in humanity (Webster, 2000a: 25-27).

Barth's *The Epistle to the Romans* was not so much a new theology, but a corrective theology. By opposing so negatively all the attempts by religion to build a bridge between humanity and God, it cleared the way to speak about God's approach to humanity. But still, this positive intention was already present in this commentary (McCormack, 1995: 244-245).

For Barth, God's "Yes" cannot be heard, if we ignore God's "No":

"Grace is not grace, if he that receives it is not under judgement. Righteousness is not righteousness, if it be not reckoned to the sinner. Life is not life, if it be not life from death. And God is not God, if he be not the End of men" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 187).

Despite all the emphasis in Barth's commentary on Romans regarding the qualitative distinction, the opposition between God and humanity, Barth did not view the dualism between Adam and Christ, between humanity and God, as equal forces pulling in opposite directions. For Barth, this dualism was to be understood as *one* movement. God's "No" and God's "Yes" both point in the same direction. The difference and opposition between God and humanity are overcome and dissolved by God, from God's side. God says "No" to all humanity's movements towards God, in order to say "Yes" to God's movement towards humanity. There is no reverse movement from God's "Yes" back to God's "No," but only the movement from God's "No" to God's "Yes" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 176-177). God rejects, only in order to elect (Barth, 1933: *R*: 350).

God's judgment is *against* our faith and obedience in order to be *for* true faith and obedience. The *KRISIS*, the judgment of God, does not stand over and against faith and obedience as such, but over and against our dependence upon our own faith and obedience (Barth, 1933: *R*: 504). Already at this early, "negative" stage of his career, Barth could say that if we say "No" to our human attempts at faith and obedience, and if we say "Yes" to faith in Jesus, to the faithfulness of God, then we can even – very surprisingly – *believe in*

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ourselves and believe in all of humanity! Believing in Jesus means believing in the universality of the faithfulness of God. In Jesus a new reality is established, wherein our unbelief and disobedience becomes unbelievable and unsustainable. But we first have to say “No” to our own faith and obedience, *in order* to be able to say “Yes” to the true faith and obedience established in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1933: R: 107). Abraham never possessed God in faith, but God possessed Abraham in faithfulness. Abraham heard God’s judgment over his life and feared God. Abraham’s faith was found therein that he heard God’s “No” over his life and knew that it was God’s “Yes” to him. Faith is to know that in God’s “No,” God says “Yes” (Barth, 1933: R: 123, 125).

The courage to say No

Barth was not a “yes-and” theologian; a “and-at-the-same-time” theologian. He was an “either-or” theologian, a “yes-no” theologian, a “but-nevertheless” theologian. He took a position, followed it through to its last implications, and started again from the very beginning in the face of a new issue. He had no inclination towards compromises, but appreciated open and clear differences, arguments and oppositions, with no room for deceptions. He did not strive towards a balanced, vague theology that tries to incorporate different, contrasting perspectives. And he was very blunt. Busch says that the question could have been put to Barth, as it was to Calvin (whose portrait hung in Barth’s study, next to a portrait of Mozart): “Could you not be ... rather more palatable, rather more like ourselves?” But for Barth, there was too much at stake to avoid offending. He would much rather have a clear theological opponent, than one that tries to assimilate his theology with other theologies (Busch, 2004a: 4-5).

Martin Marty says that Barth was a good example of what Pascal said, that one should take note of the extreme poles of thought, but not take up position halfway in between. Barth certainly never did. Barth was in his theology, in Marty’s view, not halfway right in everything, but rather completely right in one half of his theology and completely wrong in the other. Marty felt that only later in life, in publications like *Christ and Adam* or *The Humanity of God*, did Barth begin to speak rightly about the other half, about the God who is not only wholly different from humanity, but who also condescends, who draws near, who is with humanity, who identifies with humanity (Marty, 1986: 105).

The point, however, is this: Marty is correct in his observation, and Barth would have had it no other way, that when Barth was right, he was totally right, and when he was wrong, he was totally wrong. Barth never took in a compromised position between different extremes, for fear of offending others or for fear of being wrong. Barth would rather be attacked for being wrong, than accepted for being halfway right. This was not because he liked being attacked, or because he wanted to be difficult and argumentative. To the contrary, Barth had a joyful, humorous approach to debates. But it was because Barth had seen the danger of theological deception and the terrible consequences when Christians do not have the courage to take in a firm position, but yielded to evil compromises.

In the 1930’s Barth was not concerned about stupid, fanatical German Christians, but about intelligent, sophisticated theologians, like Friedrich Gogarten, who made compromises between the opposing theological positions in Germany. Theologians such as these, with their clever synthesis of God’s revelation in Scripture on the one hand, and the divine calling upon the German nation for a special task at this moment in history on the other, not only corrupted themselves, but deceived others to go along with them (Hunsinger, 2000a: 45).

After giving a lecture on “The Christian as a Witness” in 1934 in La Châtaigneraie, in Switzerland, Barth was asked a number of questions. One Englishman thanked Barth for his

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lecture and gave acknowledgement for it, but felt that Barth made a divide between a wrathful God of the Old Testament and a gracious God of the New Testament. Barth replied that he said exactly the opposite. But then Barth added that he would have appreciated it more if the gentleman had not expressed his gratitude and acknowledgment for Barth's lecture, followed by the deceptive little word, "but." Barth would have preferred it if he plainly told him: "You are wrong!" Barth said that for the past 20 years (starting in 1914) he had heard this deceptive reply: "Yes ... but" too many times, whereby people give the impression that they are in agreement with your view, but then just leave the back door open to alter your vision by a single degree or two, and thus changing it completely. Barth would much rather have people bluntly disagreeing with him, telling him: "No!". Then, at least, they can look each other in the eye and have clarity on where each one stands (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 120-121). At that critical time, in 1934, what the world needed, was not that the church have differing opinions, whereby they say "Yes ... but in my opinion." What the world needed in 1934, was that the church regained the courage to confess: "Yes!," and the courage to refute: "No!" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 123).

A very good example of how Barth did not mind clear opposition, was in his Gifford lectures, which invited Barth to speak on natural theology in 1937-1938. Barth could not do so, since he rejected natural theology in its entirety. Barth accepted the invitation, but instead of conceding one or two possible points of connection between his theology and natural theology, Barth went ahead and gave a brutal attack upon all forms of natural theology. Barth explained his non-compromising approach by saying that perhaps natural theology will be helped the most if it was given a very clear understanding of its fiercest opponent, rather than deceiving it and giving a misrepresentation of his own theology by hiding his opposition to it (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: ix-x).

That is why Barth never remained part of a theological stream or movement for very long, and time and again found it necessary to differentiate between his theology and other theologies. Despite all the enthusiasm regarding the new dialectical theologians in the 1920's, by 1930 Barth distanced himself from Brunner, Gogarten and Bultmann. All of them, in Barth's mind, were not truly breaking away from the theology of the nineteenth century, but returning to the "flesh pots of Egypt." Albeit in a new and different form, all of them were once again attempting to view "faith as a human possibility," and thus once more turning their backs on theology and surrendering to philosophy. In his obnoxious style, Barth said that he would rather be in hell with the religious socialists, than in heaven with these dialectical theologians who were once again toying with natural theology (Gorringe, 1999: 115-116).

Politics

McCormack indicates that this break between Barth and the other dialectical theologians, should not be seen merely as a shift in Barth's theology, from a dialectical method to an analogy of faith, which Barth discovered when writing his book on Anselm. One should keep in mind that due to the political developments with the parliamentary election in September of 1930, Barth felt the need to distance himself publicly from Gogarten, Bultmann and Brunner (McCormack, 1995: 15).

Barth feared deception and assimilation much more than direct opposition, since they were the tools with which political agendas were rationalised and legitimised. Barth's fear of deception is understandable, since he was deceived by a theology which seemed so wonderful and promising to him as a student, and which turned out to be morally dubious and devious. And less than two decades later, in 1933, the same kind of deception re-

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entered the German church, which had even more far reaching and horrific consequences than the deception of 1914.

Barth's brutal opposition to his friend, Emil Brunner, with the booklet *Nein!* written in 1934, should also be understood in this light. It was not because Brunner was so far removed from the truth, but precisely because he was so close to it, that Barth attacked him so violently. Haddorff argues that Barth was concerned that his colleague and friend, also a Swiss Reformed theologian, and also an open critic of the German Christians, will persuade people with his book *Natur und Gnade*, that there can indeed be a "point of contact" between grace and nature, and thus they might justify the cohabitation of their faith in the gospel and their faith in the law, the latter meaning the social order of the Nazi state. According to Haddorff, not only mainstream theologians like Althaus and Elert, but also German Christians like Hirsch, praised Brunner's book, causing great concern for Barth. Barth had experienced before how his friend and colleague Friedrich Gogarten had become persuaded by the German Christians, and feared that the same could happen to others, including members of the Confessing Church. A theology that was very close to the truth, but which contained a very small grain of error, was much, much more dangerous in Barth's view, and had to be uprooted with much more vigour and clarity, than obvious heresies (Haddorff, 2010: 101-102).

This may also explain why Barth was not as bothered by the direct opposition between East and West in the Cold War years, but we will return to that later.

Regarding the deception of 1933, Barth responded that any given time provides its own human possibilities as substitutes for faith, whether it be morality, reason, humanity or culture. At this point in time, the substitute for faith was *Volkstum* / ethnicity and the state, but at another time it will be other human possibilities (Gorringer, 1999: 119).

Not only in his theology, but also in the world of politics, in his public commitments and responsibilities, Barth was fearless in the positions he took, often offending people and causing his own alienation. Busch explains that Barth's "inward" work, the firm positions he took within his theological work, and his "outward" work, his involvement in the political issues of the day, were related to each other. For Barth, being a free theologian meant to be fearless in the face of all "inward" and "outward" pressures and powers and to give a witness to the Word of God as clearly and unambiguously as possible. For Barth, God's Word, which cannot be grasped by humanity, but which grasps humanity, displaces all powers and principalities that claim absolute authority and that attempt to usurp God's throne, where all absolute power resides. Barth claimed that the authoritarian regime which came to power in Germany in 1933, was not a conservative reaction to liberalism, but rather the bitter fruit of a liberal, anthropocentric philosophy and theology wherein humanity viewed itself as absolute. Busch says that the first move of the Nazi state, before attacking the Jews, was to wipe away its political opponents, and since Barth kept his membership of the Social Democratic Party (unlike Paul Tillich) he realised that his days in Germany were numbered. He used the time to guide the church in its resistance against this idolatrous claim of absolute authority by the Nazi state, but found to his horror that the church fully accepted the Nazi regime. Barth appealed to the church, on the basis of the first commandment, that they should serve God alone and no other gods or idols, and to reject any notion of "natural theology," i.e., of a secondary revelation of God in the form of the German nationalism (Busch, 2004a: 31-32, 67).

Jüngel argues that it would be a mistake to think that Barth's theology was a product of his politics. Barth's politics was a product of his theology (Jüngel, 1986: 90). For him, political choices flowed from theological choices (Jüngel, 1986: 104).

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This is true to the extent that Barth's political choices had deep theological foundations. But the relationship between Barth's theology and his politics was not a one way street. They had a mutual influence upon each other. It was not as if Barth sat in his study, doing theology without any awareness of the surrounding world, and then walked out of his study and merely *applied* his theology upon the political scene.

Ironically, some theologians had serious disagreements with Barth's theology, while agreeing with his politics, like Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich and Rudolph Bultmann, and others agreed with Barth's theology, while disagreeing with his politics, especially members of the Confessing Church, who held by Luther's "two kingdoms" doctrine. The latter could not accept the political implications Barth drew from his theology, as expressed in the Barmen declaration. This just goes to show the complex mutuality between Barth's theology and his politics (Haddorff, 2010: 99; Horn, 1987: 464).

Although many have rejected F.W. Marquardt's close association between Barth's theology and his affinity for socialism, and although it is true that Barth's theology was not merely the logical consequence of his political convictions, nor the mere theory to support his political praxis, there most definitely was a mutually beneficial relationship between Barth's theology and his politics. The value of Marquardt's observations regarding Barth's leaning towards socialism, says Horn, is that it took Barth out of the "pietistic ghetto" and placed his theology within the political context wherein it originated and developed (Horn, 1987: 479).

Jonker argues that Barth's preference for social democracy did not originate in his theology, but rather in the modern themes of freedom, autonomy, change through activity and the humanisation of society. These modern themes influenced both Barth's politics and his theology. But it was not as if he did not view these themes critically. Rather remarkably, Barth reinterpreted these themes, by claiming that they originate in the freedom, autonomy, action and humanisation of God (Jonker, 1988: 37-38).

Often, especially in 1914 and 1933, political events made Barth go back to theology and rethink the theological foundations upon which our political choices are made, often without our awareness. This does not mean that Barth adjusted his theology to suit his political preferences. He understood that underneath our political choices there are unpronounced theological assumptions. Therefore, instead of just opposing political positions on a political level, Barth felt he had to address the theology upon which those choices were made.

According to Haddorff, it was not by accident that Barth initiated a new pamphlet series in 1933, called *Theologische Existenz heute*. Without a doubt, it was the political climate which persuaded Barth to start this new publication. But in the pamphlet Barth urged the church to remain *theological*, i.e., to remain faithful to its witness to Jesus Christ as the only revelation of God. For Barth, theology can only truly be *political*, it can only give an accurate and faithful witness to the world, if it is purely *theological*. A political theology has nothing to say to the world of politics, since it incorporates the politics of the day into its theology. Only a theology which is done "as if nothing had happened," i.e., which remains unaltered by the fluctuations of political happenings, can give a critical and prophetic witness to world of politics (Haddorff, 2010: 99).

In a radio interview late in his life, Barth explained that although he always wanted to draw from the Bible in his theology, his theology was never isolated from the concerns of the world. His theology was never a *private* matter to him, but always a *public* endeavour. It always concerned the issues at stake in the surrounding world. The theme that Barth found in the Bible was that God is for the world, that Jesus Christ is for humanity, that heaven is for earth. And that is why he admitted openly that his theology was always very political, at least to *him*. Barth seldom made political statements. Even the Barmen declaration refrained from mentioning Hitler or the Nazi Party. It did not contain one word of politics, but it was very

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clear that it had radical political implications. And the same is true of the rest of Barth's theology. Although his commentary on Romans did not have much politics in it, it had a great political effect. In Safenwil, with a working-class congregation, and his involvements with labour unions, Barth became known as "the red pastor of Safenwil." In Basel Barth was less involved politically, but his political stance was well known to all. When he did not condemn communism in 1956, he was once again notorious for his political position. Until the end of his life, Barth told the interviewer, he remained interested in politics (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 24-25).

Race, blood and soil

To the surprise of some, who view Barth as an academic who spent all the hours of his days in his study working on his monumental *Church Dogmatics*, Barth was very involved in the world. His activities in the world influenced his theology and his theology influenced his activities in the world. McLean sees four inherent connections between Barth's theology and his politics: (1) All authority belongs to God, and therefore no political system can claim absolute authority, not even socialism with its correct focus on the poor. (2) Only God can establish a new world order, the kingdom of God, wherein justice and peace shall reign over the whole cosmos. God will do so, and is not merely interested in transforming the inner lives of believers. (3) God's love, which was revealed in Jesus Christ, does not operate between God and the individual, but it operates within the community of faith and is directed at the whole world. (4) The Bible reveals that God's love is biased towards the least of society, the poor, the disregarded, the imprisoned, the exploited and the oppressed (McLean, 1981: 64).

Barth's attack upon natural theology should be understood in the light of the claim of the Nazi Party that Hitler was the saviour of the German nation. For Barth, natural theology was to be found in any attempt by humanity to be self-sufficient and autonomous. Natural theology meant the struggle against full dependence upon the grace of God alone. Barth did not deny the existence of natural theology, but rejected it as a source of revelation and the content of the church's proclamation. Jesus Christ alone was to be the content of the church's proclamation, not its own worldview, and Scripture provided the only authoritative witness to Jesus Christ (Gorringe, 1999: 130, 132-133). Sin, according to Barth, is unbelief. And unbelief, according to Barth, is faith in humanity. And faith in humanity, according to Barth, is religion. Therefore the eternal battle wages between grace and religion. Religion is always tempted by natural theology, which replaces the gospel as the object of faith, with the human experience of faith as the object of faith (Gorringe, 1999: 140).

After his lecture in 1934 in Switzerland on "The Christian as a Witness," and a stream of critical questions which followed, Barth said that he found it rather interesting that someone mentioned "God in nature." Whereas Barth was criticised for his "narrow" view of Christian witness, as testifying to Jesus Christ alone, Barth wondered whether the audience's broader view of witness will not inevitably end where Germany was at that very moment, namely in the proclamation of human ideologies (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 141).

Barth said:

"If this is to be only a beginning where will you draw the line? Why should not race, or blood, or soil be of equal service. And would we then not be in the very midst of paganism? I love nature: I look on it as one of God's gifts. But the Church does not exist in order to proclaim nature, but Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 141).

Does this mean that God only spoke once in history, at Easter, and remained silent for all the rest of history (Busch, 2004a: 67)? Barth conceded in the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics* that God is not silent in the remainder of history. He said that God is able to

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speak to us through “Russian Communism, a flute concerto, a blossoming shrub, or a dead dog,” or perhaps through “a pagan or an atheist,” or even in “the worship and active love and youth education and theology of the Church known to us.” But, unless we regard ourselves as prophets, rather than witnesses, we are not commissioned to proclaim these things as the Word of God. If we are not apostles, commissioned by God to begin a new church, or perhaps called to a proclamation outside the church, which God is at liberty to do, then it cannot be the content of our proclamation. The church’s proclamation consists in preaching, i.e., “an exposition of some portion of the biblical witness to revelation,” as well as the sacraments, which, for Barth, is a symbolic act, attesting to the event of divine revelation (Barth, 1975: *CD 1,1*: 55-56).

The Theological Declaration of Barmen in 1934 attacked any notion of a secondary revelation in nature, in the wake of the Nazi Party’s claim to being a secondary revelation, by confessing that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God to be heard and obeyed by the church. But immediately after the acceptance of the Barmen declaration, Barth said that God reveals God-self through the whole world and all its history. The difference lies therein that when it comes to the revelation of God *outside* Jesus Christ, or *general revelation* as the church tradition named it, we cannot point to this person or that human element, this historic event or that institution, and claim: “Here is God!” Therefore, something like “the German hour” could not be seen as a secondary revelation next to Jesus Christ, as was done in Germany at the time of the Barmen declaration. God’s revelation in the rest of creation and history can only be known in the light of the revelation in Christ, or else we are in danger of mistaking evil powers for divine authority (Busch, 2004a: 67-68).

The point is not that God was only revealed once in Jesus Christ. The point is that Jesus Christ is normative for God’s revelation. Whether it be a great historical event or a dead dog, every so-called revelation of God must be measured against the one, definitive, unambiguous revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Green, 1989: 24).

Hearing other voices

Because God’s Word addresses humanity in its otherness, we must remain open to the possibility that God’s Word can address us through the other. We should, however, not view the other as a secondary revelation. We always hear and obey the very same Word of God, in its surprising otherness, which is free to reveal itself in unexpected places and people. But the moment such an instance of revelation claims to be a *source* of revelation itself, i.e., to be a *secondary* revelation, it should be rejected (Haddorff, 2010: 318).

Haddorff argues that Barth managed to weave his way between the two dangers of secular reductionism on the one hand, wherein the secular is understood to be the only language wherein ethics can be addressed, and isolationism on the other hand, wherein the Word of God can only be heard in the language of the community of faith (Haddorff, 2010: 340). According to Haddorff, Barth’s ethics is not to be equated with that of Radical Orthodoxy, since the latter rejects the possibility of hearing the Word of God in other voices and wishes to be a purely ecclesial theological ethics. Barth remained open to hearing parables of the kingdom of God in the world, while rejecting the claim that the world can be a source of revelation (Haddorff, 2010: 334).

Barth said that God is not bound to the church, but the recipients of revelation are bound to the church, since it is the sphere wherein God chooses to be revealed. In the Bible we find many examples of people who hear and obey the Word of God outside Israel (in the Old Testament) and outside the church (in the New Testament), as well as people inside Israel and the church who do not hear and obey God’s Word. However, these exceptions reinforce

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the rule, and they serve as admonishments and warnings, namely that it is God's free decision to be revealed within the community of faith. It is not any quality of those within the community of faith, nor their adherence to the community, which qualifies them to be recipients of revelation, but it is the particularity of God's revelation, God's free decision to be revealed in a specific time and place, to specific people, that turns them into recipients of revelation (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 210-211).

In a situation of relative peace and prosperity, of progress and optimism, these critical distinctions might seem unnecessary, but in critical times, in times of crises, those critical judgments – the *krisis*, the judgment of God, which was the key element in Barth's commentary on Romans – are matters of life and death.

An interview that a British Methodist journal had with Barth in 1937 is especially enlightening in this regard. By this time, the world had become aware to some extent of the tyranny of Adolf Hitler, and sympathised with the German church's lack of religious freedom. When Barth was asked if England could do anything for the German church, Barth responded by saying that they can guard against the tyrannies in England. The greatest crisis for the German church, Barth explained, was not to be free from state control, but to give a true witness to the Christian faith, free from all the subtle and explicit tyrannies that distort the gospel of Jesus Christ. This danger was just as much a reality in England as it was in Germany, perhaps even more so, since the tyrannies in England were not as explicit as those in Germany. The spiritual submission of the church to the world-spirit did not threaten their lives in England as it did in Germany, but was all the more dangerous for that reason. It is perhaps easier to deny that Hitler is a revelation of God next to Jesus Christ, than to deny that humanism is a revelation of God next to Jesus Christ. Barth said that in order for England to have the freedom to give a true witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to rid the gospel of all and any tyrannical heresies, they must return to the Reformers Luther and Calvin, and must ultimately return to the Bible. Only the truth as it is revealed by the Word of God is able to free us from all the illusions of human possibility that deceive and imprison us (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 3).

And again in 1946, after the war, in the semi-ruins of Bonn, Barth made the same point. For Barth, the willingness to confess that Jesus Christ is the one and only revelation of God, is the critical crossroad at which paths divide. For him, your Christology exposes your true theological and political agenda, i.e., whether your worldview is grounded upon the possibilities of humanity or upon the miracle of grace (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 66).

Barth said:

“This is the point at which ways diverge, and the point at which is fixed the relation between theology and philosophy, and the relation between knowledge of God and knowledge of men, the relation between revelation and reason, the relation between Gospel and Law, the relation between God's truth and man's truth, the relation between outer and inner, the relation between theology and politics” (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 66).

Even our faith in God as the Creator, is grounded upon our faith in Jesus Christ. In this lecture on the Apostles' Creed, to students from different faculties, many of whom were not Christians, Barth said that the first article of the creed concerning faith in the Creator, is already an article of faith in Jesus Christ. This article is not an anteroom to faith, it is not concerned with the general revelation of God in creation, before proceeding to the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ. This is not an article on which Christians, Jews and Gentiles can agree upon, a common ground for believers and unbelievers, before it addresses the particular faith of Christians. The creed does not confess faith in the created world, nor even in the work of creation. It confesses faith in God the Creator, in the Father of

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Jesus Christ. The Apostles' Creed does not give a step by step growth in faith, but the complete mystery of faith, based totally upon the Self-revelation of God in Jesus Christ. We would be foolish to think that some theory or doctrine of creation is a way to bring unbelievers to faith, since faith in God the Creator, the Father, is just as hidden to humanity as faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and faith in the Holy Spirit. We cannot arrive at knowledge of the Creator, in some way other than which we arrive at knowledge of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Knowledge of the triune God is from first to last dependent upon God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ, thus completely hidden to humanity and only knowable in the mystery and miracle of faith (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 50, 52).

***Bourgeois* faith**

For Barth, natural theology was the endeavour of the *bourgeoisie*, of people who were no longer expecting or desiring a radically new order from God, but who wanted to maintain the status quo, or who, at the most, longed for the further development of the status quo. Natural theology was a temptation for people deceived into thinking that they do not require the grace of God, and who wanted to depend on themselves rather than on God. Thus the God of the Bible, the objective, living God, standing over and against humanity, who is able to speak and act independently from humanity, who is able to liberate humanity from its woeful situation, was replaced, through the natural theology of the *bourgeoisie*, with a speculative, abstract, philosophical idea of God, which fits neatly into its life style and does not disturb its own agendas (Gorringe, 1999: 132-133).

Justification and sanctification, for Barth, meant the disturbance of *bourgeois* complacency. Holiness, for him, was not wholeness or inner harmony, but the divine disturbance of sinners, reconciled to God, justified and sanctified by God. Holiness is not to find peace within our hearts, but to be contradicted in our hearts by God (Gorringe, 1999: 249). The pride of unbelief, our faith in ourselves, is confronted by God's justification, while the sloth of our disobedience, the following of our own hearts, is confronted by God's sanctification. Both justification and sanctification are equal in the divine disturbances they cause in our lives, exposing the pride of our so-called faith and the sloth of our so-called obedience (Gorringe, 1999: 248).

McCormack argues that even before the shock of 1914, Barth became alienated from his theological professors. Being a pastor in Safenwil from 1911 and experiencing the struggles of blue collar workers, Barth became dissatisfied with the *bourgeois* mentality and conservative politics of his theological professors. He did not seek to find a new theology yet, says McCormack, but he was already looking for a new world. Barth became inspired by Calvin's idea of the city of God being established on earth. He became increasingly frustrated with the way in which theology was held apart from politics and economics by the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms. When it came to political and economic issues, it seemed as if theology had no say in the matter, and all authority was handed over to individual reason. Already at that time, influenced by socialism's criticism against the church, Barth came to expect more from the kingdom of God, and likewise became more critical of the church (McCormack, 1995: 78-81).

Desiring a new world

Modern Christianity had reduced salvation to mean health and safety within the present world. But through the ages the church had expected much, much more from salvation. Salvation is an eschatological reality, the recreation of heaven and earth. Salvation means

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the fulfilment of God's eternal covenant with humanity, whereby God will bring the creation to the purpose for which it was created and which God has promised (Gunton, 2000: 144).

The temptation for the church in contexts of relative prosperity and peace, is not only to forsake the object of its faith and obedience, the Word of God, but also to lose its eschatological expectation that God will redeem and recreate the world. The most that modern, God-less theology and spirituality can hope for, is human progress. A new world recreated by the gracious, redemptive, free action of God, is no longer hoped for, since there is only one world, and only one actor within it, humanity (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 185).

Within the European optimism of the two centuries preceding the 20th century, the kingdom of God, the expectation of the new world to come, could mean nothing more than a continuation and further development of Western culture, to such an extent that God, and God's new world, was not needed, expected or *wanted* by the church any more.

Barth wrote an analysis of Feuerbach's work in 1920, which was published in *Theology and Church*, wherein he argued that Feuerbach correctly saw the loss of real hope in the Christian faith. Modern theology had become so "this worldly," it had become so enchanted with modern humanity, that the "God" and the "other world" of which it spoke, was only a thinly veiled projection of humanity's highest ideals in this world. And thus the Christian faith had lost sight of the real human being and its desperate situation in this world. Modern Christianity could no longer give suffering people any real hope beyond themselves and beyond this world, because it only believed in its own faith and in the further development of the current world (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 157).

What shall we do?

Speaking to a group of pastors in 1922 on the topic: "The Problem of Ethics Today," Barth said that the new situation brought about by the First World War, was that the Western church, for the first time in two centuries, once again began to ask the question: "What shall we do?" in earnest. In the previous two hundred years, the Western church was not asking this question. Rather, the church was only curiously asking whether Schleiermacher or Kant, theology or philosophy, provided the best, or the most interesting argument to arrive at the answer already assumed and accepted, i.e., that the church should not do anything else than further the imperfect, but perfectible Western culture. Now, suddenly, in the light of recent events, that did not seem so obvious anymore, and thus the church was once again addressing the ethical problem: "What shall we do?" honestly, without presuming to know the answer in advance (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 141-146).

In this lecture Barth agreed that we can serve God and our neighbour, that we can bear witness to God in our daily lives, through our engagement in society. But once again, we must never confuse our actions with God's action. Jesus Christ is God's wholly other action in the world. Barth repeatedly emphasised the discontinuity between God's action and our action, by claiming that Jesus Christ is *not* the apex of our thinking, *not* the miracle that we believe in, *not* the ideal that we are striving towards, *not* the hero of our history, and *least of all* the content of our religious or mystical experience. Barth claimed that as far as we believe, obey and worship these idols, we are not believing, obeying or worshipping Jesus Christ (Haddorff, 2010: 71).

For the church of the 19th century in Europe, there was not so much the issue of vocation, namely the task of the church in the world, but merely the issue of relevance. With so much optimism about the modern, Western culture, and especially about the capabilities of Western science, the church and faith in God started to seem superfluous. The gap between

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the world of modern humanity, defined by rationality and individualism, as it is summed up in the starting point of Descartes' philosophy: *Cogito ergo sum*, "I think therefore I am," and the world of the Bible, defined by God's involvement in the world and covenant with humanity, seemed to widen so much, that faith became almost untenable for modern humanity. The quest for Schleiermacher and the modern Protestant theologians after him, was to make faith relevant and tenable for modern humanity. The way to do this, they believed, was to base faith on philosophical, historical and anthropological grounds.

To a large extent, modern Protestantism was not concerned with the content of the Christian faith and the task of the church in the world, but with the apologetics of the Christian faith to a modern world wherein faith seemed superfluous and naïve. Barth respected the attempt of modern Protestantism to make the Christian faith relevant to its time, since a faith that is not relevant to its time is an abstract faith. The problem that Barth saw, however, was that the way in which this was done, the Christian faith was handed over into the hands of modern philosophy, history and anthropology, and thereby lost its own theological content. Barth became convinced that the critique of Feuerbach that Christians do not believe in God, but that they believe in their own faith, in their own manmade image of God, was completely true of modern Protestant theology, since its theology was not based on the Self-revelation of God, but on the faith of humanity.

God: missing in action

Barth said in his *Göttingen Dogmatics*:

"From this brief survey it should be plain that the God of Schleiermacher, who is inescapably enclosed in human feeling and posited with it, has absolutely nothing whatever to do with the *autopistia*, the supremacy, and the unequivocal spirituality of what we have had to know as God in the context of our doctrine of revelation. This God is a something, a neuter, not a He. He is a cause, a whence, like the source of a river, not the Creator. He is simply a relative counterpart in a steady series of given factors of which we, too, are members, belonging to the same circle to which all things belong, including ourselves, not an object, or only symbolically and improperly so, and therefore obviously not a true subject" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 187).

Hart says that later in life, Barth let his students start their theological study by reading Feuerbach. Feuerbach's accusation that theology's talk of God is in fact just elevated talk about humanity, was in Barth's mind a true statement regarding modern theology. The same effort to ground theology on human nature, experience or history, was present in different manifestations of modern theology, not only in liberal theology's search for divinity within human nature, but also in Protestant orthodoxy's appeal to the inerrancy of the Biblical text and in Roman Catholicism's claim of an infallible church tradition (Hart, 2000: 40-41).

The God of modern theology, the God of Schleiermacher, cannot disrupt our lives, since this "God" is merely a way of speaking in an elevated way about our own desires and ambitions. Schleiermacher himself said unambiguously that religion does not disrupt anything within the natural world, neither externally in physics, nor internally in psychology. Religion is merely the symbolic forms with which a community of faith expresses its God-consciousness, and theology is merely the discipline of reflecting critically upon those symbols (Hart, 2000: 40).

This God cannot be the God of faith and obedience, according to Barth, in fact, it cannot even be the God of a "feeling of absolute dependence." Faith needs to be faith in Someone. Obedience needs to be obedience to Someone. Dependence needs to be dependent on Someone. There is no such object in Schleiermacher's theology, according to Barth:

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“Schleiermacher’s religion has no object. Its fervor rests on its lack of object. For it there is no one and nothing outside to which respect and fear are due. Everything is within. Even less can it mention faith and obedience together” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 187).

The God of humanity

In lectures given late in his life, while visiting the United States of America, and which were printed in the book *Evangelical Theology*, Barth reiterated the point that his theology must be understood as *evangelical* theology. That means that the God who is addressed in his theology can never be an “absolute” God, in the sense of a God that is enclosed in itself, a self-sufficient and self-contained God, a God so “wholly other” that there is no relation between this God and humanity. Ironically, for Barth, this is the God of Schleiermacher. This is the God which is unable to be the God of humanity. Despite all its efforts to relate God to *humanity*, the God of modern Protestant theology cannot show mercy to humanity. Evangelical theology, however, relates humanity to *God*, to the living God, the God that draws near to humanity in the history of grace. Although his theology looks away from humanity, towards God, it must always be understood that this God is the God of covenant history, the God of humanity, the God that draws near to humanity in grace, the God that is not merely “next” to or “above” humanity, but also “with” humanity, and most all, “for” humanity. It will not be the God of *euangelion*, the God of “good news” for humanity, but rather the God of *dysangelion*, the God of “bad news” for humanity, if the relationship between God and humanity was completely distant and strange. Barth even suggests that instead of *theology*, perhaps it would be better if we used the word “theoanthropology,” to emphasise that the God of evangelical theology is never a God isolated from humanity, as long as we do not confuse it with “anthropotheology,” i.e., the theology that tries to relate God to *humanity*, and which is left with a God that cannot do or be anything for humanity. Finally, Barth said, it is perhaps better to stick to the word *theology*, but then we must remember that *evangelical* theology is always concerned with the God who is the God of humanity (Barth, 1963, *ET*: 10-12).

Barth made the same point in a lecture on “Evangelical Theology in the Nineteenth Century,” admitting, despite all his opposition to the subjective theology of the nineteenth century, that true evangelical theology is indeed “theoanthropology.” A true doctrine of God can be nothing else than a doctrine regarding the “commerce and communion” between God and humanity (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 9).

Barth even said that an attempt to do theology “from below,” to establish a Christian anthropocentrism, can be made, no, *must* be made. Barth said that one can most certainly start with humanity which is taken hold of by God, and from there proceed to the God who takes hold of humanity. This will probably be what a theology of the Holy Spirit will look like. Theology, Barth agreed, is not the doctrine of God, but the doctrine of God and humanity. If the theology of the nineteenth century truly did this, if it truly started with humanity which is taken hold of by God and proceeded to the God that takes hold of humanity, it would not have forgotten or hidden the fact, but would have insisted vigorously, that humanity’s relationship with God is fully reliant upon God’s gracious actions towards humanity. If the struggle “from below” was taken up in earnest and followed through, it could and it should have affirmed in its own way that God’s Word and work are indeed the sole source and content of the Christian faith. It could and should have shown that the Christian faith is not merely a *feeling* of absolute dependence, as Schleiermacher famously said, but that it *is* in fact absolutely dependent upon God’s gracious action (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 23-24).

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In his lecture on the humanity of God, Barth agreed that existentialism had once again shown that it is not possible to speak about God while simultaneously speaking about the encounter between God and humanity. But Barth also expressed his concern that it might once again lead back to the error of thinking that we can speak about the so-called divine experiences of humanity, without speaking in the first and last analysis about God's action towards humanity, which is the only true origin, object and content of all our existential experiences of God (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 54).

Barth did not arrive at this insight at the end of his theological career. In a lecture given in the 1920's, entitled "The Word of God and the task of the ministry," Barth already affirmed that a God without humanity is not God. It is only the God who reveals God-self to humanity, that is God. It is only the God made flesh, that is God. Faith cannot be actual and real if God is merely above humanity, or before humanity. Faith is only actual and real, where God is with humanity, where God is revealed to humanity, where God has penetrated humanity (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 202-203).

Humanity: missing in action

Counter-intuitively, although an active God is taken from the scene in Schleiermacher's theology, this does not cause Schleiermacher to appeal to greater action on the part of humanity, but rather makes his theology prone to passivity. Religion, said Schleiermacher, does not provide truths that must be believed or duties that must be obeyed. This actually makes sense, since religion is seen as a God-less reality. The universe is moving along as it will, and neither God nor humanity can do or should try to do anything about it (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 188). Schleiermacher repeatedly claimed that religion can never be knowledge or action, which is not surprising, since it has no object, but he preferred rather to describe it under the term "peace" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 188-189).

Barth responded in the following way:

"Obviously, since God and man are seen on the same level and in the same context, there can be no real turning of man to God, no receiving of his Word, no obedience proffered to him. Here in a forceful and fatal way God, or what is called God, crushes man at the very point where there ought to be spiritual fellowship, speaking and hearing, commanding and obedience. In this regard Schleiermacher ought to serve as a warning example to show what happens when God and man are brought as close as they are here. There can be no understanding of faith as a venture or of obedience as a duty" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 189).

Barth took up Calvin's assertion at the beginning of the third part of the *Institutes*, that all that Christ has suffered and done for our salvation would remain of no value to us if we did not participate in it, if it remained outside us. Barth affirmed Calvin's metaphor of the sun's rays – compared with the Word of God – which has no effect among the blind. But this would not be understood properly if we thought that at this point we leave behind the work of God and enter into the work of humanity. Calvin explained his metaphor by adding that it is the *Holy Spirit* as our inner teacher, that cures us of our blindness and enables us to see the sunlight. It is a work of God, a work of the Holy Spirit, as our inner teacher, which enables us to hear and receive the Word of God (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 191).

That is why Barth could agree with Calvin that what Jesus Christ has done for us, must also be received by faith and obedience in us. Barth understood that, for Calvin, faith and obedience were not human possibilities, but part of the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit:

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“It is a miracle no less than that of the incarnation, but corresponding to it exactly, if the subjective possibility *does actually take the form of faith and obedience*. As the miracle of the incarnation cannot be perceived historically, but only by the Holy Spirit who as he performs it opens eyes and ears to perceive it, so the miracle of faith and obedience cannot be seen psychologically but only through the Son who as he himself assumes human nature gives us a share in his fellowship with the Father” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 192, *my italics*).

Humanity cannot reveal God, we cannot speak the Word of God, only God-self can do so through the miracle of Holy Spirit. And also, likewise, humanity cannot receive God's revelation, we cannot hear and obey the Word of God, except through the miracle of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 10).

But in the miracle of the Holy Spirit, we really and actively do believe and obey the Word of God. While one might theoretically expect Schleiermacher's passive God to bring about a more active faith and obedience on the part of humanity, and the active God of Barth to bring about a more passive human faith and obedience, the opposite is true. Schleiermacher's passive God brings about passive believers, while Barth's active God brings about active believers.

Believing this and obeying that

Speaking of a “miracle” might be deceiving, if we think of faith and obedience as “an immediate or direct relation to God.” This is not the meaning of the *miracle* of faith and obedience. As the Word of God enters history through the incarnation and the Church's proclamation, it takes the form of very concrete dogma's and demands, dogma's and demands that are extremely offensive to our modern sensibilities (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 192).

Barth explained:

“Faith means not only believing in God but also believing in this and that. To put it with all the offense that it involves, it means believing in the Trinity, or in the NT miracles, or in the virgin birth. And obedience means not only uniting our wills with God's but, for example, keeping the ten commandments. It is not a matter of the number of explications in which revelation comes to us but fundamentally of the offense that meets us in the explications, namely, that revelation comes to us in this form, and that this form demands our faith and obedience” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 193).

And yet, Barth continued to explain, standing before God, to believe in God and to obey God, cannot mean a mere adding up of all the dogmas that are to be believed and all the demands that are to be obeyed. All the concrete explications of revelation are not revelations in and of themselves. They refer to God. Ultimately it is *God* in whom we believe and it is *God* whom we obey – and God *alone* (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 193).

Here Barth was taking his Lutheran colleagues and liberal theological peers head on. Well aware of how “naïve” it sounded that our “dubious and ambivalent knowing and doing can be real knowing and doing relative to God,” Barth asserted that we cannot shy away from the actual knowing and doing that is required of us, as dubious and ambivalent as it surely must always be, just because it offends our intellectual sensibilities. Barth exposed the false humility, which is actually hubris, wherein we use our inability to believe and obey as an excuse to flee from the very concrete requirements of Christian faith and obedience, “for example, regarding it as true that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, resolving to pray and to

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love my neighbor as myself, and trusting that I am in the hands of God” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 193).

Barth said:

“It is only in the form of this knowing and doing, dubious and ambivalent though it is, that I can stand before God and that there can be any question of a meeting between God and man” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 194).

The mystery of faith and obedience

It is not up to humanity to decide what we can believe and obey, and what is outside the realm of faith and obedience. Faith and obedience in their totality are impossible for humanity. Therefore, to say: “I cannot believe this,” or: “I cannot obey that,” is nothing but veiled pride. Such statements are based on the fallacy that there are divine truths we can believe and divine commands we can obey in our own power, while others are not within our reach. This is a complete misunderstanding of the miraculous, gracious nature of faith and obedience in their totality. The greatest mystery is not that there are things which we cannot believe or cannot obey, but that we are enabled by the miracle of grace to believe and obey God’s Word at all.

Even when Barth delved deep into the mystery of the trinity, and others accused him of abstract speculation, Barth refused to be tempted into any false humility regarding the mystery of God. The mystery of God is not honoured when faith ceases to seek understanding. The greatest mystery of God does not lie in the things we cannot know about God, but in the things God has made known to humanity. That the incomprehensible God has made God-self known to humanity, is the greatest mystery of all. To say that something about God cannot be known, is just as much of a theological statement, as delving into that “unknowable” something. We cannot determine what humanity can know and what we cannot know about God. Only God can determine God’s knowability. Refusing to reflect upon our knowledge of God because of the impossibility of that knowledge, is hypocritical escapism, since all knowledge of God is impossible, except for the divine Self-revelation of God (Torrance, 2000: 83).

But still, no matter how perfect our dogmatics, how complete our ethics, how zealous our faith and obedience, it will all come to naught if its origin and goal is not the action of God, the Self-revelation of God, which is the Word of God spoken to us and heard by us. Without the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit enabling us to hear and receive and respond to the Word of God, there simply is no faith and no obedience, no matter how impressive we might regard our knowing and doing (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 194).

2.2 The unity of faith and obedience

What happened to *sola fide*?

Why faith *and obedience*? Why gospel *and law*? Does this dual emphasis not weaken God’s grace? Is Christ’s salvation somehow insufficient, that it has to be supplemented by human obedience? What happened to Luther’s rediscovery of Paul’s “salvation by faith”? What happened to the battle cry of the Reformers: *Sola gratia! Sola fide! Solus Christus!* – “Grace alone! Faith alone! Christ alone!”? Is this not an Arminian understanding? How could Barth, with his radical emphasis on the grace of God in Christ and with his severe rejection of any

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natural capacity or ability on the side of humanity to relate to God, how could he repeatedly emphasise the unity of faith and obedience, of the gospel and the law?

Barth was repeatedly taking on the issue with his Lutheran colleagues that faith and obedience, the gospel and the law, justification and sanctification, are inseparably united as part of the one Word of God which addresses us. Listening not only to Luther, but also to Calvin, Barth never forgot the other battle cry of the Reformation: *Soli Deo Gloria!* – “To God alone the glory!” For Barth, as for Calvin, God is to be glorified in every aspect of our lives, in all spheres of our existence.

This would perhaps not have been such a problem for Barth’s Lutheran colleagues, if Barth conceded that he was merely lecturing on *Reformed* dogmatics as he was instructed to do at Göttingen, because it was well understood that the Reformed tradition, which followed in Calvin’s footsteps, always had this dual emphasis on gospel and law, faith and obedience. But since Barth so vehemently insisted that there is no such thing as *Reformed* dogmatics, but only *Christian* dogmatics, i.e., to look critically at the whole church’s proclamation of the Word of God, albeit from within a certain confessional vantage point, this emphasis was always problematic for his Lutheran colleagues.

Inactive faith

From very early in his career, Barth was very much concerned with the external reality of our faith, with morality and public life, with the unity of faith and obedience. For one, Barth’s whole theological disillusionment and reorientation was caused by an external reality, by the support for the German war policy given by his theological professors in 1914. But also, in 1922, when the second edition to Barth’s commentary on Romans appeared, Barth was lecturing on Calvin, and specifically on Calvin’s understanding of obedience and the Christian life (Webster, 1998: 3).

Barth’s early criticism in his book *The Epistle to the Romans* against the possibility of human faith and obedience, was not to reject the responsibility for action on the part of humanity. What Barth was fighting against, was the notion of a moral culture, the illusion that people can autonomously improve their own morality (Webster, 1998: 5).

Barth never rejected human action, and was very much concerned about the inactive, disobedient faith of the church. To address this properly, however, Barth had to speak negatively at first, in order to obliterate all the false positives on which the morality of the church was based. Only then could Barth begin to ground the church’s action, its obedience, its morality, on a thoroughly theological basis, instead of practising naïve, uncritical ethics based on anthropological optimism (Webster, 1998: 19).

However, according to Willis, Barth’s negative ethical criticism went too far in the second edition of his commentary on Romans. Not only did Barth say that all our actions are preliminary, bound to a specific context, and thus remain open to God’s ultimate judgment, but humanity’s very existence as ethical agents became problematic, in Willis’ view. At this point in Barth’s theology, says Willis, there was only one ethical action: God forgives humanity its sins. Barth’s ethics, at this point, was thoroughly eschatological, leaving no room for preliminary ethical actions within the contemporary, limited context of humanity. God’s judgment was so radicalised, not only over all human actions, but over human, ethical agency as such, that it became impossible to speak of human responsibility. Barth still had to develop a way to speak positively of human action which responds ethically to God’s action, which corresponds to God’s Word (Willis, 1971: 28-29, 38-39).

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But after his book on Anselm, Barth could begin to speak positively of human action, in analogy to the action of God. As God acts toward humanity, as God reveals God-self to humanity, by the miracle of the Holy Spirit, we are established as people of faith, as people who are allowed and commanded to respond to God's action in faith and obedience. Our action can never be more than an analogy to the action of God, and can never do more than react, respond, follow, give witness to God's prior action. But still, it is real action, because it corresponds to God's action. Because God really gives God-self by grace in God's Word, we really know God, we really believe in God. But this knowledge of God is already service of God, this faith in God is already obedience to God, since it corresponds in analogy to God whose being is known in action, who reveals God-self by coming towards and giving God-self in grace to humanity. There is no neutrality in faith, in knowledge of God, since it exists only in the analogous movement of humanity towards God, corresponding to God's movement towards humanity (Willis, 1971: 77-78).

Total gospel and total law

The reason why Barth insisted that the dual emphasis of the Reformed tradition on faith *and* obedience is indeed an accurate understanding of the Word of God, is precisely because an inadequate emphasis on the law, weakens the gospel; an inadequate emphasis on God's judgment, weakens God's grace. Grace without judgment is not really grace at all, just as the gospel without the law, is not really the gospel at all.

But Barth went further than that. Without the gospel, Barth argued, we would have no comprehension of how demanding the law truly is. God's comprehensive grace "does not merely give an answer to the human question but in and with the answer truly puts the question for the first time" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 194). For Barth, it was not the law that teaches us that we are in need of grace, but rather the gospel which teaches the true extent of God's grace and God's command.

Barth explained that not only are faith and obedience, gospel and law, inseparable from each other, but they are also both simultaneously total in their claim over humanity. It is not as if God's grace is abundantly present, and God's command only to a limited extent, nor vice versa. As the one Word of God addresses and claims us, confronting us in every aspect of our lives, in every sphere of our existence, it addresses and claims us as all-embracing gospel and all-commanding law. Barth said:

"Here, too, we may distinguish between a response and a willing appropriation and affirmation, a recognition and an acknowledgment and acceptance, a knowing and a doing. Both take place in the same person, and we never have the one without the other. Yet there are still two things in the unity, and the vitality of the relation to God depends on there being two: that I put myself under grace but also under judgment, under the promise but also under the demand, under the gospel but also under the law, in faith but also in penitence and obedience; that I receive God's answer but also bow under his question. Naturally, they cannot be present only in degree, with the relativity that obtains in Schleiermacher's Christian understanding and that kills off all true seriousness. Both have to be present totally at all times as though there were nothing else: total grace, yet for that very reason total guilt; total gospel, yet for that very reason total law" (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 195).

Willis was one of the first to point out the ethical nature of Barth's theology as a whole. He said that it would be a fundamental error to limit Barth's ethics to those places where Barth was addressing ethics directly. Willis described Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as one, long, sustained ethical reflection. The problem of right human action is answered, Barth

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maintained, by God's victorious action in Jesus Christ, in whom right human action is fulfilled and revealed. Right human action, according to Barth, entails reacting in correspondence to the action of God in Jesus Christ. And thus every word in the *Church Dogmatics* were ethical in nature, as far as Barth was concerned (Willis, 1971: 4).

For Barth, there was no dualism to be found between theology and ethics, gospel and law, or theory and practice (Gorringe, 1999: 8-9). Already in his first commentary on Romans, Barth knew that theology and ethics should be united, since it was the *theology* of modern Protestantism which led to its unethical action in 1914. But it was only in his *Church Dogmatics* that Barth truly learned how to do theology and ethics as a unified discipline. In the first volume, part 2, Barth gave two reasons for the unity of theology and ethics. Negatively, ethics without theology would be nothing more than anthropology. Positively, the Word of God does not only liberate humanity, but also *claims* humanity (Gorringe, 1999: 152).

For Barth, the "No" of the law, was too weak, too human. It remained within the sphere of human possibilities. Perhaps within Lutheran understanding, the law could be understood as "No" and the gospel as "Yes." But in Barth's Reformed understanding, the relative "yes" and "no" of the law had to be understood within the all-encompassing "NO" and "YES" of the gospel. Only within the complete judgment and complete grace of the gospel, can our relative obedience and disobedience to the law be understood correctly (Gorringe, 1999: 182).

The juxtaposition "obedient faith" was often used by Barth to express the freedom granted to those who live in and under the claim and authority of the Word of God (Bromiley, 1979: 43).

Migliore describes the inseparable relationship between grace and command, gospel and law, gift and task, as a "signature mark" of Barth's theology. In a powerful metaphor, Barth claimed that the ten commandments were within the ark of the covenant, thus illustrating that God's grace contains a command within it, while God's command truly is a command of grace. The one true God is at the same time the gracious God and the commanding God, the commanding God and the gracious God. But as the image suggests, God's command is "contained" within God's grace. The relationship of grace and command is not symmetrical, but asymmetrical. Like the Calcedonian argument regarding the two natures of Christ, i.e., being fully God and fully human, but not in a symmetrical way, the same kind of logic is applied here. Although God is both fully gracious and fully commanding, the grace of God is always the primary factor, wherein the command is to be found. But still, both grace and command are fully present, and inseparable from each other. Neither the antinomianism of a gospel without the law, nor the legalism of a law without the gospel, was acceptable to Barth, since it did not hold onto to the God of Scripture, the God of the Old *and* the New Testaments. Barth also never forgot the other battle cry of the Reformation: *Sola Scriptura* – "Scripture alone!" Referring to the title of his essay, as well as the title of the book in which a number of essays on Barth's ethics appear: *Commanding Grace*, Migliore says: "God's command is a gracious command and his grace a commanding grace" (Migliore, 2010: 10-11).

Paul Nimmo points out that when we say that the Word of God addresses humanity not only as gospel, but also as law, then we must understand this law correctly. The Word of God as law "is not the law of sin and death; rather, this is the law of the Spirit of life." This is the Reformed understanding of the third use of the law, namely the law of the Christian life of obedience, lived in thankful response to the gospel, in opposition to the Lutheran understanding of the law (Nimmo, 2010: 218-219).

Lutheran opposition

Tiefel, in his doctoral dissertation regarding (1) the relationship between law and gospel in Luther's theology, (2) the challenge that Barth posed to Lutheran theology with his reversal of the order law-gospel to gospel-law, and (3) the response of modern Lutheranism to Barth's challenge, affirms that Barth's writing on the relationship between the gospel and the law was a "direct attack" on Lutheran theology. The challenge became especially intense in the 1930's, when certain Lutheran scholars "isolated the law of God from Christ by identifying the divine nomos with the Volksnomos and thereby with the laws of the National Socialist State." Barth exposed the theological justification of a "pagan nationalistic world-view," not only by Lutheran scholars, incidentally, but with the explicit help of major Lutheran theological themes. According to Tiefel, Lutheran scholars did not produce a "thoughtful, receptive, or systematic" response to Barth's challenge, but instead, the unity of gospel and law in Barth's theology was most fiercely rejected by the likes of Elert, Althaus, Gogarten, Hirsch, and Stapel, exactly the same Lutheran scholars "who in the time of crisis represent Lutheranism at its worst" (Tiefel, 1968: 179).

There were, however, Lutheran scholars who clearly opposed Hitler's regime, for example Hans Joachim Iwand and Ernst Wolf, and who, perhaps not incidentally, gave more "favorable German answers" to Barth's challenge, although they were not in agreement with Barth (Tiefel, 1968: 180).

Tiefel points out that for Barth, Luther was inconsistent in his rediscovery of the gospel of Jesus Christ, tending to limit the gospel to internal realities, and not taking the gospel of salvation to its full conclusion, regarding its significance for political and social realities. The impact of the gospel on ethics, on the Christian life, was not fully developed by Luther, according to Barth (Tiefel, 1968:118).

Luther's law-gospel order makes sense with reference to salvation, to justification. In that framework, the law serves to accuse humanity of its sinfulness, bringing them to the point of accepting the saving grace of God in Christ, via faith (Tiefel, 1968: 119). Although the law is thus "useful" in the sense that it can convince humanity of its need of grace, it does this in an entirely negative way. For Luther, and most Lutheran scholars, there is no third use of the law, in a positive sense, relating to the Christian life lived by grace in the power of the Spirit. The law leads to death, while the gospel gives life. The law stands in direct opposition to grace and the Spirit. In Luther's writings the law is mostly discussed within the context of humanity's sinfulness. When Luther is discussing the Christian life, the word "law" rarely comes into play. Some Lutheran scholars are willing to reinterpret Luther, in the light of Barth's challenge, and see within Luther's discussion of the Christian life, a third use of the law, although the word "law" is rarely used in this context by Luther. But for many Lutheran scholars the law in Luther and Paul bears the slogan: "*lex semper accusat*" – the law always accuses (Tiefel, 1968: 251-253).

In Barth's own reading of Luther, however, the tension between the gospel and the law is not such a central feature of Luther's theology, as it was for conservative Lutherans, who were critical of Barth's unity between gospel and law, like for instance Helmut Thielicke. In Barth's understanding of Luther, he was much closer to Calvin, regarding the law and the gospel, the judgment and the grace of God, the holiness and the love of God, the Old and the New Testaments, not as opposing forces, but as the one revelation of God's grace in Jesus Christ (Willis, 1971: 164-167).

Tiefel also shows that the reversal of the order law-gospel to gospel-law is not completely foreign to Luther. Luther also understood that the indicative precedes the imperative, that saving grace leads to fulfilment of the law, that the gospel comes before good works. The

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true challenge of Barth's unity between gospel and law, lies in the political and social implications of the gospel, stretching far beyond mere inner salvation. God's salvation in Christ is not only inward, but universal and cosmic, it establishes God's authority and claim over the entire creation and every aspect of life, including political and social realities (Tiefel, 1968: 141).

One kingdom

Thus, what is at issue here, is not only Luther's use of the law, but also Luther's teaching of two kingdoms. For Luther, the kingdom of God, salvation in Christ, is at God's right, and the moral significance of this kingdom is mainly limited to inward realities. At God's left, is the kingdom of the world. In this sphere, moral knowledge is derived from natural law and orders of creation, and it is comprehended by human reason. Within this sphere, humanity knows what it should do, and the saving gospel has almost no effect on it (Tiefel, 1968:245-246).

It is not necessarily the order of law-gospel, as such, which is the fundamental problem for Barth in Luther's theology. But by viewing law and gospel as opposing realities, as two distinct realities – which, according to Barth, was more true of modern Lutherans than of Luther himself – a problematic dualism was created. Firstly, it created a dualism in God. Behind the God of grace revealed in Jesus Christ, the *Deus revelatus*, there is another hidden God, a *Deus absconditus*, a wrathful God existing outside Jesus Christ. Secondly, it created a dualism within the world. There is knowledge of God and humanity that exists outside the revelation in Jesus Christ, given in the created order and natural humanity, acquired independently by human reason (Willis, 1971: 167-169)

In a Bible study on Romans 12:1-2, in Münster in 1926, Barth emphasised the fact that the text says we should give our "bodies" as a living sacrifice, not our soul, not our spirit, not our inner life, but our bodies. Barth explained that in the New Testament there is no duality between body and soul, between spirit and nature. We are sinners in the totality of our humanity. Every part of our existence is reconciled to God, just as every part of our existence will be redeemed by God. But God also claims us in the totality of our humanity. There is no sphere of our life that is situated outside God's work in us. God does not allow for a religious sphere of life wherein we obey God, and a secular sphere wherein we obey other laws, wherein God's Word does not claim our complete obedience. Our whole existence is confronted by God's all-embracing grace, as well as God's all-encompassing command. The gospel and the law do not refer to different aspects of our lives. In the whole of our lives, we are forgiven and claimed by God. There are no parts of our lives which God does not want, which are not placed under God's grace, as well as under God's discipline of grace (Jehle, 2002: 33-34).

In Barth's *Ethics*, written from 1928-1931, while lecturing in Münster and Bonn, Barth did not attempt to find a place for theology within ethics, but rather to find a way to do all of ethics theologically. Employing the structure that would later guide him in his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth tried to understand our ethical action in relation to the actions of God, i.e. creation, reconciliation and redemption (Haddorff, 2010: 75-76).

Haddorff argues that for Barth, theological ethics cannot be pinned down to a specific moral method or theory; it cannot be equated with any fixed principle or rule. God's command is not something other than God's being, God's action; it is not an object that can be studied in isolation from God-self. Theological ethics reflects upon and responds to the trinitarian action of the living God: the command of life embedded in the Father's act of creation, the command of law embedded in Christ's act of reconciliation, and the command of promise embedded in the Holy Spirit's act of redemption (Haddorff, 2010: 83).

A grave mistake

With his understanding of the unity of the gospel and the law, Barth confronted the duality in Lutheran theology. And although Barth knew that Luther's theology could not be equated with modern Lutheranism, he asked whether it is by chance that National Socialism came to rise in the heartland of the Reformation. Barth believed that Luther's inheritance, the erroneous relationship between law and gospel, the dualism between worldly powers and the authority of the gospel, the separation between orders in creation and the universal claim of the gospel, as well as the limiting of the gospel to inward realities, created the setting wherein a pagan ideology could arise within a Christian nation (Tiefel, 1968: 142).

Busch shows that the "two kingdoms" doctrine enabled, not only German Christians, but especially the Confessing Church, to separate their political life from their Christianity. It was possible, within the understanding of the "two kingdoms," to be a member of church of Jesus Christ as well as a "brown shirt" or German nationalist. It was possible to be a follower of Jesus, and at the same time to implicitly support the Nazi's policy against the Jews, as long as it proceeded "lawfully." Barth maintained that a truly evangelical church should say an unambiguous "no" to the state's solution to the Jewish question, but that such a church "as things stand simply does not exist." In this Barth gave a ruthless critique on the Confessing Church, who opposed the German Christians, implying that because it also separates church and politics, like the German Christians, it simply is not a church at all! Leaving the German Evangelical Church, only to establish another church that also has a two-kingdoms doctrine, was meaningless in Barth's view (Busch, 2004b: 55-57; Barth, 1938: *KB*: 14).

Barth believed it was unbiblical, and saw its grave consequences, to split reality into different spheres, into a sphere of the gospel and a sphere of the law, a sphere of the church and a sphere of the state. Barth was a rather lonely figure, a voice calling in the desert if you will, arguing that it is not sufficient for the church to be concerned with its own ecclesial matters. For Barth, it was inconceivable that the Confessing Church could reject the Aryan paragraph *inside* the church, but accept it *outside* the church. Barth thought it was hypocritical that the church expected of Jewish pastors to be discreet about their ethnicity, although they were baptised children of God. This was the main cause of conflict between Barth and the other leaders of the Confessing Church, and even Barth's "friends" within the church found him to be very stubborn and blunt in his criticisms. Soon after the acceptance of the Barmen declaration, August Marahrens, the first chairman of the Confessing Church from 1934 to 1936, said that Barth was the biggest threat to the church, because of his opposition to National Socialism on so many issues. This indicates how the Confessing Church was ready to confess Jesus Christ as the only One whom the church must obey, and was perhaps ready to apply that to ecclesial affairs, but viewed the affairs of state as outside Jesus' authority. When it came to public affairs, the Confessing Church was willing and ready to obey the state, in contradiction to the very first article of its own Theological Declaration of Barmen (Jehle, 2002: 52, 54-55).

Only a few weeks after the Barmen Declaration was accepted, an academic conference was held at Anbasch, where theologians such as Paul Althaus and Werner Elert sought to reaffirm the separation of law and gospel, as well as the two kingdoms doctrine of the Lutheran church, which viewed the church and the state in separate realms that do not affect each other. In this understanding, the law referred to the natural orders of creation, binding people to blood relations such as family, folk and race. The obligations and commitments of these orders of creation, the law, stood completely apart from the gospel, and was not affected by the gospel. Barth's effort to place the gospel before the law, rather than vice versa, and to place both gospel and law under the Word of God, seemed to the likes of

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Althaus and Elert as anarchistic theology, which disregards the social orders given in creation. But in Barth's view, it was precisely this order of law before gospel, and the neat separation of the two kingdoms, which enabled the German church to simultaneously believe in the gospel, as well as in German nationalism, totalitarianism and anti-Semitism (Haddorff, 2010: 100-101).

It was precisely in the working out of the political implications of the Barmen declaration, the declaration which the Confessing Church accepted unanimously and upon which it was founded, that Barth came into conflict with the Confessing Church almost immediately after its inception. Barth's position that the implication of the Barmen declaration was that he, as a state official, could not swear an oath of unconditional allegiance to Hitler, ended his role of leadership in the church and also his academic career in Bonn. In his parting address to the Confessing Church at Wuppertal in 1935, after accepting a position at the University of Basel, and just before being arrested and deported, Barth rejected the notion that the Nazi state is a manifestation of divine law. Barth affirmed that the gospel and the law are inseparable. The law, found in the gospel, cannot be equated with the law of the state, but both the gospel and the law, in their unity, stand *over against* the state and its law (Busch, 2004a: 33-34).

This is precisely what the second article of the Barmen declaration stated, namely, the rejection of the false doctrine that there are some spheres of our existence wherein we do not belong to Jesus Christ, but we belong to other lords; spheres of life wherein the justification and sanctification that Jesus Christ alone can give, are not needed.

It is commonly understood that Barth emphasised the transcendence and primacy of God as a critique upon the theology of modern Protestantism, which viewed faith in anthropocentric terms. But it is less commonly understood that Barth's theology was not only theocentric, but it was also a social and a public theology. Whereas modern Protestantism limited faith to the inner experience of the individual, Barth emphasised the social and political implications of faith, the unity of faith and obedience. Barth's theology was *communal* in nature. It did not only accentuate the primacy of God over the individual, but also the primacy of God over the church, the world and the entire cosmos (Green, 1989: 18).

The divorce between theology and life

The dualism in Lutheran theology did not mean that Lutheran theologians focused only on issues of faith, and disregarded ethical, social and political issues. To the contrary, modern Protestantism focused increasingly on ethical, social and political issues, finding it increasingly difficult to speak about matters of faith, or more specifically, about the proper content of the Christian faith. The dualism applied in both directions. When Lutheran scholars focused on matters of faith, they were in a sense limited to inward realities, and could not easily say how the Christian faith impacts social or political realities. Whereas when Lutheran scholars focused on social or political issues, they could not draw from the Christian faith in their response to these realities, and felt compelled to speak on anthropological, philosophical or historical grounds, relying rather on secular humanism than on the content of the Christian faith.

Busch remarks that Barth held theology, especially modern Protestantism, partly responsible for both modern, secular atheism and the modern divorce between theology and ethics, which were two occurrences related to each other. Modern, secular atheism was, according to Barth, partly due to the fact that theology had given a false picture of God. Theology, especially modern Protestantism, spoke of a God, which is not the God who reveals God-self through the Word of God and who is the true object of faith, but as the God which is

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created and enclosed within the subjective faith of humanity, the God of which Feuerbach correctly said that this God is in fact the projection of humanity's own ideals, the best version of humanity. The faith of modern Protestantism was not faith in God, but faith in faith, faith in religion, faith in humanity. Society could not be blamed for rejecting faith in this God, which is in fact not God at all, but a false idol created by religious humanity. And that is why Barth did not attack secular atheism directly, but rather focused his criticism on modern theology, which was partly responsible for modern atheism, according to him. Related to this criticism, was the criticism that modern society's divorce between theology and ethics, cannot be laid at the feet of secular society solely, but is at least partly the fault of theology, who laid the foundations of this divorce. Already in the theology of the 17th century, Barth saw the beginnings of a theology that does not recognise that all of theology is ethics and all of ethics is theology. For a few centuries the wrong assumption had been growing within theology itself, that only certain aspects of theology have ethical implications. And with a concurrent subordination of theology to ethics, the aspects of theology which were perceived to be unrelated to ethics, i.e., unrelated to life, were deemed of lesser importance. It was the fault of theology, not of secular society, that people no longer understood that theology as a whole, from beginning to end, is related to life, and not only related to some ethical decisions or actions, but to the complete being, all the thoughts and actions, the life of the human being in its totality. It was by modern theology itself that the wrong impression was given that humanity can know and do the good apart from the revelation and action of God towards humanity, from other sources and within its own capacity. It was from modern theology that the false idea was born that on the whole human beings can know and do the good, the law, and that the gospel is only the assurance of God's forgiveness, of a second chance, when occasionally we falter, or the assurance of an inner or a heavenly salvation, which is divorced from a life lived in the world. The law was understood to be a grace-less and gospel-free reality, whereas the gospel was understood to be without any command or claim. Against this wrong understanding, which was so prevalent in modern society and for which theology bore responsibility, Barth asserted that we can only know and do the good in light of the gospel. The law is enclosed within the gospel, as the ten commandments lay within the Covenant ark. This also means that the gospel does not come to us as cheap grace, as forgiveness in principle, but as the command of God, as God's claim upon the whole of our lives. Busch states it clearly: "The grace of God commands, and the command of God is gracious," or in different words: "The gospel speaks about God's will *for* us and the law tells us what God wills *from* us" (Busch, 2004a: 152-155).

One Word of God

Hart has shown that the understanding of the law and the gospel was one of the fundamental sources of divergence between Barth and Brunner. For Barth, one knows your sin, not by virtue of the law, independent from the gospel of grace, but it is from the gospel of grace that one comes to understand your sinful transgression of the law. For Brunner, as he argued in his essay in 1925, "Law and Revelation: a Theological Foundation," reason sets the limits for revelation. The law is the common point between theology and philosophy, the reasonable limit wherein revelation takes place. It is to reasonable humanity, who knows and understands the law and their sinfulness in light of the law, that the gospel of grace is revealed. The law is the tutor for the gospel. The person who does not believe in Christ at all, knows the law just as well, by virtue of human reason, rather than revelation, as does the believer in Christ. This essay highlighted a basic disagreement between Barth and Brunner. Already then, for Barth, theology was *nachdenken*, which means that everything that humanity can understand of the gospel and grace, of the law and sin, is only possible *after* the revelation of God's grace in Christ via the Word of God. Whereas Brunner was at heart a philosophical theologian, who sought understanding of God on philosophical grounds, within the natural reason of humanity, outside or alongside the gracious revelation of God in Christ.

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In this essay in 1925, four years before Brunner coined his famous concept *Anknüpfungspunkt* – “point of contact” – Brunner was already searching for a “point of connection” – *Beziehungspunkt* – between humanity’s reason and God’s revelation. Barth felt that Brunner made too much of a Kantian opposition between law and gospel, and asked whether the law was merely the limit of revelation, the reasonable framework wherein God could be revealed, or whether the law was not already revelation (Hart, 2004: 27-30).

Psalms 119 which praises the law as God’s gracious gift to the psalter, as God’s gracious revelation, repeats the petition: “Teach me your law,” thus indicating that we do not know the law independent from God’s Self-revelation, but the law is already part of God’s gracious revelation. Without the prayer that God reveals the law by grace to us, we have as little possibility of knowing the law, as we do of knowing the gospel.

In 1935, after being expelled from Germany, Karl Immer, the pastor of Barmen, invited Barth to give his lecture on gospel and law as a farewell address to the Confessing Church. Barth accepted the invitation, but was stopped and forced to return to Switzerland by the Gestapo. Pastor Immer then read the lecture in the packed Barmen church, including Gestapo officials. Barth’s lecture contained theology and “only theology,” but was extremely political precisely for that reason. Barth’s lecture reversed the order law-gospel to gospel-law, and claimed that both gospel and law form part of the one, undivided Word of God, the Word of grace, which is nothing other than Jesus Christ. The law is not deducible from any orders in creation or events in the world, but only from what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ. Any other understanding of the law, is not only “uncertain” and “dangerous,” but also “perverse” (Haddorff, 2010: 107). The law, just like the gospel, bears witness to the grace of God revealed by God’s Word. Therefore the law can never be bound to civil law, social custom, or any social, cultural or historical ideologies. The gospel and the law, in their unity, are bound to the Word of God, to the Word of grace, to Jesus Christ, and to nothing else (Haddorff, 2010: 108).

Although Barth only explicitly reversed the order of law-gospel to gospel-law in 1935, Barth’s theology from 1915 onwards was a theology that sought to derive completely, in its understanding of gospel and law, from the one Word of God, i.e., the gracious Self-revelation of God in Christ. Migliore also sees in these opposing views of the law and the gospel, perhaps “the crux of the divergence between Brunner and Barth.” The law, for Brunner was not only to be found in the Old Testament, but also in nature and reason. It was for Brunner the necessary presupposition enabling humanity to perceive the revelation of God in Christ. Whereas for Barth, theology would be delivered into the hands of philosophy, anthropology or psychology, if it was not from start to finish a theology of the Word of God. Migliore points out that it might be worthwhile to investigate Barth’s and Brunner’s understanding of the Holy Spirit, since it is the Holy Spirit who goes ahead of God’s revelation in Christ and prepares the unbelieving sinner for the reception of the Word of God (Migliore, 2004: 47-48).

In a vivid image that Barth wrote to Brunner in 1930, Barth’s theology is like a spinning top, which is entirely supported on one singular point, i.e., the Word of God, the gracious Self-revelation of God in Christ. For Barth, everything that theology can and should say about God and humanity, about gospel and law, about faith and obedience, has to depend completely upon this one point. Everything we know theologically, we know by virtue of faith in the Word of God whereby God’s grace in Christ is revealed. In this way Barth’s theology was a retrieval of all the *solas* of the Reformation: grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, Christ alone, to God alone the glory (Hart, 2004: 20, 43).

This does not mean, however, that the gospel of grace is without the law, since the law is contained within the gospel of grace. Neither does it mean that faith is without obedience, since faith in the Word of God is inseparable from obedience to the Word of God. Neither

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does it mean that Scripture is irrational, since the revelation through Scripture enables the faith that seeks understanding. Neither does it mean that Christ is without humanity or nature, since Christ is for humanity and for creation. What it does mean, is that the gospel of grace and the law, faith and obedience, Scripture and reason, Christ and humanity and nature, are all understood from the revelation of God in Christ. It is within the “strange new world of the Bible” that Barth rediscovered in 1916, that the whole encounter between God and humanity is to be sought and understood, and not within the world of philosophy, anthropology, psychology or even religion.

Word and Spirit

The miracle of the Holy Spirit is that we can hold onto both these radical extremes of the Word of God, without being torn in two. Having faith we have no excuse not to be obedient also, while a zeal for God’s kingdom does not relieve us from the obligation also to believe. Barth said in so many words that Luther’s *sola fide* should be extended and fully understood by interpreting it in the light of Calvin’s *solī Deo gloria* (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 195).

Barth’s Reformed understanding of the unity of faith and obedience, was not a form of Armenianism, a weakening of the gospel of grace in Christ, since it was understood within the comprehensive action of God, i.e., the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit.

George Hunsinger gives a concise summary of Barth’s understanding of the Holy Spirit as follows: “A comprehensive discussion would show that, in Barth’s theology, the saving work of the Spirit is trinitarian in ground, Christocentric in focus, miraculous in operation, communal in content, eschatological in form, diversified in application, and universal in scope” (Hunsinger, 2000b: 179).

Barth appreciated that Calvin and the Reformed tradition did not so much emphasise faith *and works*, as it emphasised that humanity is justified and sanctified *by God* and not by *ourselves*. That our works, but also our faith, is a gift from God, is God’s work of grace within us, was the true insight of the Reformed Confession. As Barth began to study Calvin and the Reformed tradition for the first time in earnest with his appointment as a Professor in *Reformed* theology at Göttingen, it was not the emphasis on faith and obedience, on justification and sanctification, that impressed him, but rather the emphasis on God’s action, on God’s grace, without which all our faith and obedience will come to naught. What Barth saw in the Reformed teachings, was not that humanity must grab hold of God in faith and obedience, but that God grabs hold of humanity’s faith and obedience, that God not only forgives all our sins, but also claims the whole of our lives, that even the tiniest faith and most mundane obedience is the miracle of the Holy Spirit working within us, and that our weak faith and our poor obedience will be completed and perfected by God’s justification and sanctification in Christ, to whom all the honour, glory and power belongs (Busch, 1975: 150).

The Barmen declaration in 1934, not incidentally the same year as Barth’s fierce opposition to Brunner, was in many ways a return to the Reformed understanding that Christ acts in the Word through the Holy Spirit. It was a rejection of any secondary revelation of Christ, and although Hitler and Nazism were never mentioned in the declaration, it clearly exposed the political dangers when the church allows for secondary revelations of Christ next to the Word. Barth’s brutal attack in the booklet *Nein!*, against Brunner’s book *Natur und Gnade*, which tried to look for a point of contact between grace and nature, has to be understood in this context. For Barth, the point of contact between God and humanity is not to be found in human history or natural order, but in the Word and Spirit (Busch, 1975: 246-248).

The Holy Spirit versus the *Zeitgeist*

The battle between Barth and Brunner, between revelation by the Word and Spirit alone, versus a general revelation in nature which precedes the particular revelation in Christ, was a theological dispute, but it was not a theoretical, academic dispute, abstracted from life. For Barth, this theological mistake, of looking for divine elements in human nature, culture or history, was *the* thing that opened the door for the church to support the German war effort in 1914, and to allow in 1933 for a secondary revelation of God next to Jesus Christ, in the form of National Socialism. Even if that door was only left opened by a small margin, the evil spirits that came rushing through it were plentiful.

In 1933 National Socialism demanded from the church to be coordinated with its policies. That meant that the church could not only obey Jesus Christ as its Head, but also had to obey Hitler as its *Führer*. Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* was literally to be placed next to the Bible on the altar in church (in that order, first *Mein Kampf*, then the Bible). Green says that the cross and the swastika were to be figuratively attached to each other, meaning that the church's doctrine had to conform to the state's doctrine of nationalism, racism and militarism (Green, 1989: 148).

After Hitler became Chancellor in January 1933, his government infiltrated and gained control over the church with rapid speed, including the evangelical churches. By spring time, Lutheran and Reformed churches were united within a broader German Evangelical Church, and a new church order determined that a Reich bishop be appointed, who had to report directly to Hitler. Ludwig Muller, who was sympathetic to the Nazi government and who supported the nationalist ideology of the German Christians, was appointed as Reich bishop in 1934. Thus, Haddorff explains, Hitler and his government not only influenced and tainted the theology of the church, but very quickly, by altering church polity and by replacing church and state representatives, gained official authority over the church's local synods and local congregations (Haddorff, 2010: 98).

1914 and 1933 proved to Barth that when modern Protestantism said "God" or "revelation," they were in fact not referring to God or revelation, but to human intentions, ambitions, ideals and desires based on human assumptions, presuppositions, opinions and convictions. The words "God" and "revelation" only gave divine legitimacy to human aspirations. Barth understood that as far as modern Protestantism was concerned, Feuerbach's critique that religious people have faith in their own faith, that they project their own ideals onto God and thereby create their own manmade images of God, their own idol, was indeed accurate (Busch, 2004a: 59).

1914, and especially 1933, exposed in the crudest possible manner, how the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the time, takes hold of a theology which is not wholly reliant on God's gracious and miraculous Self-revelation by the Word and the Spirit. A theology that seeks to find the revelation of God in the natural possibilities of humanity, inevitably becomes enslaved by the idols of the *Zeitgeist*.

One, but not the same

The unity of faith and obedience, the fact that faith and obedience are both to be understood as a response to the one Word of God, as a miracle of the Holy Spirit, does not mean that faith and obedience should be equated or confused with each other. They are inseparable and yet distinct. The mistake of Augustine and much of Catholic doctrine, according to Barth, is that it equates justification to sanctification (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 33).

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Although obedience is also God's work, is also a miracle of the Holy Spirit as much as faith, it is something different from faith. Obedience has to do with our existing-in-faith, the stepping forth of our faith (Latin: *existere* = "to step forth"). Obedience has to do with sanctification, with the holiness that the *Holy* Spirit establishes in our lives. It is the vertical truth of grace, of our justification by faith, going into horizontal, real and concrete action, sanctification, obedience. And yet, any faith that has not this distinct reality of concrete existing-in-faith, this horizontal activity of holiness, sanctification, obedience, next to it, simply is not faith at all, but an empty abstraction devoid of any content. Barth was absolutely convinced that not only James and Calvin, but also Paul and Luther, understood this distinct yet inseparable reality of faith and obedience very well (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 33-34).

Faith and obedience are not identical to each other, but, according to Barth, faith cannot be faith without obedience and obedience cannot be obedience without faith. The disciples would not have believed in Jesus' call, if they did not immediately rise, left all their things behind and followed Jesus in obedience. The disciple who follows Jesus, cannot believe in Jesus without obeying Jesus, and cannot obey Jesus without believing in Jesus (Barth, 1958: *CtD*: 17-18).

Faith, i.e., hearing and believing the Word of God, if it is true faith, if it is an actual hearing, must mean a hearing of Another, of one that stands opposite us, and therefore a hearing of an authority that stands over and against us. It is a hearing that binds us in such a way to God and our neighbour, that we cannot escape the absolute and concrete claim it makes on our entire existence. It defines our existence by the all-encompassing sacrifice and service of loving God with every aspect of our being and our neighbour as ourselves (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 34).

Barth said:

..we exist as *believing*, as hearers of God's Word, and as such cannot be other than doers of that Word" (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 35).

Sanctified sinners

This does not mean that our obedience is any less ambiguous and dubious than our faith. We are not only *simul peccatores et justi* but definitely also simultaneous sinners and sanctified. This, however, should not give us a reason to weaken the claim of sanctification on our lives, as Luther was at times tempted to do, interpreting sanctification merely as "separated" – which is closer to the Biblical term *hagios* / "holy." Barth could not understand why Luther, who at times could clearly define the Christian life in terms of our sacrifice and service in our secular "calling" in a marriage or vocation, could at other times be hesitant to give concrete content to our sanctification. Of course, Barth conceded that it is only the Holy Spirit who ultimately determines whether our actions are obedience or disobedience, and that even the greatest acts of sacrifice and service, as seen from the human side, are simultaneously sinful and open to the judgment of God. But this is no reason to shy away from the actual content of sanctification, since we can say exactly the same of our faith. The whole of the Christian life, our faith and obedience, stands under the judgment of God as being sinful from beginning to end, and yet also as being forgiven by the grace of God, justified and sanctified in Christ, recreated and redeemed by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 35-36).

Barth conceded that we always remain sinners and beginners in our obedience, and that we can only continue in obedience with faith in God's grace and in prayer for God's forgiveness.

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In the light of Christ's obedience, our obedience is nothing but disobedience, but since we are in Christ, our disobedience is sanctified and made obedient. It is not for us to judge whether our obedience is truly obedient or not, since only the Holy Spirit can determine that. All that we can do in the obedience of faith, is to act in the confidence and trust that our acts are sanctified in Christ and that the Holy Spirit will redeem our imperfect obedience by grace (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 36).

According to Barth, even Calvin said that we are always beginners, always forgiven sinners with nothing to offer, also in our obedience, and that the holiness of our obedience is hidden from us in the Holy Spirit. Barth said:

“Calvin, whose special interest was, indeed, the reality of *sanctification*, has continually reminded us, even perhaps more forcibly than Luther, that at the question as to the reality of our *obedience*, even at the supposed highest pitch of all seriousness, not only are we always at the beginning but we have been flung back into nothingness. Only in the Holy Spirit also is it decided, with reference to our purest, best-intentioned action, whether it is perhaps, and remains, sin, or whether, by virtue of God's forgiveness taking a share in our action – a share we cannot apprehend – it might be well done, done in God” (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 36).

Therefore we must leave the evaluation of our obedience to the Holy Spirit, and entrust ourselves fully to God's gracious sanctification, without which our obedience would be nothing but disobedience. Barth said:

“In other words, the Holy Spirit is absolutely and alone the umpire with reference to what is or is not Christian life. In the secret of the Holy Spirit it is true or untrue that we at times have or have not faith, and therefore are obedient and Christian or are not such. For this reason our sanctification is reality, but our obedience is a problem that we cannot solve, into the darkness of which we can but enter again and again and be thrown utterly and alone upon God” (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 37).

Is “Christian” a good adjective?

In this lecture given on the Holy Spirit and the Christian life, Barth concluded this chapter that deals with faith and obedience, by asking that if we agree with Luther and Calvin, rather than with Augustine, that the human life can only become the Christian life by virtue of the miraculous and *hidden* work of the Holy Spirit, if we agree with Paul that our lives are hidden with Christ in God, how then will it be possible to use the adjective “Christian” so often and with such ease? For instance, how is it possible that we can speak of a “Christian worldview,” or a “Christian morality,” “Christian art,” “Christian families,” “Christian groups,” “Christian newspapers,” “Christian societies,” “Christian endeavours,” and “Christian institutions,” if it is the *Holy* Spirit, the hidden and miraculous work and action of *God*, that determines whether this human life is indeed a Christian life? Barth was of the opinion that people will have a much better chance of understanding what the Christian life truly is, if we were not guilty of abusing this adjective so regularly (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 37-38).

For Barth, we can never use the adjective “Christian” in a definitive manner when referring to the community of faith, or to any action of the community of faith. Not only the justification, but also the sanctification of the church, not only its faith, but also its obedience, is a *hidden* reality in Christ. Because both our justification and our sanctification form part of the one work of God's grace in Jesus Christ, wherein we participate only through the miracle of the Holy Spirit, we cannot point to any external form of existence and call it “Christian.” In everything we say and do, the church can only point to Jesus Christ, in whom we are

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justified and sanctified, and in whom our real life of faith and obedience is hidden in God. For the future revelation of this hidden reality, of our justification and sanctification in Jesus Christ, of our faith and obedience in the Holy Spirit, we can only ask in prayer (Willis, 1971: 280).

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To know is to serve, to serve is to know

In 1937 and 1938 Barth received the rare (and peculiar!) honour of being invited to give Gifford lectures at the University of Aberdeen, which are lectures focused on the development of natural theology, of which there has never been in the history of theology a more staunch and consistent critic than Barth! Barth accepted the invitation on the premise that perhaps natural theology will be developed if it is helped to understand its most fierce opponent, and thus used this opportunity to once again give a brutal attack on any form of natural theology. And in a very cunning way, given that these lectures took place in Scotland, Barth used a confession of the Scottish reformation written in 1560, which had been long forgotten by the Scottish natural theologians attending these lectures (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: ix-x).

The title of these lectures, "The knowledge of God and the service of God," indicates that Barth used the unity of knowledge and service, the unity of faith and obedience, as the only true response to the Word of God which the Holy Spirit establishes by the miracle of grace, as his starting point. This is of course in stark contrast to a natural capacity for knowledge of God given within humanity, which has no need for service, no need for obedience, as natural theology asserts. Whereas natural theology claims that there is a natural capacity given within humanity whereby we can come to know God, Barth proceeded from the radical starting point that knowledge without service, faith without obedience, is simply not possible. It is only in the obedient service of God that God can be known in faith.

Barth said:

"Nothing could be more foreign to the teaching of the Reformation than the idea of a knowledge of God which was not also in itself service of God, or a service of God which consisted in something else than knowledge of God" (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 103).

In his 10th lecture, entitled "Freedom to Believe," the last lecture in the first half of the series, dealing with the knowledge of God, Barth came to Article 12 of the Scottish Confession of 1560, which he saw as "the real centre" of the confession. This, for Barth, not only served as a proper conclusion to the first ten lectures on the knowledge of God, but also as an excellent bridge to the lectures that were to follow, dealing with the service of God, since it places the whole Christian life, not only our creation and redemption, but also our regeneration and sanctification, completely and utterly within the gracious work of the triune God, and more specifically, regarding our faith and obedience, within the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 103).

It is irresistible to quote the whole of this article of the Scottish Confession of 1560, if only for its poetic beauty:

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Article 12 – OF FAITH IN THE HOLY GHOSTE:

"This is our Faith and the assurance of the same proceeds not fra flesh and blude, that is to say, fra na natural poweris within us, bot is the inspiration of the holy Gost : whome we confesse GOD equall with the Father and with his Sonne, quha sanctifyis us, and bringis us in al veritie be his awin operation, without whome we sulde remaine for ever enimies to God, and ignorant of his Sonne *Christ Jesus*; for of nature we are so dead, so blind, and so perverse, that nether can we feill when we are pricked, see the light when it shines, nor assent to the will of God when it is reveiled, unles the Spirit of the Lord *Jesus* quicken that quhilk is dead, remove the darkness from our myndes, and bowe our stubburne hearts to the obedience of his blessed will. And so as we confesse, that God the Father created us, when we were not, as his Sonne our Lord *Jesus* redeemed us, when wee were enimies to him; so also do we confesse that the holy Gost do sanctify and regenerat us, without all respect of ony merite proceeding from us, be it before, or be it after our Regeneration. To speak this ane thing zit in mair plaine words: As we willingly spoyle our selves of all honour and gloir of our awin Creation and Redemption, so do we also of our Regeneration and Sanctification, for of our selves we ar not sufficient to think one gude thocht, bot he quha hes begun the wark in us, is onlie he that cintinewis us in the same, to the praise and glorie of his undeserved grace" (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 102).

Not able to think one good thought

This article smashes to pieces any possibility that humanity, by our own nature, has the ability or capacity to know the truth or do the good. We cannot even think one good thought, says the confession. Barth fully appreciated how harsh and offensive these words are for modern hearers. But he reminded his audience that it is not unbelief who confesses these hard words, but faith. It is in faith that we know that we cannot believe of our own accord. It is in obedience that we give God all the glory and honour for doing this gracious work in us. Barth reminded his audience that unbelief has always had more faith in its own ability and capacity, in its own knowledge, than faith in God has had in its own ability and capacity, in its own knowledge. The hard words of the Reformers do not stem from a diminished view of humanity, but from a much more comprehensive view of God and the extent of God's gracious work in humanity (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*:107).

The problem of modern Protestant theology with its natural theology is perhaps less of an over-estimation of the abilities and capacities of humanity, than a complete disregard for the gracious and superior being and action of God. If we think that God can be known at a safe distance, that we can stand at arm's length and know the Creator as a mere object within creation, next to other objects of knowledge, then we are sorely mistaken. This is in essence what the whole endeavour of natural theology attempts, according to Barth, i.e., to know God without standing in a relationship to God which is proper between creature and Creator; to know God without serving God; even to know God without having faith (trust) in God. This is the irreconcilable difference between natural theology and a theology of revelation. Natural theology is the attempt to grasp God without being grasped by God (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 103-104).

Barth argued that humanity in its natural capacity cannot know God. It is only as humanity is made into a new creation by the grace and miracle of the Holy Spirit, it is only as humanity has been made into the new humanity which is free to believe and obey God, that knowledge of God becomes a reality. Barth agreed with the Confession:

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“Knowledge of God according to the teaching of the Reformation is *obedience* to God and therefore itself already service of God. According to Reformed teaching the knowledge of God is brought about when the object reaches out and grasps the subject, and through this the latter, the man who knows becomes a *new* man. All thoughts which he forms about God can only be an echo of what was said to him through God’s dealing with him, by means of which he became this new man” (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 104).

This new humanity means concretely living a life of faith, not an abstract faith in some abstract god, and certainly not faith in humanity, but concrete and real faith in Jesus Christ. This new humanity is not blessed with a range of new possibilities, which it can choose to do or to ignore. This new humanity exists only in the very specific and necessary faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ. Only in this singular path, which it must walk of necessity, lies its freedom and new reality.

“To have faith means to live as a man who is faced by Jesus Christ. ... To have faith means to serve this Lord. That is why knowledge of God is nothing else than service of God” (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 104).

It is important to note that this life of faith, is always faith in Jesus Christ, never faith in humanity. The person who lives by faith in Jesus Christ, is well aware how utterly impossible it is to live this life of faith if it were dependent on human efforts. Once again Barth asserted that this is always the fantasy of those who do not live in faith, i.e., that faith is a human potentiality, which also gives them the convenient excuse that they did not receive this potentiality, or at least not in equal measure with believers. Faith, however, according to the confession, is not like an art or skill which can be established by developing inherent human potential. Faith is not something upon which believers can boast, nor something unbelievers can admire or envy. In a sense believers understand non-believers better than they understand themselves, for it is only believers who understand how utterly impossible faith truly is. It is only believers who understand that faith is not a human potential of which some people have received more and others less, but for all of humanity it is an impossibility which can only be established by the gracious, miraculous work of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 106).

“With faith itself comes the conclusive insight, that no one has the capacity for faith by his own effort, that is either the capacity to prepare for faith or to start it, or to persevere in it, or to perfect it” (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 106).

Faith and obedience are divine gifts given in the divine miracle of God’s Self-revelation. Humanity is not given the possibility of faith and obedience, i.e., the capacity to believe and obey, which it can retain apart from God’s Self-revelation, like some special skill which was acquired or secret information which can be stored away and recalled when necessary. It is a “loan,” “a capacity granted to the incapable.” As God gives God-self to humanity, the human form that gift takes on, is the form of faith and obedience. Faith and obedience are part of the miracle of God’s Self-revelation, since it is the gracious miracle of the reception of the Self-revelation of God (Hart, 2000: 44).

Who then can be saved?

Who can live this life of faith? Anybody and everybody. All of humanity is free to believe, can believe and do indeed believe when we actively believe in Jesus Christ, who is the Self-revelation of God, the divine salvation, the divine possibility of faith and obedience. This freedom is not something humanity possesses before or apart from faith and obedience, but

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is established in the act of faith, in the life of obedience. This freedom is not a capacity of humanity whereby we can choose either to believe or not to believe; to obey or to disobey. It is not a freedom of the human spirit, but the freedom of the Holy Spirit, which is actual and real in the act of faith, in the life of obedience (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 107-109).

The actuality of faith precedes the possibility of faith. Jesus Christ is the objective reality of faith, and the Holy Spirit is the subjective reality of faith. In Jesus Christ, God says Yes to humanity, while humanity says yes to God in the Holy Spirit. It is only in the miracle of the reality of faith as established in Jesus Christ, and awakened in us by the Holy Spirit, that we can begin to speak about its possibility. Faith is the unexpected, unmerited gift of the Holy Spirit, which must first be received in wonder and gratitude, before it can be investigated and reflected upon (Rosato, 1981: 70).

In the miraculous hearing of the Word of God by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is known to the believer that it is not within humanity's grasp to hear and obey the Word of God. Therefore unbelief is not the inability to hear and obey the Word of God. Faith knows its inability to believe better than unbelief. Unbelief is the refusal to accept the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, the rejection of and rebellion against of the miracle of the Holy Spirit, whereby we are enabled to hear and obey God's Word. Therefore the epitome of unbelief can even be the very sincere and pious effort to believe and obey by our own power and abilities (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 19-20).

To believe is not to be convinced of our faith, but to be continually convinced by the Word of God of our unbelief and to give ourselves repeatedly in repentant, grateful and obedient trust to the grace of God in Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can convince us that our best effort at faith is sheer unbelief and that our most noble deed is utter disobedience. Only the Holy Spirit can convince us that we are saved by God's grace alone. Only the Holy Spirit can liberate us from our efforts to save ourselves and enable us to trust in Christ alone (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 28-29).

In Barth's paper to the Free Reformed Synod at the beginning of 1934, regarding the preparation and consideration of the Barmen declaration, Barth said that the message of the church is firstly that God the Creator, God the Reconciler, God the Redeemer, makes us God's children by free grace. This free grace of God is, secondly, the promise whereby our old selves are buried and we are raised as new creations, in the power of the Holy Spirit and the presence of Jesus our Lord. The gift of grace means, thirdly, that we belong to Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ we are justified through the miracle of faith, which means the continual forgiveness of our sins, always anew. And in Jesus Christ we are sanctified through the miracle of obedience, which means the continual command and claim of Jesus on our lives, ever again. Therefore, fourthly, through the Holy Spirit, we live in faith and obedience, for which we must pray continually, everyday afresh, in the expectation of the future fulfilment of our salvation in Jesus Christ. This fourfold message of the church stands in opposition to a number of errors. It implies that the grace of God does not entail moral or religious perfection, or any other merit on the part of humanity, upon which it can boast, but always remains the justification of the godless. It further denies the error of any separation between the gospel and the law, justification and sanctification, as if they do not equally stem from the singular, undivided grace of God in Jesus Christ. Our justification does not mean that we suddenly become better, less sinful human beings. We remain justified sinners. But also, we are not justified without the claim of sanctification, demanding our obedience. This, our sanctification, our obedience, is however also a gift of free grace. In the footsteps of Calvin, the church has to confess that grace means justification *and* sanctification, faith *and* obedience. The gospel and the law do not have different origins, but both originate from the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The church cannot speak of faith, without simultaneously speaking of obedience, and the church cannot speak of the gospel, without simultaneously speaking of the law. But in the expectation and hope of the future

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coming of Jesus, the error is also refuted that faith and obedience can be complete and sufficient in itself. Faith and obedience live in and by the anticipatory prayer: "Come Lord Jesus!" (Barth, 1934: *KB*: 29-31).

This means that all people can be saved. Every person can believe and obey, because what is impossible for humanity, is not impossible for God (Matthew 19:25-26).

There is hope for all

Faith and obedience begin where human efforts cease. Justification and sanctification are only for sinners. Only the lost can be found. At the end of human possibilities, God's work in us begins. At the end of our world, the journey toward God's new world starts. Only if we die with Christ, can we be raised with Christ. The work that God does in us, God's righteousness which is established in our faith and obedience, has no connection to human capacities or abilities, and never becomes our own, but it always remains God's work in us (Busch, 1975: 172).

Humanity has no capacity to hear and obey the Word of God. There is no human possibility for faith and obedience. But in the miracle of the Holy Spirit, every human being can believe and obey. It is only in the act of hearing and doing the Word of God, it is only within the miracle of faith and obedience, which is made possible at every moment by the power of the Holy Spirit, that faith and obedience become human actualities and therefore human possibilities. There is no possibility of faith, no assurance of the knowledge of faith, no guarantee of revelation, outside the act of faith, outside the event of hearing and obeying the Word of God, outside the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. It is only in the act of faith, in the obedience of faith, in the eschatological movement of the believer towards the fulfilment of redemption being brought about by the power of the Holy Spirit, that faith and obedience are established and sustained. Faith is only real and possible in the obedient act of praying. Like the prayer of Psalm 119:19: "I am a sojourner on earth, hide not thy commandments from me" (Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 10-11).

In his doctrine of the Word of God, Barth said that the reality of faith and obedience, the subjective reality of revelation wherein the Word of God is heard and obeyed by people, by the church, is the sphere of sacrament. It is the sphere wherein we are in constant movement from baptism towards communion, from the miraculous and gracious entry into faith through water and Spirit towards the equally miraculous and gracious renewal and fulfilment of our faith through the body and blood of Christ. It is the movement, in the words of Romans 1:17, *ek pisteōs eis pistin*, from faith to faith (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 232).

The faithfulness of God

All hearers of the Word of God is faced, whether consciously or unconsciously, with the dilemma, the crisis, of whether we really are hearers and doers of the Word. Confronted by this question, Barth said that the preacher must not point people to their faith, nor to other people's faith or to the preacher's faith, but must point them to the Bible, to their baptism or to the Lord's Supper, i.e., must point them to Jesus Christ, the living Word, the Lord with whom we have died and have been raised again, the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. Only in Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is our faith and obedience real and actual. If we look anywhere else for a human experience or a human possibility of faith and obedience, we will only be confronted with the impossibility of faith and obedience (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 249).

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Even in Barth's second attempt at a commentary on Romans, wherein he expressed the impossibility of faith and obedience too strongly, too negatively, by his own admission years later, faith and obedience were in fact understood as real and actual. In Barth's own translation of the Greek text of Romans, Barth at times chose to translate *pistis* with "the faithfulness of God," instead of "faith," and *pisteōs 'Iēsou Christou* with "the faith of Jesus Christ" instead of "faith in Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1933: R: 14, 107). Although ground breaking in the 1920's, the ambiguity of the genitive in *pisteōs 'Iēsou Christou*, which can either mean faith *in* Jesus, or faith *of* Jesus, has now become generally accepted by New Testament scholars.

According to Barth *pistis / pistos* have many possible meanings in the New Testament, many of which do not primarily relate to a human experience, but rather to a divine event. In some instances it signifies the faithfulness of God, the reliability and trustworthiness of God and God's Word. We receive faith from God, because God is *pistos*. God making God-self known through the revelation in Jesus Christ creates a new state of being for humanity, the state of being "in Christ," wherein we come to see the divine decision that God has made for us. Therefore, *pistis / pistos* can be described as trust: trust in God's worth, God's readiness, God's might, and God's truth in Christ, i.e., acknowledging and submitting ourselves to the faithfulness of God in Christ (Barth, 1975: CD I, 1: 228).

Although there is a close relationship in Paul's writing between *dikaiosune* and *pistis*, i.e., righteousness and faith, no author in the Bible uses the phrase: *dikaiosune dia ten pistin*, "justification through faith," as Luther did. Faith never signifies something which gives humanity any merit, but is precisely the trust placed in the merit, the righteousness of God. God is faithful despite our unfaithfulness (Romans 3:3). God is righteous. God justifies humanity. Faith is the human act whereby we as believers hold onto God's faithfulness, God's righteousness. Faith does not justify, but it holds onto the justification of humanity by God's grace in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1956b, CD IV, 1: 615).

Romans 3:22 which says: *dikaiosunē de theou dia pisteōs iēsou christou eis pantas kai epi pantas tous pisteuontas ou gar estin diastolē* / "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction," comes the closest to Luther's formulation: "justification through faith." But this phrase also speaks of the righteousness of *God*. (Not to mention the ambiguity of the genitive which could mean "faith in Jesus Christ" or "faithfulness of Jesus Christ." The tautology of the phrase "for all who believe" makes the translation "faithfulness of Jesus Christ" more plausible.) The following verses make it abundantly clear that it is the righteousness of *God*, the justification given by *God*, which is addressed here, not the righteousness of *faith*. Romans 3:23-26 says (with my emphases): "...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified by his grace* as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show *God's righteousness*, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show *his righteousness* at the present time, so that *he might be just and the justifier* of the one who has faith in Jesus."

An unreal God?

Bockmuehl argues that Barth's emphasis on the precedence of God over humanity, on the human impossibility of faith and obedience, even going so far as to describe faith as a predicate of God and not of humanity, caused his theology to be enclosed in objectivity. In this way, Barth's objective "God" became just as unreal as Bultmann's subjective "God," because while Bultmann's "God" was trapped in subjectivity, Barth's "God" was trapped in objectivity. A real encounter between God and humanity was not really possible in Barth's or

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Bultmann's theology, according to Bockmuehl. Whereas the subject of theology, God, was in danger of being swallowed up by the predicates, humanity, in Bultmann's case, the opposite could be said of Barth, that the predicates were in danger of being swallowed up by the subject. Barth's emphasis upon the "other worldliness" of God, according to Bockmuehl, did not fully allow Barth to communicate how God relates to this world (Bockmuehl, 1988: 85).

The argument regarding the danger of a theology enclosed in objectivity is valid, as it also addresses Berkouwer's critique against Barth (to which we will come later) that faith is not truly understood as a human action in Barth's theology, but rather as a divine action. However, Bockmuehl admits that Barth could, in the very same essay, emphasise the total commitment to the other world of God *as well as* the necessity of decision in this world. Bockmuehl cannot comprehend the unity of Barth's theology and ethics, and although he admits that Barth addresses ethical issues, even emphasising the importance of specific, concrete action, for Bockmuehl this is a paradoxical anomaly in Barth's theology and not an inherent part of it (Bockmuehl, 1988: 89-90).

Bockmuehl's main objection is that Barth's theology does not allow for a real encounter between God and humanity, for a real struggle between this world and the kingdom of God. Barth's understanding of the ultimate victory of God's election, reconciliation and redemption in Jesus Christ, did not leave enough room for penultimate dangers and struggles, in Bockmuehl's view. Barth's understanding of sin as nothingness, as that which God did not elect, as the unreality which will ultimately not be able to withstand the reality of God's victory in Jesus Christ, also affirms Bockmuehl's concern that a real encounter, a real struggle, was not present in Barth's theology (Bockmuehl, 1988: 95).

Gallus argues that for a theologian like Tillich, the impossible possibility of faith in Barth's theology, finally means that faith is not a human predicate. Faith, in Barth's theology, cannot be to see God's revelation, since revelation cannot be seen by humanity. Faith cannot be to conceive revelation, since revelation is inconceivable. Faith cannot be to experience revelation, since revelation takes place outside humanity's experiences. Thus the faith that Barth spoke of was, to Tillich and others, something completely outside human reality, and therefore not the action of humanity, but the action of God. Gallus says that Tillich agreed with Barth that we do not have faith in our own faith, and that we only have faith in God and in God's action, but maintained that this faith in God and in God's action, is indeed a human reality, and not merely a divine reality (Gallus, 2007: 558).

A reality for us

But according to Barth, faith and obedience *in* Jesus Christ is real. In the event of being taken up in Christ and participating in Christ's faith and obedience, we believe and obey. The incarnation in Christ not only revealed true divinity, but also true humanity. In Jesus Christ true faith and obedience was revealed. Without the vicarious faith and obedience of Christ, establishing real humanity and thus real obedience of faith, faithless humanity is doomed. Therefore, believing in Christ entails recognising Jesus, who believed in our place, who obeyed the will of God "for us." Barth uses Jesus' "for us" in a double sense, meaning that Jesus was not only "for us" as opposed to being against us, but also "for us" in the sense of taking our place in the judgment of God, displacing us from our position of faithlessness, from our human reality deserving God's wrath. The vicarious faith and obedience of Christ means that faith and obedience is indeed a human reality for those who are in Christ (Bromiley, 1979: 182).

In the editors' preface to the doctrine of reconciliation, Bromiley and Torrance explain that the term *Stellvertretung* that Barth used, contains this double meaning of both

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“representation” and “substitution,” that Jesus Christ was “for us” in the sense of displacing humanity from its position and standing in its place. And this, for Barth, does not only apply to the incarnation, but also to Christ’s crucifixion, death, resurrection, ascension and heavenly intercession for us, on our behalf (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: vii*).

Barth admitted in the foreword that throughout his doctrine of reconciliation, he was in his mind, even when not displayed on paper, in an intense discussion with Rudolph Bultmann, even when he deliberately chose to ignore him. Barth expressed great respect for Bultmann and his quest, and apologised for not being able to do “greater justice” to Bultmann’s theology (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: ix*).

When Barth discussed in his doctrine of reconciliation, in the section “The Judge judged in our place,” the fourfold meaning of this *Stellvertretung*, the fact that Jesus Christ is “for us,” he did not mention Bultmann’s name, but he was commenting on Bultmann’s process of demythologisation. The fact that Christ is “for us,” means (1) that Christ displaced us as judges over ourselves and took our place as the only Judge, (2) that Christ stood in our place to be judged, (3) that our judgment was placed upon Christ, and (4) that Christ acted justly in our stead (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 273*). And then Barth said:

“If the nail of this fourfold ‘for us’ does not hold, everything else will be left hanging in the void as an anthropological or psychological or sociological myth, and sooner or later it will break and fall to the ground. If it is to be meaningful and true, and with it all those doctrines of man’s plight and redemption, of his death and life, of his perdition and salvation, which seems to be true in themselves, then it must first be demythologised in the light of this ‘for us’ ” (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 273*).

The editors Bromiley and Torrance explain that Barth is arguing here that Bultmann’s project of demythologisation entails in fact not a demythologisation, but rather a thorough mythologisation of the reality of the covenantal history, the salvation history of reconciliation and redemption between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. Bultmann’s project attempts to describe the reality of atonement in terms of timeless, ahistorical existential categories, which are not real, but myths that need to be re-enacted again and again in order to have any meaning (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: vii-viii*).

Christ “for us” alters our reality. Whereas we want to be our own judge, that option is taken from us. Regardless of whether we want to judge ourselves in terms of religious, ethical, philosophical, psychological, sociological, anthropological or historical categories, any and all attempts to be our own judge are destroyed. For this is the root of our sin, i.e., the fact that we want to be our own judge and the judge of others. And this means that we are liberated, liberated for real faith and obedience, since the anxiety of judging the faithfulness of our faith and the holiness of our obedience is taken from us, allowing us to believe and obey without fear of our own judgment or the judgment of others. When we fear Christ’s judgment alone, we are free to believe and obey (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 231, 234*).

In his Gifford lectures, Barth noted that the Scottish Confession of faith does not describe humanity’s sin as part of the doctrine of creation, but as part of the doctrine of salvation and redemption. The confession clearly shows how terrible human sin is, but it places it in the context of the grace of God, which precedes it and follows it. The confession takes very seriously the fact that humanity is *against* God, but it takes even more seriously the fact that God is *for* humanity. The seriousness of sin can only be truly understood in light of the infinitely more serious grace of God (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG: 46*). The fact that it is impossible for humanity to believe and obey God, is serious, but its true seriousness is only comprehended in light of the fact that Jesus believes and obey for us, on our behalf.

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Jesus represents us. Jesus is made what we really are, sinful. Our sin is placed upon Christ, so that we can see ourselves for what we truly are. The reality of our unbelief and disobedience are represented in Christ. In Christ the true extent of our unbelief and disobedience are exposed in the light of God's judgment, obliterating all our feeble concerns regarding the smallness of our faith or the incompleteness of our obedience (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 238, 241).

But in Christ's suffering, crucifixion and death not only God's judgment upon our sin, but also our sin, even more, we the sinners, are defeated and buried. Asking what the existential meaning of Christ's passion has for our lives, is to trivialise the world-altering, actual occurrence of Christ's vicarious suffering, crucifixion and death on our behalf, into the most superficial kind of theatre display, which is not real at all, but only performed in order to move or inspire our own feelings, thoughts or will. To explain the real significance of this event, the event itself needs merely to be repeated, as is done in the eucharist. In the eucharist, we are not asked how Christ's passion moves us, but merely told: "This is Christ's body for you," and: "This is Christ's blood for you." It was done "for us." Our intellectual comprehension or emotional experience of it, even our willing participation in it, does not add anything to it (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 248-249, 253).

Having done all of this "for us," Jesus did what is right, Jesus acted justly and obediently, Jesus did what God expected of humanity, Jesus acted as the faithful covenant partner. By doing this for us, Jesus lived the real life of faith and obedience on our behalf (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 256).

A reality *in us*?

Does the real faith and obedience of Jesus "for us" then indeed give truth to Bockmuehl's accusation, that in Barth's theology God is enclosed in objectivity, that everything that Christ did "for us" happened outside humanity, and that therefore there is no room for a real encounter between God and humanity, and neither for real faith and obedience on humanity's side of the relationship? Is faith and obedience only Christ's reality, or is it also *our* reality?

Bockmuehl affirms that Barth addressed the encounter between God and humanity, as well as the Christian life, more positively in *The humanity of God* and in later parts of his *Church Dogmatics*. Bockmuehl especially appreciates Barth's writings on vocation. But for Bockmuehl, these writings signify a change of direction, a self-critique in Barth's theology, rather than the full development of the same theological trajectory (Bockmuehl, 1988: 103-104).

But even in the second edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, Barth affirmed the reality of faith and obedience. According to Barth, the Bible does not tell us that we are divine or how we can become divine through our faith and obedience. The message of the gospel does not inform humanity about an event, emotion, or experience within ourselves, of which we must take notice. Revelation does not ask for our understanding or sympathy. It confronts us with the difference between God and humanity, with the impossibility of faith and obedience. We can only hear this Word which comes to us in its ever newness, in its ever strangeness, with "fear and trembling." But as the Word of God confronts us in all its strangeness, it establishes what we cannot establish, it achieves what we cannot achieve, it gives what it demands. The Word of God denies the human possibility of faith and obedience, but simultaneously places us within the divine reality of faith and obedience, within the grace of Christ's faith and obedience, making it impossible to do anything other than to believe and obey *in Christ*. The Word of God "demands participation, comprehension, co-operation; for it

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is a communication which presumes faith in the living God, and which creates that which it presumes" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 28).

The gospel is not the message of how humanity can become divine, but how God became human in Jesus Christ, and how we can participate in the humanity of Christ. As the faith of Christ exposes our unbelief, and as the obedience of Christ exposes our disobedience, we have no other option but to take part in Christ's faith and obedience.

Even then, even in his commentary on Romans, faith is understood by Barth to be real and actual:

"This then is faith: the fidelity of men encountering the faithfulness of God" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 32).

Not as a human possibility, but as a wholly new reality which has its starting point in resurrection of Christ, and which places humanity's complete existence under the *KRISIS* – the judgment of God – thereby making humanity fully dependent upon the all-embracing and all-claiming grace of God, faith and obedience are real and actual (Barth, 1933: *R*: 32).

Faith and obedience are real and actual to the extent that the believer's whole life is lived in fidelity to the faithfulness of God. Christians cannot live by our feelings, convictions, understanding or morality, i.e., we cannot live by our faith and obedience, but only by the faithfulness of God. The Christian life is always the choice between scandal and faith, between utter despair and certain hope, between total judgment and total grace. The so-called "possibility" of faith and obedience might hover aimlessly between these extremes, but the reality of faith and obedience can only live in the reality proclaimed in Romans 3:23-24, that all have sinned against God, and all are justified freely by God's grace in Jesus Christ. And therefore, every person can and must believe (Barth, 1933: *R*: 39-40).

Rejecting unbelief

Although the radical newness of Christ's justification and sanctification places all our human faith and obedience under God's judgment, the same is true of our unbelief and disobedience. Just as we cannot elevate our faith and obedience as divine possibilities within humanity, so too we cannot and may not elevate our "negative" possibilities, our ignorance, imperfection or despair, as if they qualify us for God's grace. We cannot even elevate the supposed smallness or emptiness of our faith, neither the shortcomings or ambiguity of our obedience, as human qualities making us worthy of God's grace. Barth criticised the theologians of his day of confusing faith with historical or spiritual achievements by humanity, with human possibilities, whereas they should have known better than anyone that "faith is the ineffable reality of God." Neither our human affirmations nor our human negations can escape the reality of God, whereby all human efforts are negated and true faith established by God's grace alone. Whether we think of faith as an achievement of our own decision or indecision, our own activity or passivity, our own knowledge or ignorance, our own experience or inexperience, the moment we think of faith as a human achievement of any sort, at that very moment we have forsaken and lost the very origin our faith, namely the faithfulness of God. Being chosen by God, we cannot, even for one second, pretend that we have chosen God (Barth, 1933: *R*: 56-59).

Rather surprisingly, already in this book on Paul's epistle Barth attacked the sophisticated attempts of ascribing special piety to human negations of God, be it esteemed intellectual theories regarding the "Last Things," a holy piety of silence before God, or the profound experience of living within of the eschatological "Moment." Not only self-glorification, but also

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self-annihilation, as in Buddhism, mysticism or pietism, are forms of Pharasaism. And, according to Barth, self-annihilation is even worse than self-glorification, because it is the Pharasaism of humility, which is very devious and deceiving. To boast in our negations of God, as if they have the power to bring about God's presence, is still to worship human achievements instead of worshipping God (Barth, 1933: *R*: 109-110).

Even accepting religion

And therefore Barth, in *The Epistle to the Romans*, despite the severe judgment of God over all forms of religion, rejected the idea of abandoning religion. We would fool ourselves if we thought that by abandoning religion, we will be able to bypass the sinfulness of all our human efforts and thus avoid the righteous judgment of God upon our actions. To abandon religion, would entail a greater hypocrisy, as if we were now in some sense "above" God's judgment over all forms of religion, as if abandoning religion were a better human possibility. Religion is the best human possibility. We cannot, from humanity's side, do any better than religion. But grace is God's reality beyond all human possibilities (Barth, 1933: *R*: 241-242).

Di Noia has indicated that Barth's phrasing of "*Aufhebung der Religion*" in *Church Dogmatics*, volume I, part 2, paragraph 17, has unfortunately been translated with the phrase "Abolition of Religion." It is clear that the German word *Aufhebung* entails both the destruction and reconstruction of religion concurrently. In a way similar to Hegel's usage of the word *Aufhebung*, Barth used it to indicate that religion is stopped, brought to a halt, but simultaneously lifted up and held up to continue on a higher plane. Furthermore, Di Noia argues that Barth's use of the German word "*Unglaube*," translated as "unbelief," when Barth describes "religion as unbelief," should rather be understood as meaning faithlessness or unfaithfulness, than unbelief. The point is this: in Barth's view religion is simultaneously negated and exalted, judged and justified, eliminated and elevated, by the gracious reality of God's Self-revelation (Di Noia, 2000: 245, 249-251).

Sin, says Barth, is on all accounts unbelief. And unbelief is nothing other than humanity's faith in itself. Religion is unbelief in so far as it is humanity's own expression of faith (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 314). Religion is unbelief in so far as it is the human attempt the speak the Word of God, instead of hearing the Word of God, of having faith, instead of receiving faith, of grasping God, instead of being grasped by God, of being worthy, instead of obeying its Master (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 302-303).

It would not do for religion to attempt an escape from its fundamental sinfulness, from its basic attitude of unbelief, from faith in itself. The best religion can do, is to acknowledge and confess its sinfulness, its unbelief, its faith in itself.

True religion, says Barth, is religion which is simultaneously justified and sinful. Although religion can never be true in itself, it can give witness to the Truth in so far as it allows itself to be judged and justified by the Truth, by the Word of God, by God's Self-revelation (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 325). In order to be strong, the church must allow itself to be weak, to receive the gracious, mysterious and miraculous working of the Holy Spirit, in whose power alone our faith and obedience in Jesus Christ is real and true (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 344).

However, even if and when the church does so, it is not our weakness, not the acknowledgment and confession of our unbelief and disobedience, not our "living by grace," which makes our religion true religion. It is God's grace in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, it is the revelation and reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, through the miraculous gift of the Holy Spirit, which turns our unbelief into real faith and our disobedience into real obedience, which turns our religion as unbelief into true

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religion (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 344-346). The truth and reality of Christian religion does not lie in itself, but in divine creation, in divine election, in divine justification and divine sanctification. The Christian religion really and truly believes and obeys Jesus Christ, not on the basis of our own faith and obedience, but on the basis our gracious creation, election, justification and sanctification in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 346, 348, 352, 357).

By itself, the Christian religion is unbelief just as much as any other human religion. But it is made true religion by God's grace. Barth likened this to the sun which shines on the earth, and on the part of the earth that is turned towards the sun, it is day, while on the part of the earth that is turned away from the sun, it is night. Nothing in the earth itself can turn it into day or night. It is only as the sun shines on it, that it becomes day. But then it truly is day on that part of the earth. The light of the sun is reflected on that part of the earth and the creatures who inhabit that part of the earth receive its light and life. The Christian religion, Barth said, is the sacramental sphere created by the Holy Spirit, wherein people really hear and obey God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ, thus making it true and holy, although it is not so due to any quality in itself (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 353, 358-359).

People of faith

Barth argues that the Word of God does not only reveal the reality of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, but it also reveals the reality of people who believe and obey the Word of God. The reality of faith and obedience in the Word of God, is just as much a part of revelation, as the incarnated Word of God, Jesus Christ. The Word of God does not reveal the human possibility of faith and obedience, but the divine reality, the gracious, miraculous reality that there are people who believe and obey the Word of God. The Word of God reveals that it does not only come to people, but that people really hear it and do it, that Jesus Christ is not only the Son of God, but that Jesus Christ is the Brother of many, who are also children of God in Christ. The Word of God does not only reveal the reality of "God with us," but also the reality of "God with *us*" (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 205-207).

The fact that Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, entails two movements simultaneously: the movement of God towards humanity, as well as the movement of humanity towards God (Steenberg, 1983: 31).

The Word of God does not return empty to God (Isaiah 55:11), but it really does what it sets out to do, i.e., to call people to faith and obedience. If the decision of faith does not take place, if the Word of God is not really heard and obeyed, then the Word of God would be without content (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 23-24).

In God's eternal election God has freely elected to be the God of humanity and humanity to be God's people. God's grace does not only entail God's movement towards humanity, but also humanity's movement towards God. Grace works from both sides, from God's side and from humanity's side. In Jesus Christ, God is with us and we are with God. The gospel, God's election of humanity, God's Yes to humanity, does not stop and wait for humanity's decision, humanity's yes to its election, humanity's faith and obedience, but it includes our decision, our yes to our election, our faith and obedience. In Jesus Christ, not only God's Yes to us is real and actual, but our yes to God is also real and actual.

Decision of faith

In a conversation with representatives of the pietistic movement in Germany and Switzerland, in 1959 in Basel, Barth was asked if all people are in Christ, and whether we

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are not called to a decision for Christ. Barth warned them not to be so attracted to the word “decision,” where it is referring to a human action. Our human decision can only follow God’s prior decision. In Bultmann’s theology everything depends upon our human decision, and Ebeling speaks of “faith,” when he should rather speak of Jesus Christ, Barth cautioned. Our human decision, as important as it is, can only be correctly understood if it is understood in the context of God’s decision, which precedes and completes all our decisions. Barth said that he does not like to use the word “believers.” We, the church, the community of faith, are in solidarity with the world as people who must become what we already are in Christ. The distinction between the church and the world is only temporary. Both the church and the world together have our beginning and our final destiny in Christ (Barth, 1995: *G*: 14-15, 18-20).

And yet, Barth himself could speak on other occasions extensively and urgently about the decision of faith. The person whose existence is established by Jesus Christ, is the one who lives in the decision faith, Barth said. The true human being, who lives according to God’s purpose and will, is the human being who lives completely within the decision of faith. It is only in the decision of faith, Barth emphasised, that we correspond to God’s Word, that we receive God’s grace. The Bible, Barth said, knows nothing of humanity in general, but it addresses those who live within the decision of faith. We can only speak about true humanity, Barth added, if we take the decision of faith as our starting point (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 25-26). Confronted by the Word of God, neutrality becomes impossible, and the decision of faith becomes the only true possibility (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 27).

But what is this faith for which we decide?, Barth asked. The answer Barth found in the Heidelberg Catechism: that in the whole of our existence and life we do not belong to ourselves anymore, but to our trustworthy Saviour Jesus Christ. The decision of faith is therefore nothing else than placing all our trust in the Word of God, on relying not on ourselves or our own decisions anymore, but relying fully on Jesus Christ (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 26).

What Barth did consistently in his theology, was to emphasise the objective reality of salvation, apart from humanity’s decision of faith. As Hunsinger points out, it occurs so frequently, especially in Western theology, that even though Christ’s atoning work is emphasised very strongly, at some point all that God has done for humanity in Christ, is described as being subordinate and dependent upon humanity’s decision of faith. And thus humanity’s decision of faith becomes the dominating reality in theology, rather than the reality of salvation in Christ (Hunsinger, 1991: 103-104). Surely, the only way to participate in Christ’s salvation, according to Barth, is in faith, but it is the reality of our salvation in Christ which gives reality to our faith, not our faith which makes our salvation in Christ real (Hunsinger, 1991: 106).

The representatives of the pietistic movement had many critical questions and remarks regarding Barth’s apparent minimising of the importance of the decision of faith, and they suggested that Barth does not take sin and the threat of people being lost seriously enough. Barth responded that he gives plenty of attention to sin in his *Church Dogmatics*, however, sin must always be understood in the broader context of God’s grace. Yes, there is the danger of people being lost, but we cannot leave them with that threat at the end of a sermon, because the Bible does not leave it there. Sin, and the danger of being lost in unbelief, should not be proclaimed as a threat, but sin must be called to confession, lost people must be called to faith, by the proclamation of God’s grace. Yes, the Bible speaks about sin, yes, the Bible calls people to a decision of faith, but the Bible does so within the reality of God’s gracious action before and after all our decisions, within the reality of God’s faithfulness despite our unfaithfulness, of God’s grace despite our sin. The Bible addresses believers and unbelievers in the same way. Believers know our sin and unbelief much, much better than unbelievers, and know that we are also called by the Bible to repent our sin and

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to believe, because we, together with the rest of humanity, have been forgiven in Jesus Christ and are moving towards redemption in Jesus Christ. As believers we rejoice in the fact, and proclaim to the world, that our sin and unbelief will not be victorious, but that Jesus will be victorious, *therefore*, we all must repent of our sin and unbelief, and believe in Jesus. The church must rather err on the side of speaking too much about the gospel and grace, than err on the side of speaking too little about sin and unbelief (Barth, 1995: G: 20-23).

After some further questions by the representatives of the pietistic movement and responses by Barth, Barth asked some counter questions: What happens after the decision of faith? What about the life of obedience? What does Pietism say to the converted about Mammon? Where were all the pietistic brothers when Hitler arose? Where were they after the war? What did they say about atom bombs? Were they hiding in their chapels? Barth said that despite all their emphasis on decision, he did not observe any decisions being made by the pietistic brothers with regard to the real problems of the world. Conversion entails the conversion of the whole of our lives. An a-political conversion is not real conversion. It is not our conversion which is of ultimate importance, but the life of obedience which flows out of our conversion. In the life of faith, God takes us into service, demanding our obedience, our responsibility to God *in* and *for* the world. We are awakened to faith, not for our own salvation, but for the sake of the world (Barth, 1995: G: 34-35).

Good news for the world

In an introduction to the book, *God Hear and Now*, George Hunsinger describes beautifully the positive proclamation of Barth's theology and life, which was not optimistic, which was realistic, but nevertheless filled with joy and hope. Although Barth could speak with all due seriousness about the problems of the world, and with an acute awareness of his own limitations, he always did so within the framework of the wonderful good news of God's grace. Or perhaps, Hunsinger suggests, it was Barth's joy in the good news of God's grace, which gave his theology the proper seriousness and humbleness (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: vii-viii).

Hunsinger says:

“Dietrich Bonhoeffer once suggested that in Barth we find the same *hilaritas* as we do in Mozart. The good cheer which knows how to incorporate all that is negative within itself yet without losing its basic gladness is surely one of Barth's most appealing characteristics. It is a *hilaritas* informed by *gravitas*, but which never succumbs to it. For all his greatness, or perhaps just because of it, Barth does not take himself too seriously. Along with *hilaritas* and *gravitas*, an element of *humilitas* pervades his work. Barth has no higher aspiration than to place his intellect in the service of God's grace. Grace inspires the cheerfulness, the gravity and the humility that he sees as proper to the theologian's task” (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: vii-viii).

Barth's son, Christoph, also testifies to the fact that the way in which his father did his work, although he laboured diligently and was at times very disturbed about events in the world, was with a remarkable joy (Barth, C.F., 1986: 6). Despite all the misery in the world, his father dearly loved the world, and was truly a worldly man, reading the newspaper every day with the same attention as he read the Bible (Barth, C.F., 1986: 8).

Christoph Barth says about the manner in which his father approached his work:

“During all those years I knew him as a hard-working, passionately fighting and at times deeply troubled man, who nevertheless enjoyed life, good company, and good

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music and was amazingly disposable to his family. Theology – this was my conclusion from early childhood onward – must be the most joyful, the most exciting of all sciences” (Barth, C.F., 1986: 6).

Because our work is response to God’s prior work, and because our work will be perfected by God’s future work, we, the church, can labour with all due urgency and seriousness, but nevertheless with abundant joy and hope, because it is not our work that saves the world, but God’s work, which we are allowed and commanded to participate in, by God’s grace.

Yes and Amen

God’s activity always precedes human activity, but still, the human activity which is created and enabled by God’s activity, is real and actual. God’s election of humanity creates real and actual elected humanity. God’s election of humanity does really bring about humanity’s election of God (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 176-177).

In his doctrine of election, Barth said that God’s election is the gospel beyond Yes and No. Because Jesus Christ is both the electing God and elected humanity, because God has elected to be our God and has elected us to be God’s people, in Jesus Christ, the doctrine of election is not Yes and No, but altogether Yes. The doctrine of election is the gospel *in nuce*, it is the sum of the good news (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 3, 13-14).

Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination, which contained a Yes and a No, was not the *euangelion*, the unambiguous good news of the gospel, according to Barth, but rather *dysangelion*, bad news, since it attempted to be so balanced, so “almost scientific,” that it distorted the gospel message (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 18).

In contrast to Calvin’s doctrine of double predestination, of election and rejection, Barth’s doctrine of election was in a sense a doctrine of God’s double election, God’s double Yes, God’s Yes and Amen: that God will be our God and that we will be God’s people (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 19).

In the Gifford lectures on natural theology that Barth gave in Scotland, he explained that in his view, Calvin erred on the objective side, by seeing the election in terms of God’s absolute decree, while the Lutherans of the 16th and 17th centuries erred on the subjective side, by seeing the election in terms of humanity’s freedom to believe, and therefore in some natural ability or readiness for faith in humanity. In both cases, the election was not understood in a sufficiently Christological manner. Both, according to Barth, showed traces of natural theology, where the knowledge of God is tied to some general philosophical principle, rather than to the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 78-79).

Barth argued that God rejects Jesus Christ in humanity’s place, on the cross on Golgotha. Thus we cannot believe in our rejection, but we can only believe in our election in Jesus Christ. Since Jesus is rejected by God in our place, the doctrine of election is most definitely the doctrine of the non-rejection of humanity. Humanity is not rejected. God rejects God-self in Jesus Christ, so that humanity will not be rejected, but elected by God. We can only disbelieve the rejection of humanity (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 167-168).

The aim of grace, is not merely for God to be gracious to humanity, for God’s turning to humanity, but the aim of grace is also for our turning to God, for our faith and obedience (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 30). But it is truly grace that we are who we are, God’s elected people. Barth says that even the human being, Jesus, was not the elected human being, because of any merit, ability, nor because of a life of faith or because of prayer, but it was by grace

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alone, by the Word of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus was miraculously conceived and born, without sin, the Son of God, God's elected. And as it is with Christ, so it is with Christians, as it is with the Head, so it is with the body of Christ. Not our faith, obedience or prayer can make us God's elected, but in Jesus Christ we are God's elected, people of faith and obedience, by grace alone, by the Word of God alone, in the power of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 118).

We are not asked to have faith in our election. The election of Jesus, whereby we are elected, is the miracle of grace which brings about our faith and obedience. A doctrine of election which is separated from Jesus, which is described as a *decretum absolutum*, as an absolute decree before and apart from the history of Jesus, is impossible to believe in, according to Barth. Barth conceded that faith and election belong together, but they belong together "in the same way as calling and faith, or justification and faith, or sanctification and faith, or God and faith," i.e., faith is the free and necessary obedience which follows upon God's gracious election, calling, justification and sanctification of Jesus Christ, and in Jesus Christ, humanity as a whole. It is not because we have faith that we are elected, but it is because we are elected in Jesus Christ, that we have faith in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 161).

However, Barth also warned against discarding the word "decree" altogether, since it communicates the eternal faithfulness of God, the eternal will of God, the eternal election of God to be the God of humanity in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 182). But God's decree is a *living* decree. God's eternal decree is far more active and at work in the present moment than our faith and obedience. Although God's decree, God's election, is complete, it is complete as a verb spoken in the tense of *perfectum*, which describes an action that is continuous. God's election of humanity is complete, but it is not exhausted. God's election is complete, but it is not behind us, in the past. God's election of humanity happened, is happening and will happen (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 183). God's election, creation, reconciliation, vocation, justification, sanctification and glorification of humanity in Jesus Christ, is an eternal happening (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 184). It is within this eternal happening that we are taken up and allowed to participate as we are awakened to faith and obedience (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 185-186).

Unworthy participants

With this revelation of the people of God, the people of faith and obedience, we are not presented with a human possibility, we are not presented with an option which we can choose to take or decide to ignore. Revelation confronts people of faith as the Lord addressing servants, as the King addressing subjects. Barth said that we will be surprised to find in the gospels that Jesus addresses the disciples in the form of command. They have no say in the matter. As the Word of God reveals Jesus as the *Kyrious*, the Lord, it also reveals an absolute claim upon those called to follow, to believe and obey, to submit themselves to this King and serve this Lord alone. People of faith are not addressed by the Word of God due to their merit or ability, asked to do something for which they have special abilities or skills. They are claimed as unworthy and incapable servants and subjects, ordered to follow and obey their Master. Barth used Luke 17:7-10 as an example. In verse 5 the disciples ask Jesus to increase their faith, upon which Jesus replies in verse 6 that if they had the faith of a mustard seed, they would be able to order this tree to uproot itself and plant itself in the sea. And then, in verse 7-10, which Barth was discussing, Jesus explains to the disciples that they are unworthy servants, like servants working on the land or tending to sheep. The servants' master does not say please or thank you, does not wait for the servants' decision to agree to the master's requests. The master simply commands the servants to obey, and

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the servants simply obey, acknowledging their unworthiness, and doing their duty without objection (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 273-274).

The people of faith are not worthy or fit for the task to which they are called, and it is not expected of them to complete or finish this task, to produce results. We are claimed in our unworthiness and unfitness for this task. We are forgiven by grace for our unbelief and disobedience, and commanded to follow and obey our Lord and Master, despite ourselves (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 275).

For Barth, faith and obedience in their unity are real, concrete human actions. Faith is a movement of the will, a free decision of obedience, the action of a rational person, the service of God which corresponds to knowledge of God, the love of God which follows faith in God. But this real faith and obedience only comes into existence upon encountering a divine reality happening to us from outside ourselves. It is as the real Word of God addresses us and we respond to it, that faith and obedience are real. And it is only due to the reality and merit of grace, and not due to any possibility or ability in us, that the Word of God *does* really address us and that we *do* really receive it in faith and obedience (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 19).

Our hidden reality

Perhaps one could say that what Barth was challenging, was not the reality of faith, but the external assurances we seek to affirm that faith is real and true, either in ourselves or in others. Barth fully affirmed the fact that faith is a human act, including our human knowledge, will and obedience, but he said that we have no external assurances of that. The Word of God is its own assurance. We believe, we are the agents of faith, we act in faith, we obey with our own will and decision, but the truth and reality of our faith and obedience cannot be observed or assured externally, for it is a hidden reality which exists only within the reality of the Word of God. And that is why faith does not look to itself, does not evaluate itself on its external existence, but looks to God, looks to the Word of God, finds its assurance not in itself, but in the Word of God and in the reality of faith promised in the Word of God (McConnachie, 1931: 195-196).

The sacraments, Barth said in his earlier life, point to the reality of our justification and sanctification, the reality of our faith and obedience, albeit a *hidden* reality. The sacraments are signs that witness to the hidden, but the real and present action of God, the real and present Self-revelation of God in God's Word, wherein our justification and sanctification, our faith and obedience take place. As God freely chooses to give God-self in the sacraments, to be known in the Self-revelation of God's Word, the sacraments become signs of the hidden reality and presence of God, but also of the hidden reality of our faith and obedience by virtue of God's justification and sanctification. The early Barth tried to follow Calvin's lead in his understanding of the sacraments, which, according to Barth, was not a mere compromise between the idealism of Zwingli and the realism of the Catholic-Lutheran position. Christ is not only present in the sacraments as an expression of the faith of the church (Zwingli). But neither do the sacraments contain the reality and presence of Christ in themselves (Catholic). Calvin did not bind the presence and reality of Christ to the church's faith or to the sacraments themselves. The sacraments, the same as preaching, really mediate the presence and reality of God, but only as God freely chooses to give God-self to them, and only as God freely chooses to create, by the Holy Spirit, the faith and obedience with which they are to be received. It is the free gift of God's grace which creates both the signs as real signs, and the real faith with which the signs are seen, heard, known and accepted (Barth, 1929: *KB*: 451, 455, 458, 460).

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Later in life, however, Barth refrained from speaking about baptism and eucharist as sacraments. The resurrected, living, Self-testifying Lord, Jesus Christ, is the only One who causes humanity to participate in the reconciliation, the restored communion, between God and humanity, by baptizing us with the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is the only sacrament, the only mediation between God and humanity. Barth's late rejection of infant baptism and support of confessional baptism, was not an attempt to lessen the hiddenness of faith and obedience, but rather to radicalise it to an even greater extent. Therefore Barth differentiated between the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which entails being plunged by God's Spirit into the hidden, future reality of a new creation in Jesus Christ, and the baptism with water, which is the believer's first step of obedience, the first movement towards God that corresponds to God's movement to humanity. Thus, far from endorsing a baptism grounded upon assurance of the believer's faith, Barth said that even baptism (with water), just as our faith and obedience, could not be seen as a human act that produces or accomplishes anything by its own power, but only as the free and obedient correspondence to God's hidden and future action in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. For the late Barth, baptism with water was a human act done in the promise of the Holy Spirit, the promise that Jesus Christ, who brought about our faith and obedience, which is hidden to us now, will also complete it in the future (Barth, 1969: *CD IV,4*: 30-32, 38-40, 42-43; Neder, 2009: 82-83).

Near the end of his career, Barth could only say that our baptism with water "points forward, away from itself and beyond itself, to its fulfilment in the future baptism with the Holy Spirit" (Barth, 1969: *CD IV,4*: 71). Barth wanted to ensure that in no way the church and its actions replace Jesus Christ as the only mediator of God's grace, the only mediator of God's salvation, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Emphasising the hiddenness of all human faith and obedience, even in baptism, Barth said: "...Christianity will deceive both itself and the world if it pretends that its baptism accomplishes something which is more and better than a human answer, and at the same time a human question, in face of God's grace and revelation" (Barth, 1969: *CD IV,4*: 73; Neder, 2009: 83).

Radicalising the hidden, future reality of the Christian life, Barth saw confessional baptism as the first step in our life of prayer, and thus not as an act of self-confidence in our own faith and obedience, but as an act of hope in our hidden and future justification and sanctification in Jesus Christ:

"Because and to the degree that baptism is prayer, it is at once a very humble and a very bold action, free from all illusions and profoundly sober, yet bold and heaven-storming. As prayer to God which raises no claim, as pure seeking, knocking, asking: Come, Lord Jesus! *Veni Creator Spiritus!* it is unequivocal obedience to God, an unequivocal answer to His justifying and sanctifying work and word" (Barth, 1969: *CD IV,4*: 210).

Our future reality

Faith and obedience are hidden realities, because they are not natural realities, but realities in God's grace. They are eschatological realities, i.e., they are real and present in the form of promise. In a lecture in Münster on eschatology, Barth explained that the promise of the Word of God puts us under the strictest command of faith and obedience, because it is not a human promise, but the promise of *God*. The promise of God is in every aspect command. Grace is not a self-evident, natural reality, but it is a future determination which comes to us in the form of a claim, a command. In the reality of faith and obedience, the whole world is against us and only God is for us. Nothing in the world, nothing in nature, nothing in ourselves, nothing but God can help us and support us in our faith and obedience. The hope we have in the reality of faith and obedience, cuts off all other hopes that we have in the

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world, turning us into refugees, pilgrims in this world. Hope, real hope, demands decision. The ethical character of our faith is grounded upon its eschatological character. By cutting off all help and support in this world, the promise of our faith demands a life of obedience to our ultimate destination. Grace does not live by the possibilities of this world, but by the reality of God's world which is to come. That is why the reality of faith and obedience is a hidden reality, an incomprehensible, mysterious, wonderful reality. The reality of grace, the wonder of grace, is precisely the hidden mystery that what is impossible for humanity, is possible and real in God. The mysterious reality of grace is to be found in the "and yet": we cannot find God, "and yet" God found us (Barth, 1931: *KB*: 14).

Only as we pray, do we give a very small and human "and yet" in correspondence to God's gracious and miraculous "and yet." In prayer, we are uncertain in ourselves, uncertain in our faith and obedience, but certain in the Holy Spirit, in whom our faith and obedience is promised as a hidden, mysterious, miraculous and gracious reality (Barth, 1931: *KB*: 15).

In his Gifford lectures in 1937 & 1938, Barth said that Jesus Christ is *the great change* in our lives, and this is *real* change, although it is a *hidden* change. What has ultimately changed for us in Jesus Christ, is our future. We do not know who we will be in the future, but we know who Jesus will be in the future, and we know that we are moving towards our future with Jesus Christ. By being our future, Jesus Christ determines our present. By the real change Jesus established in our future, real change has been established in our present, even though it is a hidden change. The reality of the change lies in the future, the hiddenness of the change lies in the present (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 94-96).

The reality of the church

If we look at the church in its religious, historical or sociological reality, we will only see unbelief and disobedience. The real faith and real obedience of the church, are not observable externally. In a presentation on the relationship between church and culture, at a mission conference in Amsterdam in 1926, Barth said that the existence of the church as the people of faith and obedience, is an existence given and promised by God-self in God's gracious Word. God does not gather and call faithful and obedient people to be God's people, but unfaithful and disobedient people, sinful people. The church's external existence does not strive toward real faith and obedience, but comes from real faith and obedience. Its internal, hidden reality of justification and sanctification in Christ, and therefore of faith and obedience, is the primary thing from which the church lives and has its being (Barth, 1926: *KB*: 363-364).

The church does not live by its faith and obedience, but by the Word of God, which creates its faith and obedience. Barth said that in relationship to the Word of God, we can never talk about faith without mentioning obedience, and we can never talk about obedience without mentioning faith. In faith we hear the Word of God, but in order to be acting, living faith, it necessarily entails obedience. Obedience leaves behind all hesitations and lives completely by the Word of God, praying at every moment: "Lord, help my unbelief!" We are not only sinners before we come to faith and obedience, but also while we believe and obey. Faith and obedience means ceasing all self-justifications and self-sanctifications and living fully from the Word of God, whereby we are graciously justified and sanctified. The church is the community of faithful and obedient sinners, established, gathered and called by God, whose faith and obedience live by the Word of God alone (Barth, 1926: *KB*: 365).

Not only as justified, but also as sanctified people, we remain sinners. Our new life in Christ is a hidden reality in God. If it was not so, then our sanctification would not be grace. We do not see our obedience in sanctification, but we believe in it. Even though our obedience is at

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every point filled with disobedience, we believe in the reality of our obedience hidden with Christ in God. And in this faith, we are obedient (Barth, 1926: *KB*: 375). And our faith also is at every point filled with unbelief, but we trust in obedience that our salvation is complete in Christ despite our unbelief, that God is faithful despite our unfaithfulness, and in doing so we have real faith (Barth, 1926: *KB*: 377-378).

At a student conference in Aarau in 1927, Barth gave a presentation on *Das Halten der Gebote*, "The keeping of the commandments." Here Barth once again emphasised that faith is to say yes to grace, and to say yes to grace, means to say yes to both the gospel and the law. Grace, Barth once again accentuated, is both justification and sanctification. Because we say yes in faith to God's decision for us, because we say yes in faith to the grace of the Holy Spirit, the commandments keep their power and remain our Master. Even in our disobedience, there is obedience present, even in our ill-discipline, there is discipleship present, because of God's decision to sanctify us, because of the gracious working of the Holy Spirit in our lives, to which we replied yes in faith (Barth, 1927: *KB*: 225-227).

Justification of the unjust; sanctification of the unholy

And shortly thereafter, in another lecture, Barth once again spoke on the topic of *Rechtfertigung und Heiligung*, "Justification and Sanctification." Here Barth said that justification and sanctification are the fulfilment of what is promised to us in our baptism: our election and calling for fellowship with God. God's Word, God's grace, God's action toward humanity, has these two aspects: justification and sanctification. This grace of God with which God acts toward humanity, this justification and sanctification with which the Word of God addresses humanity, is received in faith and obedience. Faith and obedience in the grace of God, mean recognising our sinfulness, acknowledging our unbelief and disobedience, and in this way holding onto God's grace in faith and obedience. Although we differentiate between our justification and sanctification, it is the one work of grace in the miracle and mystery of the Holy Spirit. The grace of justification is the life of sinners, while the grace of sanctification is the death of sinners. The one Word of God calls us to rise to life in justification, while the one Word of God commands us to come and die in sanctification. Both the faith of the justified sinner and the obedience of sanctified sinner consist in praising God in gratitude and acknowledging the righteousness of God in worship. The sinner's faith and the sinner's obedience live in the hope of the complete reconciliation and future redemption in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1927: *KB*: 281, 283, 286, 290, 294, 297, 300, 302, 306).

We must realise how trivial our faith and obedience are, nothing more than sign-posts pointing to the righteousness of God, without any merit, meaning or ability in themselves. We must know that faith "is not a work, not even a negative work." We can achieve nothing through our faith, even if it is the humility of denying all our achievements (Barth, 1933: *R*: 110).

Barth said of faith:

"Faith is the ground, the new order, the light, where *boasting* ends and the true righteousness of God begins" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 110).

In his first significant political writing after the Barmen declaration in 1934, Barth wrote an article in 1938 on the relationship between God's justification of humanity and human justice, entitled *Rechtfertigung und Recht*. Very interestingly, Barth opposed two polar extremes. On the one hand, Barth opposed the pietism which focuses solely on God's justification and largely ignores human justice. This extreme is prone to deify the church, demonise the state and to withdraw from political engagement. The other polar extreme is that of a liberalism

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which focuses solely on human justice, ignores God's justification of humanity and believes in humanity's ability to achieve justice. This error leads to deification of the state and the secularization of the church. Barth, however, believed that God's justification of humanity, the salvation of sinners by grace, does not only apply to the church and the personal salvation of individuals, but it also applies to the state, regarding the responsibility of seeking human justice. It is only as the state acts in the knowledge of its own sinfulness and the abundant grace of God, which is humanity's only justification, that it can fulfil its task to seek human justice. Sure enough, the state can deny God's gracious justification, can serve other idols, or proclaim itself to be without sin, the purveyor of justice and worthy of worship, but not even the most demonic state can sustain this mutiny against the grace of God (Haddorff, 2010: 111; Barth, 1968: CSC: 102, 104-105).

The role of the church is to remind the state both of its task to seek justice, as well as the fact that justification comes from God alone, and that justice can therefore only be served in repentance of our sin and gratitude for God's grace. The best, the essential task of the church in relation to the state, is to intercede for the state, on behalf of the state, in prayer. The church must expect the best of the state and must be a community of peace and justice, without trying to replace the state. This is true, not only when the state fulfils its task of seeking the justice of the coming kingdom of God, as it should, not only when the state gives the church the freedom to proclaim and pray for the coming of God's justice, but also and especially when the state does not fulfil its task anymore, and when it tries to replace the church and becomes an idolatrous state, regarding itself as the guarantor of justice (Haddorff, 2010: 112; Barth, 1968: 131-132, 135-136).

However, says Haddorff, as the political situation deteriorated in Europe in 1938, Barth said in an essay called "The Political Problem of Our Day," that any positive relationship between the church and the Nazi State had become untenable. There are just states and unjust states, and there comes a time when the responsibility of the church is no longer to pray and work for the furthering of a just state, but to pray and work for the demise of an unjust state (Haddorff, 2010: 112).

In 1946, in the ruins of several German cities, Barth gave a lecture on "The Christian Community and the Civil Community." In these lectures Barth once again said that the church *reminds* the state of its task, it gives a witness to the state through its own deliberations, choices and involvements. The church cannot withdraw from political life, but it has to make small and provisional decisions, it has to respond and give witness to the state. Thus, not only when the state seeks control over the church and interferes on the terrain of the church, as in the 1930's, but also now, after the war, when the church once again enjoys its freedom, it should use its freedom, not to be concerned with itself, but to give witness to Christ's lordship over the state and to firstly seek God's kingdom and righteousness in every sphere of life. Even a just state, even a state that gives the church the freedom to fulfil its own particular task, may not be left to its own devices, but must constantly be reminded by the church of the coming kingdom of God, which is never to be equated with the church or the state. The proclamation of the divine justification of unjust humanity in Jesus Christ alone, and not by any human efforts, is not a task the church must fulfil only for its own sake, but also for the state, for the sake of the world (Haddorff, 2010: 114-115; Barth, 1968: 161-163, 165-168, 172).

This makes it abundantly clear that despite Barth's repeated emphasis that humanity's faith and obedience cannot achieve righteousness or holiness, and that God alone can justify and sanctify unjust and unholy humanity, it never meant for him that human faith and obedience are unimportant, that human justice is not necessary. Because God justifies and sanctifies humanity, our faith and obedience are real and actual. Of necessity human righteousness must follow God's righteousness, of necessity faith and obedience must follow God's justification and sanctification by grace, of necessity human action must follow God's action.

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But this faith and obedience, this human justice, this human action, is completely grounded upon and dependent upon the righteousness of God, the grace of God, the action of God, without which it is all null and void.

Gegentreue

Seils says that already in 1910, Barth told his congregation in Safenwil that faith is not grounded in historical research, but in Jesus Christ alone. Here Barth followed in the theological path of his theological mentor from Marburg, Wilhelm Herrmann. For Herrmann, the inner life of Jesus formed the basis of faith, and thus it cannot be disturbed by historical-critical analysis. For Barth, even at this early stage of his theological development, even before the traumatic disillusionment of 1914, and even before Barth became a student of the Reformers, the fact that our faith is not grounded in human inquiry, but in Jesus, had two implications. Firstly, it means that we can believe, as Luther emphasised, with *fiducia*, with *Zuversicht*, with trust and confidence. But secondly, it also means that our faith entails obedience, as Calvin implored (Seils, 1996: 187-188).

After Barth's disillusionment in 1914, and the realisation that what theologians call "faith," is mostly faith in faith, rather than faith in God, Barth could only describe faith in negative terms in his commentary on Romans. In the light of the church's endorsement of the First World War, of the church's unbelief and disobedience veiled in words of faith, Barth had to show that the real, living God is never identical to what we call "God" in our religious experience, conviction and worship. To ensure that we are truly speaking about faith in *God*, and not faith in religious humanity, Barth could only speak of faith as human *Hohlraum*, as a "vacuum," which must be filled with God's content, as the very end of human action that allows God to act, as human silence wherein God speaks, as human not-knowing that accepts the wisdom of God. Seils argues that the closest Barth came to describe faith positively at this time, was to describe it as *Gegentreue*, as the human faithfulness which responds and corresponds to the faithfulness of God (Seils, 1996: 191-193).

Faith is only real and actual as divine miracle, as a new beginning made by God, as creation *ex nihilo* (Barth, 1933: *R*: 116-139). The reality of faith is a divine reality, beyond the visible reality of our existence. While only aware of our failed attempts at faith and obedience, we hold onto the reality of the righteousness of God beyond our faith and obedience (Barth, 1933: *R*: 125).

In the face of this new reality established by God, faith is no longer a question of possibility, but of acknowledging, recognising and confessing this new reality known in Christ. The question is not whether it is possible to believe and obey, since God's grace in Christ reveals the impossibility of human faith and obedience. The question, no, the claim, made upon us, by the reality of Christ's justification and sanctification, is to correspond to the new reality in which we find ourselves, to live as the new beings that we are in Christ, to have our little faith and to do our meagre obedience, in participation with the vicarious faith and obedience of Christ.

No longer, already, not yet

In fact, now, in the light of this new reality, unbelief and disobedience become the impossible possibilities of sin. This does not mean that unbelief and disobedience are non-existent, but that they are based upon unreality. In unbelief and disobedience, we act as if God is not with humanity, and thus we act upon something that is not real. By acting in unbelief and disobedience, we act against our true identity as human beings reconciled to God. We act

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upon the basis of the “no longer” of our past existence, wherein we were separated from God, instead of acting upon the “already” of our present existence and the “not yet” of our future existence, wherein we are reconciled to God and we will be fully redeemed by God (Gorringe, 1999: 199).

In 1920 Barth came into contact with the church historian and atheist, Overbeck. Overbeck claimed, together with Weiss and Schweitzer, that the radically eschatological expectation of the early church was a reality which should not be smoothed away by modern interpretations of the Christian faith. According to Overbeck, when the church lost that real expectation, its faith was fundamentally compromised. The attempt to reconcile faith and reason, or to find historical grounds for faith, robbed faith of its own radically eschatological nature, and thereby destroyed its essence. Barth fully agreed with this assessment of modern theology by Overbeck (Gorringe, 1999: 54; Barth, 1920: *T&K*: 15-17).

Barth saw in Overbeck’s critique of liberal theology how lethal the marriage between faith and history was, how the Christian faith became impotent when viewed as a mere element within the developing history of the world. Barth concurred with Overbeck’s analysis that liberal theology was living with a corpse, with its attempt to explain Christianity to the contemporary world, while leaving out the central belief regarding Christ’s return, whereby all things will be made new (Jüngel, 1986: 60; Barth, 1920: *T&K*: 15-17).

Jüngel says that for Overbeck this critique on modern Christianity meant the impossibility of Christianity in a modern age, while for Barth it meant that Christianity offered real hope in a modern world, which had no hope outside its own possibilities. Barth agreed with Overbeck’s critique of religion, but not with the aim of being anti-religious. Barth’s aim was to think and speak about the Word and action of God, which stand over against religion (Jüngel, 1986: 62).

Jüngel argues that Overbeck helped Barth to see clearly what religion cannot achieve, while at the same time the Blumhardts, with their somewhat naïve, unscientific dogmatics, helped Barth to view theology not only as a negative science, which can only serve to criticise religion, but also once again as a positive endeavour, with substantial content of its own. And that content was the living, resurrected Jesus Christ. For Barth, Overbeck with his atheistic attack on religion, and the Blumhardts with their simplistic faith in the resurrected Jesus, stood back to back, with two differing viewpoints of the very same reality. Overbeck looked back critically on the history of religion, while the Blumhardts looked forward positively to Christ’s renewal. Both sides represented in their own way the *skandalon* of the gospel to Barth. Overbeck helped Barth to see the impossibility of faith and obedience, while the Blumhardts helped Barth to see the impossible possibility, the reality of Jesus Christ’s resurrection, whereby all things will be made new (Jüngel, 1986: 65-66; Barth, 1920: *T&K*: 2).

Webster says that Barth’s greatest dilemma after his disillusionment in 1914, was not the failings of theological liberalism or religious socialism, but the assault of the Bible upon the preacher. Whereas Barth had previously assumed that the Bible fits neatly into the modern worldview, affirming and legitimising our modern thinking, now suddenly the Bible became a source of disturbance. But it was not the Bible as such that was the problem. It was not the pre-modern world of the Bible and its authors that caused the disturbance. It was the strange *new world* that the Bible pointed to, the radically eschatological expectation of the Bible, the very real hope in the kingdom of God, that made Barth stutter and stall when faced with the plight of his congregants and the surrounding circumstances of the First World War (Webster, 2000b: 3).

“By faith,” Barth said, “we are what we are not.” We are indeed the agents of faith, but only so far as we are eschatological new beings in Christ, the future children of God, the people

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who will on the Day of the Lord be declared righteous by the righteousness of God. We are born from above, as John 3:3 says. For Barth, human beings are the subjects of faith, but the true identity of those human beings lie in God's future. The new human beings living within the new heaven and the new earth are the subjects of faith. Faith is not a possibility for us now, but it is the movement towards our future reality (Barth, 1933: R: 149). God rejects what we are and affirms what we will become (Barth, 1933: R: 150).

In faith, which in fact means *in Jesus Christ*, we are what we are not. The reality of faith is not a present reality, but a future reality, it is a becoming. It does not live by its present possibilities, but by its future reality. Faith cannot escape the "not yet" of its existence, and it should not wish to do so, because, although this "not yet" is the source of its greatest despair, it is also its only real hope. We cannot attain the new life, as people raised with Christ, and escape passing through death, whereby all our human efforts are annihilated. Believing that we shall live with Christ, we cannot avoid dying with Christ (Barth, 1933: R: 153, 202).

Raised from the dead

It is Jesus Christ who in reality is the new humanity. Jesus Christ is the new creation beyond all human possibilities, beyond religion. Jesus Christ is the new life on the other side of death. Jesus Christ is the "not yet" of who we are in reality. The life of faith is the life of the resurrected Christ living in us (Barth, 1933: R: 269).

Grounded upon our new humanity in Christ, is not only our faith, but also our obedience. Because our new life, as people who will be raised with Christ, is completely based upon the grace of God, we are not allowed to hide behind our inabilities or sinfulness, but must live the life of obedience. Barth said:

"Grace lies beyond all optimism and also beyond all pessimism. Grace is the power of obedience, because it is human existence in that plane and space and world in which obedience is undeniable and unavoidable, because it is the power of the Resurrection. And grace is the power of the Resurrection because it is the power of death, the power, that is, of the man who has passed from death to life, who has once again found himself because he has lost himself in God and God alone" (Barth, 1933: R: 213).

The resurrection, according to Barth, is not a human event, the birth of a human conviction or a way in which humanity gave meaning and significance to Christ's life and death. The resurrection is the Father's acceptance and declaration of what Christ has done "for us" on the cross (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 309).

Barth noted in his doctrine of reconciliation that the resurrection narratives do not employ the word "faith." The resurrection narratives are not narratives about how the disciples came to resurrection faith. If anything, they are narratives of how the incontrovertible fact of Christ's resurrection met and clashed with the disciples' utter lack of faith. What we find in these narratives are not the evolutionary developments of the disciples' resurrection faith, but the altered reality which confronted the disciples' unbelief, which destroyed their unbelief and brought them to faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 339, 341).

What we are faced with in the resurrection narratives, is not the living faith of the disciples, but the living Jesus Christ, encountering the disciples and talking to them, explaining the fulfilment of the reconciliation which took place in the cross and which has been affirmed by the resurrection. This event took place, not in the disciples' faith, not outside the world, but in

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the real world, confronting and defeating the disciples' unbelief or lack of faith, and awakening them to faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 341).

In a sermon on John 20:19-31, the resurrection narrative wherein Jesus appears to Thomas, Barth gave a different perspective on this narrative than the common interpretation. According to Barth's exegesis, Thomas was not scolded by Jesus for not believing, for wanting to see with his own eyes and feel with his own hands. The encounter between the disciples and the bodily resurrected Jesus, was the necessary event turning them into apostles of faith. All the other disciples first saw the resurrected Jesus, before they believed. And Jesus brings Thomas to faith in the same manner. It is the resurrected Jesus which awakened the disciples' faith, not the disciples' faith which resurrected Jesus. We read in 1 John 1:1: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched – this we proclaim..." Without the resurrection of Jesus, there would have been no apostles, no church and no life of faith. It is the physical encounter with the resurrected Jesus, which causes Thomas to pray in faith: "My Lord and my God!" In verse 29 Jesus says: "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." In the second part of the verse, Jesus is not addressing Thomas, but us. Jesus does not bemoan the fact that Thomas did not believe without seeing and touching Jesus. Jesus says that due the apostolic faith created by this resurrection encounter, others will be blessed in having faith, without having seen (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 5, 8).

On Easter Sunday in 1964, Barth once again preached on John 20 in the prison in Basel, but this time only on verses 19-20. Barth told the prisoners that although he has been a professor of theology for many years, he cannot explain the resurrection for them. Barth said that it is very easy for people to say that they cannot believe in Jesus' resurrection, for him also. But when we do so, we must remember that it was equally impossible for the disciples in the Bible to believe in it. Nowhere in the Bible is Jesus' resurrection explained or made possible to understand. Because Jesus' resurrection was an act of God, it was and remains an incomprehensible act. Even the apostles to whom Jesus appeared, could not explain it. They could only recognise it, acknowledge it, testify to it, proclaim it. When Christians greet each other with the Easter greeting: "Christ is risen," "He is risen indeed!," they are not describing or explaining the resurrection, but witnessing to it, they are confessing it in faith (Barth, 1967: *CFG*: 118-119).

In an interview late in his life, in 1967, Barth was asked what people should make of the difficult questions regarding the resurrection of Jesus and life after death, with theologians like Dorothy Sölle and her "God is dead" theology on the one side, and the renewed confessional movement in Germany, emphasising the bodily resurrection of Jesus, on the other side. Barth responded pastorally and told the interviewer not to be so anxious, and not to take those theologians so seriously, since they cannot eat you. Barth explained that the resurrection of Jesus does not confront us in the form of a difficult test of faith that we should pass. The resurrection of Jesus is the liberating power which enables us to live, to believe and obey. When Dorothy Sölle says God is dead, she means that a strange, hidden god in the highest, a god which is removed from this world, is dead. But that god never lived. There is truth in the statement that God is dead, because that is what took place on Good Friday. But Good Friday can only be understood in the light of Easter Sunday. We can only know that God died for our sins, because we have been brought to faith by the living, resurrected Lord. And the confessional movement should not be taken so seriously either, Barth said. When he met them, he asked them where they stand on Vietnam. And someone shouted back at Barth that they are not talking about Vietnam, but about Jesus! But therein lies the problem. It is not the conviction with which we confess that Jesus was raised, which is of importance. Jesus was raised so that we can be liberated for lives of faith and obedience. And therefore, where we stand on Vietnam, is just as important as Jesus, if we take the resurrection of Jesus seriously. Barth said he is not sure which is worse, to say God is dead,

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or to confess that Jesus was raised from the dead, but to live as if God is dead (Barth, 1967: KB: 2).

The real God beyond human optimism and pessimism

Barth was neither an optimist nor a pessimist, but rather a realist. He could neither be swayed by the optimism of the Enlightenment, nor the pessimism of the 20th century. Guarding against the optimism of religious moralism, as well as the pessimism of atheistic nihilism, Barth's ethics was informed by what he understood to be Christianity's realistic hope, its "joy over the abyss" (Gorringe, 1999: 177-178, 197).

The reality of God's grace does not mean that humanity must do something, and neither does it mean that humanity can do nothing. It means that God has done something. God has established the kingdom of God. God reigns over humanity. And this means that God does not do everything, but that God forgives our sins, and makes us part of the doing of God's will, on earth as in heaven (Barth, 1933: R: 215, 222).

The Holy Spirit is the miraculous power, the creative and redemptive power of the kingdom of heaven, wherein faith is real and alive and at work. The Holy Spirit is the beginning and the end of the life of faith. Within human possibilities, faith is empty and cannot achieve anything, but by the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, faith is real and effective, and it has actual content (Barth, 1933: R: 157).

Barth did not set up reality over against idealism, but reality over against unreality. Hunsinger illustrates this point by contrasting Barth's and Reinhold Niebuhr's understanding of "love." For Niebuhr, the reality of love was to be found in anthropology, in how human beings love each other. The love which the Bible speaks of, *agape*, giving oneself selflessly for the other, is the ideal of love. It is the "impossible possibility" of love. It reminds us how sinful our real love is, and it commands us to always strive towards God's ideal love. Barth's understanding was rather that God's love, *agape* love, God's sending of Jesus into the world to atone for our sins, is real love, as 1 John 4:10 says. And because God really loves us in this way, we really love one another. As 1 John 4:19 says: "We love because he first loved us." This is the reality of love. What is unreal, is that we hate each other. This is the "impossible possibility" of sin, according to Barth. This shows how Barth's theology is theocentric rather than anthropocentric, meaning that God's action determines what is real, rather than humanity's action. When we act in correspondence to God's action, we live our true reality, but when our actions contradict God's action, we act in unreality, we act as people who we are not in reality (Hunsinger, 1991: 38-39).

The anthropocentric myth of modernity that Barth exposed, which is also true of postmodern ethics, according to Haddorff, is that ethics can be separated from theology, that the question of the good life can be asked without asking the question of God. Without a moral ontology, without a theological account of moral *reality*, without explaining why reality as such is good, it becomes questionable why people should do the good, even if they had knowledge of what is good. If ethical theories, whether modern or postmodern, do not ask the question of God, of the Creator who creates a good reality, if they continue to separate theology and ethics, if they ignore God, they invariably deify humanity, and thus become vulnerable to the self-serving ethics of anthropocentric thinking. If God is taken out of ethics, humanity inevitably makes itself God, and thus the good is replaced by power, God's good will is replaced by humanity's self-serving will. Any ethical theory that is not grounded upon the reality of God, who alone can establish the goodness of reality as such, is prone to be deceived by the illusions of "good" humanity, which cannot establish the good through its

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own doing. Without the divine creation of a good reality, the human illusions of goodness do not amount to anything (Haddorff, 2010: 190-191).

If the reality of God is ignored, if our good actions do not come from the *goodness* of God, there is no way of telling whether our good actions are really good, or whether they are in fact disguised ways of serving our own interests, or the interests of some group, some ideology or some other anonymous power that oppresses others, or even ourselves. If the reality of God is taken out of ethical reflection, then humanity replaces God, and power replaces the good (Haddorff, 2010: 192-193).

Saying that the question of God and God's will, must be asked, is not saying, however, that the question of God and God's will can be answered by humanity. If humanity seeks to ask *and answer* the question of God and God's will, then it cannot escape the anthropocentric myth that we can know and do the good apart from God. Saying that the question of God and God's will must be asked, means that the reality of theology and ethics, the reality of faith and obedience, are dependent upon the reality of God, God's will and God's *action*. The real answer to the question of God and God's will can only be answered by God-self, by God's free and gracious action of Self-revelation (Haddorff, 2010: 193).

Furthermore, a moral ontology founded on a deistic notion of merely a Creator-God, who only established a moral order within creation at the beginning and then left the world to its own devices, will not suffice. If ethics is to be grounded upon the *reality* of the *good* God, then it must be grounded upon the reality of the trinitarian God, who did not only act at the event of creation, but who is continuously acting in the covenant history of grace (Haddorff, 2010: 221)

Only within the unity of faith and obedience, the unity of theology and ethics, can the anthropocentric myth be overcome, the fallacy that humanity can know the good and do the good apart from God's reality and action. It is only as we respond and react to the reality and action of God, that our faith and obedience become real and active.

And only as we respond and react to the reality and action of God, can our faith and obedience move beyond the human optimism and pessimism of the world. Only the reality and action of God liberates us to move beyond seesawing from false hope in human possibilities to despair in human possibilities, up and down, up and down, without getting anywhere, towards the realistic hope of the renewal of the world which is only possible by the reality and action of God.

Barth's theology was a form of realism. He reversed the order of the possibility and the reality of faith, saying that it is only within the reality of the life of faith that we can ask regarding its possibility. Only as we are confronted by God's reality, as we encounter God personally, as we are addressed by God's Word, as our faith and obedience become real and actual, can we ask how far our knowledge of God stretches. Only as the reality of God crashes into our human existence and we are addressed and claimed by God, only as we are compelled by the reality of God to call upon God in faith and obedience, can we inquire into our knowledge of God (Van der Kooi, 2002: 239-240; Jüngel, 1986: 129).

It is to this real knowledge of God, known as we pray to God in faith, that we move now.

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The unity of faith and prayer lies in the fact that faith is the lifelong event, happening each day anew, of a personal encounter between Jesus Christ and the church. In faith and prayer we again and again turn from ourselves towards the origin, object and content of our faith, Jesus Christ, who creates, renews and completes our faith. We know God by acknowledging, recognising and confessing Jesus Christ as our Lord, Head, Judge and Saviour, as the Lord of heaven and earth, Head of the community of faith, Judge and Saviour of all of humanity, with the prayer of faith: "I believe, Lord, help Thou mine unbelief!"

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A strange object

Faith is knowledge of God. Faith is to know God. This knowledge of God has definite content. It is knowledge of Jesus Christ as attested to in the Bible and proclaimed in the church. That does not mean that it is impersonal content, to which we have access apart from the One who is known. It cannot be compared to knowledge of any other object, since it is not knowledge of an object within this world, but knowledge of God. Ultimately, faith is not knowledge of the Bible or the proclamation of the church, but knowledge of God-self, revealed by the living, reigning Lord Jesus Christ, before whom faith bows in obedient acknowledgment (Barth, 1956: *CD IV,1*: 758, 760-761).

Therefore, to know God is to pray. Faith is knowledge of the God who can only be known as God reveals God-self. In this Self-revelation God not only gives *knowledge* of God-self, but God gives *God-self*. God is present and active in God's Self-revelation. To know God is to be confronted with God-self. Faith is knowledge of the God, who can only be known in a personal, relational way, who confronts humanity in such a binding way that the only possible response is to follow unconditionally. Faith is a liturgical act, since it is knowledge that does not answer to people, but to God (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 26-27).

Humanity has no capacity or ability to know God. And even if we were somehow able to grab a hold of the knowledge of God by some bizarre accident, it would be completely incomprehensible to us, since it is knowledge of *God*. Only God can reveal God-self and make that Self-revelation comprehensible to humanity (McCormack, 1995: 248).

When God gives God-self to be known, through the gracious gift of faith, God truly gives God-self, meaning: God is present in every aspect of that knowledge of God. McCormack asserts that in Barth's understanding God is not only present as the Giver of that knowledge, but God is also present as the content of that knowledge, and God is even present in our perception of that knowledge, in our being addressed by that knowledge, and in the reception of that knowledge (McCormack, 1995: 357). God gives God's Self-revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit and humanity receives God's Self-revelation by the power of the Holy Spirit (Bromiley, 1979: 28).

God is not an ordinary thing within the world, next to other things, and therefore God cannot be known in the same way that other things are known. God is not constituted by our knowledge of God. We are constituted by the knowledge of God given to us by grace. Therefore faith, the relation of the knower to the God who is known, means being bound to God-self and to God's Word. God does not become the object of our knowledge of God, but

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remains the Subject of the knowledge of God, and as long as we have knowledge of this Subject, we remain bounded to this Subject in the obedience of faith (Bromiley, 1979: 57-58).

In his own Prolegomena to the *Church Dogmatics*, Barth refers back to the first chapter of Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion*, where Anselm, just before setting out his famous proof for the existence of God, prays a prayer filled with unrest. In this prayer Anselm is addressing the fundamental problem of all dogmatics, i.e., whether God will be present and will freely choose to be revealed in the faith and work of the theologian who is attempting to show that and who and how God is (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 230).

Because all theological work, and all of faith for that matter, is faced with this fundamental problem, this prayer of unrest is not a strange anomaly, something unfitting or a point of weakness in Anselm's theology, but the necessary attitude that always accompanies faith and theology (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 231). As Barth explained:

“All faith's unrest is, in fact, set aside in prayer, but its prayer is its profound unrest. And both as prayer and also as unrest it is expectation, expectation of its object. It lives by its object, at rest or in unrest, having found, seeking, finding again and seeking anew” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 231).

Barth began his *Church Dogmatics* with a prayer of rest and unrest, a prayer of finding and seeking anew, the prayer of Mark 9: “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 24).

Even earlier, in his first attempt at dogmatics in Göttingen, Barth began by quoting the prayer of Thomas Aquinas with which he started his *Summa Theologica*:

“Merciful God, I ask that thou wilt grant me, as thou pleasest, to seek earnestly, to investigate carefully, to know truthfully, and to present perfectly, to the glory of thy name, amen” (Barth, 1991: *GD*: 3).

Bound by its object

In faith, we are already bound by the Word of God, responding to the Word of God which has already addressed and claimed us. To be bound by the Word of God is not an option which we can choose to realise or to reject. Even if we express the desire or intention to be bound by the Word of God, it means that we are not bound by the Word of God, and that we want to approach the Word of God on our own terms. Doubters cannot make a decision of *sacrificium intellectus*, thus laying to rest all doubt and binding ourselves to God's Word. This will inevitably entail an unsustainable form of self-deception. We cannot save ourselves from our own doubts. It is only as God addresses us, thus claiming and binding us to God's Word, setting all our doubts aside, that we respond to God's Word in obedient faith. It is not our decision to bind ourselves or to limit ourselves to the Word of God, but it is the Word of God which binds us and gives the freedom to obediently live within its limits (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 6-9).

For Barth there is in faith not only knowledge of God, but also love of God, trust in God and obedience to God, because of the way in which God has completely bounded the believer to God-self by the Word of God (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 12).

“Faith is the total positive relationship of man to the God who gives Himself to be known in His Word. It is man's act of turning to God, of opening up his life to Him and

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of surrendering to Him. It is the Yes which he pronounces in his heart when confronted by this God, because he knows himself to be bound and fully bound. It is the obligation in which, before God, and in the light of the clarity that God is God and that He is his God, he knows and explains himself as belonging to God. But when we say that, we must at once also say that faith as the positive relationship of man to God comes from God Himself in that it is utterly and entirely grounded in the fact that God encounters man in the Word which demands of him this turning, this Yes, this obligation; becoming an object to him in such a way that in His objectivity He bestows upon him by the Holy Spirit the light of the clarity that He is God and that He is his God, and therefore evoking this turning, this Yes, this obligation on the part of man" (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 12).

The Bible does not teach us anything about the characteristics of faith, but merely that faith is completely and irrevocably bounded to the God who addresses and encounters the believer. Even love, trust and obedience says nothing about our faith, if we do not understand it is total love of *God*, total trust in *God*, total obedience to *God*. The early church did not confess the character of its faith, but the God in whom it believed, the God to whom it was bounded fully and totally (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 13-14).

Barth refrained from giving a definition of faith. Faith is simply to be found in the *object* of faith, Jesus Christ, in whom all people have been reconciled with God, and in the *act* of faith, whereby we acknowledge, recognise and confess that Jesus, who is personally present, is Lord (Seils, 1996: 185-186)

For Barth, the prolegomena of the *Church Dogmatics* was not, as a prolegomena is usually understood, a word *before* the first word, but already a first word. In it Barth did not set out to lay down philosophical presuppositions upon which his theology could be built, since he believed such endeavours to be wrongheaded. Rather, with this prolegomena Barth was already entering the subject matter itself, convinced that one can only speak of the possibility of knowledge of God upon the basis of the actual content of that knowledge. The philosophical possibility of knowledge of God does not set the criteria for its content, but its actual, theological content sets the criteria for its possibility. As only God can reveal God-self, God determines how God is to be known (Busch, 1975: 212-213).

When setting out on the second volume of the *Church Dogmatics* on the doctrine of God, Barth said the following of the first volume on the doctrine of the Word of God:

"Therefore we can see already that the doctrine of the knowledge of God does not form an independent prolegomena to the actual doctrine of God. It is itself already a part of that doctrine, because it can consist only in a representation of the being and activity of God" (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 32).

Even before humanity can encounter God, God has already encountered humanity. Even before we can stand before God, God already stands before us. The being and activity of God precedes any knowledge that we might have of God, and therefore the doctrine of knowledge of God does not stand apart as a prolegomena to the actual content of the knowledge of God, but is already filled by it (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 31-32).

But God does not stand before humanity as a mere object among other objects. God stands before humanity as its God, its Lord, its Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. God stands before humanity as One whom we may love and whom we must fear *above all things* (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 35).

Because God has revealed God-self to us, we are allowed to love God, but because God in God's Self-revelation always remains a mystery, we must also fear God. Faith is bound to

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the God who is revealed and yet remains a mystery, the God whom we are allowed to love and yet must fear in awed reverence (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 38-39).

A hidden object

God's Self-revelation is always a mediated, a veiled, a hidden revelation according to Barth. However, the purpose of this veiled-ness of God's Self-revelation, Barth said, is not to veil, but precisely to unveil, not to hide, but precisely to reveal. That which is unveiled, which is revealed, is nothing other than God-self, the God who is only knowable by God-self. And therefore God has to veil God-self in revelation, in order to be unveiled, God has to hide in a mediated form, in order to be revealed. Even in heaven, when we see God face to face, that revelation will be mediated, since it will be pure grace, i.e., God making God-self known to humanity who cannot know God. And that is why God's Self-revelation can only be received as a gracious gift, with thanksgiving and wondering awe, with joyful gratitude (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 209, 212-216, 219-220).

Since it is *God* we know in revelation, the God who even in revelation remains hidden, the God who has to hide in human form in order to be revealed to humanity, we cannot know God except by asking in prayer for God to be revealed to us in this mediated, hidden form. Barth said:

“It would not be God if His presence, objectively bestowed, did not become the necessary basis of our prayer and praise and thanksgiving. Only false gods can be present in other ways (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 207).

If grace is truly grace, it has to be inaccessible, otherwise it would not be grace. If one could give a gift to oneself, it would cease to be a gift. It has to be inaccessible to oneself, given by another, and to be received with gratitude, in order to be a gift. Thus grace has to be inaccessible, has to be given by God and received in gratitude by humanity. Grace cannot be grabbed, but has to be given and received. Even knowing God's grace, recognising it, taking notice of it, or just remembering it, has itself to be a work of God's free grace. Once the gift becomes a possession, it ceases to be a gift. The moment humanity takes hold of the gift, the moment it tries to put it under its own control, or starts to think of the gift as something it is entitled to, it becomes something different from grace. It has to be given always anew and to be received always anew, in order to remain a gift of grace. The only proper response to grace is gratitude, while sin, at its core, is always a form of ingratitude (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 41, 45).

“In awe we gratefully let grace be grace, and always receive it as such. We never let reception become a taking. Our knowledge of God is always compelled to be a prayer of thanksgiving, penitence and intercession. It is only in this way that there is knowledge of God in participation in the veracity of the revelation of God” (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 223).

The object determines the method

Although the word “prolegomena” usually refers to the questions which must be answered *before* the content of that study can be addressed, Barth was already speaking about the content of his dogmatics in his prolegomena. However, Barth still chose to use this word, “prolegomena,” to indicate deliberately that the content of faith cannot and should not be separated from the epistemological method by which that knowledge is approached (Van der Kooi, 2002: 237).

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The best apologetics, according to Barth, was to do theology unapologetically. If indeed a *prolegomena* was needed, it was needed to address errors within the church's faith, and not to address the unbelief of people standing outside the faith. Barth's own *prolegomena* was made necessary, not by unbelievers outside the church, but by the erroneous understanding of faith as a human possibility, by modern Protestantism as well as the Roman Catholic Church. The former grounded faith upon anthropology and history, whereas the latter grounded faith upon Scripture, tradition, the church and the faith of the church. For Barth, theology could only be done by hearing Jesus Christ in faith and responding to Jesus Christ in prayer, with no preliminary prerequisites making that hearing and responding possible, except the reality of Jesus Christ speaking (Bromiley, 1979: 5).

Theology, for Barth, is Christology, if it is to be theology, and not anthropology, philosophy, historical science or some other science. In order to be theology, it must be unapologetic Christology. Otherwise it would be a self-justifying discipline, which tries to establish its own right as an academic discipline by means of other disciplines. This would mean subjecting theology to criteria foreign to its own subject matter. It would be almost the same as if historical science tried to justify its enterprise by submitting itself to the criteria of biology. The subject matter of theology is Christology, and therefore the criteria for this science must be set by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and nothing else (Jüngel, 1986: 128).

T.F. Torrance gives a telling example, of how he (Torrance) was asked to practice theology at Princeton Seminary in an "impartial, detached, dispassionate" manner to believing and unbelieving students alike, and not to convert any student to Christianity. Being a student of Barth, Torrance replied that he would rather practice theology as a science. When asked what he meant by this, he explained that science is not free thinking, but it is bound to the object of its research. The nature and being of the object of a scientific study, determines very strictly the manner in which it can be studied. No responsible scientific study is possible in a way which is detached from its object. And all students taking part in a study, are similarly bound to the object of that study. Torrance could not guarantee that students that are brought by his teaching into an encounter with the object of theological study, God, might not become converted (Torrance, 1986: 56).

Despite the accusation by some that Barth's theology will lead to the repudiation of faith by thoughtful people, Hauerwas claims that Barth was the ultimate rationalist. This means that Barth allowed his reason to be bound *unconditionally* to the object of his study, to be determined by it and to let his method be prescribed by it. The task of theology, the task that Barth undertook, was not to make the Christian faith reasonable to thoughtful people, i.e., to make it more believable, acceptable and less offensive to its "cultured despisers." The task of theology, which Barth took upon himself, is to explain the rationality of the faith, the knowledge of God, which is very strictly bound to its unique object, God in God's Self-revelation, as far as this object will allow (Hauerwas, 2001, 2002: 141-142).

Du Toit refers to the phrase "the linguistic turn," coined by Richard Rorty, to describe the postmodern realisation that one cannot escape one's beliefs and language and test them from the outside, but one can only explain their inherent coherence from the inside. Although varied in their critique of modernism, postmodern theories are critical of the attempt made by modernism to base its beliefs on a foundation outside the belief itself (Du Toit, 1999: 2; Johnson, 1997: 184).

Du Toit brings the postmodern a/theology of Mark C. Taylor, influenced greatly by Jacques Derrida, in conversation with Barth's understanding of revelation (Du Toit, 1999: 3). Taylor says that words do not reveal, but rather veil, and continually re-veils. Therefore Taylor speaks of revelation, rather than revelation. Theological language does not unmask the truth, but only masks it by more and more layers of re-veiling (Du Toit, 1999: 4).

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Du Toit argues that Barth acknowledged the inability of our words to refer to a transcendent reality beyond itself, i.e., to God. Barth rejected an *analogia entis*, i.e., an ontological connection between our words and God, but employed an *analogia relationis*, whereby God has freely determined to reveal God-self in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, by gracious miracle. As we encounter this event, of God freely revealing God-self in Jesus Christ, the Word of God, our words, which cannot move beyond our sphere, are enabled to correspond analogously to God's Word, that miraculously enters our sphere from God's side (Du Toit, 1999: 10-11). Du Toit also notes that Barth's emphasis on the miraculous nature of revelation is further re-enforced by his view that words do not primarily give us an accurate image of empirical realities, but rather that words "induce action," that they appeal to a relationship (Du Toit, 1999: 11-12). We might add: words do not reflect knowledge, but ask for it, pray for it.

Nielsen sees in Barth's book on Anselm, *Fides quaerens intellectum*, a liberation from the problem posed by Feuerbach, i.e., that all theological statements merely project their own ideals onto God, by fully acknowledging that all human language and thought, also *theological* language and thought, always remain fully human. However, theology which is faith seeking understanding, theology which is prayer, theology which corresponds to its object by obediently acknowledging that God is the being of whom no greater thoughts can be thought, is human language and thought which allows God to be God and humanity to be humanity, by speaking in such a manner that the truth of its statements can only be revealed by God-self. And thus for the first time, according to Nielsen, Barth could use theological language that does not only contradict (*widerspricht*) who God truly is, but theological language that corresponds (*ent-spricht*) to God's Self-revealing action (Nielsen, 2010: 121-123).

Despite the name by which Anselm's proof of God is known, i.e., the *ontological* proof of God's existence, MacDonald argues that for Barth Anselm's definition of God, as a being of which no greater being can be *conceived*, was not an ontological definition of God, but a noetic one. It says absolutely nothing about God. What Barth saw in Anselm's definition of God, says MacDonald, was the fact that our language cannot penetrate God's being, but only through God's Self-revealing action can our language be penetrated by God. It was to this ontological reality that Anselm's definition of God corresponded in its noetic nature (MacDonald, 2000: 197).

Johnson notes that Barth's non-foundational theology differs from many of the contemporary post-liberal or postmodern theologies, in that Barth did not believe theology to be enclosed in Christian language itself, but that it has a centre outside itself, in God. Johnson refers to an image Barth used, of an axe-less wagon wheel, rotating around the opening in the middle, which illustrates that theology is forever decentred, forever starting anew, forever circling the centre which lies outside itself. This eccentric centre, this foundation-less foundation of theology, is God's Self-revelation to humanity in Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which forever remains outside the grasp of humanity, but which grasps humanity by its own power (Johnson, 1997: 185).

In this way, Barth could speak of the revelation of God which never diminishes the mystery of God, but rather deepens it, since we can never take hold of it, and yet we are held by it. Placing the mystery, the gracious miracle of God's Self-revealing action, at the centre of his theology, Barth led the way in doing theology in a manner which does not claim to possess knowledge of God, but which always remains open for God's Self-revelation (Johnson, 1997: 185, 188; Du Toit, 1999: 11).

Johnson says that since God's mysterious being is never a fixed being that we can have in our possession or control, because God's being is found in God's gracious and miraculous

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action towards humanity in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, our knowledge of God is also found in our corresponding action of faith, love and hope. As Barth said, with the emphases of Johnson added: “We can and must *act* as those who know. But we must not claim to *be* those who know” (Johnson, 1997: 189-190; Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 124).

Barth said that when theologians are asked to explain their theological statements, we can only repeat ourselves. If we do not wish to alter the object to which our statements are pointing, Jesus Christ, we have no option but to repeat ourselves. The form of our theology has to be determined by its object. Wittgenstein also indicated this limit in language. If I point to something and say a sentence, and the person listening does not understand, I have no option but to point again and to repeat the sentence. Likewise, theology can only exist in pointing to Jesus Christ and repeating ourselves again and again, with all the variations that our object will allow. And as we do this, we do it as people of faith, people who know that we have no guarantees that we are indeed pointing to and speaking of the living, free Jesus Christ. Therefore, we dare not speak as if we have Jesus Christ on our side, as if mentioning the Name Jesus Christ, proves our point and gives us the last say. With fear and trembling, with the utmost humility and reverence, with abundant joy and confidence, we can only point to Jesus Christ again and again, repeating ourselves ever anew, in the certain hope that God alone can reveal God-self in Jesus Christ (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 173-175).

Theology’s task is not to convert unbelieving people to faith, nor to affirm believers in their faith, nor to liberate doubters from their doubt. Theologians should also not undertake the task of theology in order to strengthen their own faith. The issue at hand in theology is not whether we believe or whether we do not believe. The issue at hand in theology is what the content and nature of the Christian faith is. The task of theology is, regardless of the faith or unbelief of those who are addressed, to explain the inherent rationality of faith. It is not the rationality of unbelief or doubt which is addressed by theology, but the rationality of faith. Theology does not seek the faith of rationality, but the rationality of faith (Barth, 1975: *FQ*: 15-18).

Barth’s theology has shown that speech about God does not only entail the transformation of speech itself, but also of the speaker (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 176). The object of our theological study, God, does not only determine our method of study, but also determines us, those who perform the study, by binding us personally to God-self.

The Bible and its object

Likewise, truly historical study of the Bible, must allow itself to be conformed to the object the Bible is pointing to, rather than trying to conform the Bible to the objectives of the researcher. Historical criticism, if it is truly historical, and truly critical, cannot pretend to reconstruct a world *behind* the text, a history *behind* Scripture. If this attempt is made, it will merely end up being a projected construction of our own world, our own history, behind the text. To take the historicity of the text seriously, and to reflect critically upon it, we have to accept the text for what it purports to do and be, and not something else. We must allow ourselves to be bound by the objective of the text, rather than projecting our own objectives onto the text (Bromiley, 1986: 65-66).

Whereas Barth at first in his *Church Dogmatics* understood the Word of God in a threefold form, as the Word of God preached by the church, written in the Bible and revealed in Jesus Christ, he later differentiated it more narrowly, saying that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God, to which the Bible attests and to which the church witnesses.

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In the 1920's Barth made Bullinger's phrase: *praedicatio verbi divini est verbum divinum* / "the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God," famous once again. But in the 1960's Barth said he was glad to discover later in his life that Bullinger did not say this, but it was a heading which was added in the 1600's. The saying is indeed true, but what Bullinger meant, more specifically, is that wherever the Word of God is preached, we have the promise that God's Word will be proclaimed by God-self. Our preaching of the Word of God is not identical to the Word of God, but in our preaching we have the promise that God-self will speak God's Word, and we are called to pray for and to anticipate the fulfilment of that promise (Barth, 1963: *KB*: 2).

How do we know that God became human in Jesus Christ? How do we know that humanity is reconciled to God in Jesus Christ? We are told this by Scripture, by the tradition of the church and the proclamation of the church, but how do we know it is true? We know it is true because Jesus Christ is the living Word of God who reveals it to us in faith. Jesus Christ is the text we read. There is no epistemological possibility to know that God became human in Jesus Christ, unless it is revealed by God to us. We have no way of knowing God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ while standing outside faith and outside the community of faith. We cannot show people any possibility of having knowledge of God's Self-revelation outside of faith, but we can only witness to God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ actually known in faith. God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ is not only free and gracious in its ontological objectivity, but it is also free and gracious in its noetic subjectivity. It is not knowledge lying around, to be picked up by the curious passer-by, but it is knowledge freely given by God's gracious Self-revelation in Jesus Christ, given in the actual knowledge of faith, given to the community of faith. It is freely and graciously given, not in the Bible, not in the church's tradition or proclamation, but it is given, always anew, in the living Person of Jesus Christ, who is the Head and Lord of the community of faith (Barth, 1958: *CD IV*,2: 122).

MacDonald affirms that in Barth's theological realism, there is no possibility of standing outside the miraculous strange new world of the Bible, brought into existence by God's miraculous Self-revealing action, and judging whether God's revelation took place. The only judge or measure of God's revelation, if it truly is God's miraculous Self-revelation, is to be found in the event of the revelation itself (MacDonald, 2000:185-186).

The church and its object

Barth warned that we must act as those who know this in faith, giving witness to Jesus Christ, but we must not claim that we have this knowledge of God in our possession, that we are the authoritative bearers of this knowledge. Whether we claim that we possess knowledge of God in the tradition of the church like the Roman Catholic Church, or that we possess it in Scripture like fundamentalists, or that we possess it in our inner voice like sectarian communities, we would be fools, real fools, in the Biblical meaning of the word, if we made such preposterous claims. The epistemological possibility of knowledge of God is as closed to us as it is to anybody else. We can only receive the free and gracious Self-revelation of God in the living Word, Jesus Christ, through empty-handed faith, every morning anew, always as a new gift, without it ever coming into our possession. And we can only give witness to Jesus Christ, the living Word, who freely and graciously reveals God to the community of faith, but who always remains our Lord, our Head, and who never becomes our possession (Barth, 1958: *CD IV*,2: 124). Since God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ is and always remains an *act of God*, a *free and gracious* act of God, it always occurs as a *miracle*, outside the realm of human possibilities (Barth, 1958: *CD IV*,2: 147).

And still, there is no way of knowing Jesus in faith, outside the church, outside the Bible, outside the history of Israel. Why specifically Israel, the Bible and the church? Why

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specifically Jesus? There is no way of answering these questions according to Barth. There is no logical explanation or mystical experience which can convince us that God reveals God-self in this manner. It is a mystery, a secret (Barth uses the German word *Geheimnis*, which connotes both the meanings “mystery” and “secret”). God is not bound to them, but we are, because by the mysterious grace of God, God freely chooses to be revealed in Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, as attested to in the Bible, as believed and obeyed by the church. There are many good and beautiful things outside Jesus, outside the history of Israel, outside the Bible, outside the church, but the Christian faith and life, if they are at all *Christian*, are inseparably bound to the living Lord, Jesus, the Messiah of Israel, as attested to by the Bible and believed and obeyed by the church (Barth, 1956: KB: 205).

Faith and its object

In 1927 Barth published *Christliche Dogmatik im Entwurf* and started studying Anselm's *Proslogion*. As he did in his commentary in Romans, says Seils, Barth still emphasised the difference between God and humanity, but now, even more than before, he saw the Word of God, wherein God reveals God-self, as the starting point of theology. Whereas Barth's contemporaries made the Christian faith in its human subjectivity the starting point of their theology, Barth sought to make the Word of God his starting point. According to Barth, we cannot assume that we already know who God is in faith, before we encounter the Word of God. We first have to hear the Word of God in order to come to knowledge of God in faith. Seils argues that Barth never neglected the relationship between faith and the Word of God, and repeatedly acknowledged that theology can only be done in faith, but for him that meant that our faith is grounded and contained in the Word of God; not that the Word of God is grounded and contained in our faith. The order and the hierarchy in the relationship between the Word of God and the Christian faith can never be reversed. Our faith lives by the Word. The Word does not live by our faith (Seils, 1996: 193).

Even the dialectical theologians with whom Barth was associated in the 1920's, and who also emphasised the radical difference between God and humanity, when they started seeking a positive correspondence, a point of contact between God and humanity, returned to faith and the subjective experience of humanity, rather than fixing their gaze on the action of God, on God's Self-revelation in the Word. Barth saw this as a return to the “flesh pots of Egypt.” The radical difference between God and humanity, which the dialectical theologians emphasised before, could only be maintained by not returning to humanity's faith and experience, but by looking to God's Self-revelation in the Word of God, whereby the Word in its own power establishes a positive correspondence between God and humanity.

Theology, from the very first word, has to be theo-logy: words of God, it has to be based upon the actual content of the God known in faith, it has to be *nachdenken*: reflecting on the confession of the church, it has to be faith seeking understanding. The attempt to establish the possibility of knowledge of God outside God's Self-revelation, apart from the content of the church's confession of faith, all attempts at natural theology, had to be abandoned, according to Barth (Busch, 1975: 208, 211-212; Busch, 2004a: 80). And therefore, theology, from the very first word, has to be a prayer, a response of faith to God's Self-revelation.

The Holy Spirit not only awakens us to faith, but also makes the content of our faith intelligible. Although it is true that the theologian is involved personally in the endeavour of thinking and speaking about God, although the theologian has to stand inside the faith to speak about the knowledge of faith, it is not as if it is the theologian's faith which illuminates the Word of God and which makes it intelligible. It is the Holy Spirit, for whose work the theologian can only ask in prayer, that both establishes our faith in the Word, fills that faith

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with the true content of the Word, and furthermore makes it intelligible (Rosato, 1981: 38-39).

The Word of God has power outside and apart from our faith. And it is only by the power of the Word of God that our faith comes into existence and is sustained. Even unbelief has no existence outside the power of the Word of God. It is only as we are addressed by the Word of God that we are put in a position, by God's grace, to respond to God's Word. In faith, we freely use the grace given by God's Word to believe and obey it. In unbelief, we do the impossible, we remain in the captivity of unbelief despite being liberated for faith by the Word of God. But both faith and unbelief only happen within the sphere of God's prior grace, in response to the Word of God which precedes it and which addresses and claims it by its own power (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 154).

Knowledge of God, knowledge of faith, exists in the encounter between God and humanity, where humanity allows itself to be addressed by God, where we respond to God's Word to us, where we react to God's claim upon us. Knowledge of God is relational knowledge. It can only *re-lect*, *re-pond* and *re-act*. There can be no reflection, response or reaction outside the encounter between God and humanity (Van der Kooi, 2002: 20).

Faith is not a source, but a response. God speaks, faith responds. God establishes faith by God's Word. Faith is not a human product. Although it is we who believe, our faith is not created by us, but created by God's Word. Barth's continued emphasis on the Self-revelation of God, was meant to guard against thinking that our faith, or talk about God, or knowledge of God, has any ability to produce anything. Our faith, our talk about God, our knowledge of God, although believed by us, although spoken by us, although known by us, is given, produced, created by God's Word alone. It is never a source, but always a response (Hart, 2000: 41).

A personal, living object

Hart explains that for Barth, revelation is not a once off event, which exists apart from God's being after it has occurred. As long as the distinction, the qualitative difference, between God and humanity is taken with full seriousness, one has to hold onto the necessity for God's continued revelation. As faith knows God, it knows God in God's wholly otherness, in God's complete difference from all other created things known by humanity, it knows God in God's mystery, and therefore faith knows the need for God's continual Self-revelation. It is not natural for humanity to know God, as it is natural to know other things or other people. Humanity's "natural" relation to God, if any, is at the most unbelief and ignorance, but even that should not be overstated as if it is a real point of connection. Our "natural" relation to God is not even "neutrality," because we are "naturally" antagonistic against God and we resist God's Word when it addresses and confronts us. Revelation and reconciliation are related in Barth's theology. Both deal with the impossible possibility of God coming to humanity, of God giving God-self to humanity as a personal Other, of God addressing and claiming humanity, of God establishing an impossible relationship between God and humanity from God's side, by the miracle of grace (Hart, 2000: 42).

However, Hart argues that Barth did not speak so negatively about the possibility of knowing God, due to cynicism regarding human knowledge. For Barth, it was faith itself, actual knowledge of God, which understood that God cannot be known by human efforts. Outside real knowledge of God, one might perhaps be more optimistic about the possibility of knowledge of God, but inside the knowledge of God, inside the knowledge of faith, God is known in God's incomprehensibility as the God who can only be known by the divine miracle of pure grace, as we are resurrected from death to life (Hart, 2000: 43).

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It has to be remembered that knowledge of God is not information, a principle or an idea, but it is God-self who is given to the knower. Even a human person cannot be known by a single moment of self-revelation. But in the case of knowledge of God, the knowledge must not only be renewed or affirmed, as in human relationships, but it must be given anew in its totality, since God in God's being is not knowable to humanity.

For Barth the fact that God is the living, personal, free God, meant that God must always give God-self anew as the object of our knowledge of faith, otherwise there can be no knowledge of God. It is not that there is no relation, no correspondence between faith and its object, but the relation, the correspondence has always to be renewed from God's side, in order to be a real, living relationship, an active correspondence. Although God can be an object of knowledge, God is never an object like other objects, but the living, personal, free God who, even as God gives God-self to be known as an object, still remains in control of that knowledge as its ultimate Subject. But God does in fact do this, God does in fact give God-self ever anew as an object of knowledge to faith, and thus God also requires to be sought always anew. God gives God-self again and again, so that we might find God again and again.

Barth said:

“But this object is the free God who is hidden from man because he is a sinner, who has, of course, put man in the new state of faith in which He can be known by him, but who in this very state – it is indeed that of faith – wills to be sought and found anew and then anew again. For faith, He is and remains enclosed in objectivity, in the externality of the Word of God, in Jesus Christ. He must teach man to seek Him and He must show Himself to him in order that he may find Him. But it is by this external object that Christian faith lives” (Barth, 1975: *CD I, 1*: 231-232).

Because God gives God-self always anew to faith, God requires of faith to pray for God's revelation always anew. Without God answering our continuous prayerful seeking, by freely choosing to be revealed always anew to us, there can be no life of faith.

Faith seeking understanding

Barth's book on Anselm, claimed that Anselm did precisely this. Instead of providing philosophical proofs of God, whereupon faith in God could be based, Anselm's proofs are faith in God seeking understanding, according to Barth. And that is why Anselm could move seamlessly from theological argument to doxology and back, because his proofs are in fact a prayerful response to the Self-revelation of God known in faith (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 37-39; 150-154; 170). Both Anselm and Aquinas understood that revelation precedes our theological endeavours to make our faith intelligible (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 165).

It was from Anselm that Barth learned that actual knowledge of God precedes the possibility of knowing God. God cannot be known by humanity, except if God makes God-self known to humanity. Therefore humanity cannot decide what the conditions for knowledge of God should be. Only *after* God has made God-self known, can we reflect upon this knowledge (Gorringe, 1999: 125-126).

Not only knowledge of God, but also knowledge of humanity, has its origin in God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ, whereby faith is established. Thus the order of knowledge is always: first revelation, secondly faith and only then the search for understanding begins.

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That is what *Fides quaerens intellectum* / “Faith seeking understanding” means (Barth, 1975: FQ: 12).

Schwöbel asserts that it was from the pre-modern theology of Anselm, that Barth discovered two assumptions of modernity, which he attacked. Whereas, in the pre-modern times of Anselm, what something was, determined how it could be known, and how something acted, determined what it could do, in modern times these assumptions were reversed, so that how something could be known, determined what it was, and what something could possibly do, determined its actions. Thus, in pre-modern times, the being of God, the essence of God, determined how God can be known, and the actions of God determined what God can possibly do. But in modern times, how God can be known, the epistemological question, determined who God was, and the possibilities of humanity, determined how God acted towards humanity. Schwöbel explains that in pre-modern times, who people was, in light of their past history, tradition, custom, acts, determined how they could be known and what they could do. In modern times, what people could imagine themselves to be and do in the future, determined how they could be known and what they could do. And the same logic applied to pre-modern and modern knowledge of God. Barth saw in this modern reversal of being and knowing, of actuality and possibility, two foundational errors in modern theology. Our knowledge of God does not determine the God who is known. It is the God who is known that determines our knowledge of God. And it is not humanity’s possibilities that determine God’s actions, but God’s actions that determine humanity’s possibilities (Schwöbel, 2000: 29-30).

This allowed Barth to approach theology much more freely, unapologetically. Without feeling the need any more to provide a philosophical foundation upon which his theology could be built, Barth was able to let the content of our faith, the church’s confession of faith, the actual knowledge of God, determine his theological approach.

The hard work of prayer

However, being liberated from the obligation of apologetics, did not mean that theology could be done in self-assurance. A far greater danger than apologetics threatens all of theology, namely the danger that God might not reveal God-self, thus leaving our words without any real content. The only way to address this threat, is by doing theology, as Anselm did it, as a prayer, asking God to reveal God-self in our words.

As mentioned before, Barth explained that theology is not only *accompanied* by prayer, that prayer is not only the proper starting point or end point of theology, but that all theological work *is* prayer. Theological work can only be done properly in the act of prayer, since all theology is in essence the prayerful asking that God will reveal God-self through the Word:

“We should keep in mind the fact that prayer, as such, is work; in fact, very hard work, although in its execution the hands are most fittingly not moved but folded. Where theology is concerned, the rule *Ora et labora!* is valid under all circumstances – pray and work! And the gist of this rule is not merely that *orare*, although it should be the beginning, would afterward be only incidental to the execution of *laborare*. The rule means, moreover, that the *laborare* itself, and as such, is essentially an *orare* (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 160).

Theological work is not merely a performance of the *intellectus fidei*, but is in actual fact prayer, since theologians are attempting not to show their faith, but the God in whom we believe. Prayer is the basic attitude of faith, since it turns away from itself to the object of faith, the object of all theology, God.

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“For in prayer a man temporarily turns away from his own efforts. This move is necessary precisely for the sake of the duration and continuation of his own work. Every prayer has its beginning when a man puts himself (together with his best and most accomplished work) out of the picture. He leaves himself and his work behind in order once again to recollect that he stands before God. How could he ever find it unnecessary to recollect this fact continually and anew? He stands before the God who, in his work and word, is man’s Lord, Judge, and Saviour. He recognizes also that this God stands before him, or rather draws near to him, in His work and word. This is the mighty, holy, and merciful God who is the great threat and the still greater hope of man’s work” (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 162-163).

The reason that theology is done in prayer, always moving from unrest to rest and back again to unrest, always seeking and finding and seeking anew, is because the object of faith, the free and hidden God, wills to be revealed and to be known in this manner. God does not will to be known as an impersonal, lifeless, static object, next to other objects within the world. God does not will to be known as an object which can be known once off, so that after knowledge of it is acquired, no further inquiry, learning or seeking is required. Faith is a true encounter between the personal God and the believer, and therefore it is always accompanied by prayerful asking, seeking, knocking.

For Barth, doing theology was an act of faith. This act of faith entails an act of *penitence*, an act of *obedience* and an act of *prayer* (Bromiley, 1979: 4).

Asking, seeking, knocking

God reveals God-self in the first person: “I am who I am.” Therefore God cannot be known in the third person. We cannot know God as an observer standing outside the personal encounter between God and humanity. God is always the Subject of God’s Self-revelation. This makes God’s unveiling also a veiling in divine Subjectivity. God does not give God-self in such a way that we can have God as our own object. God is known as God gives God-self continually to be known, and therefore we can only continually sigh in perplexity and longing for the Self-revelation of God (Webster, 2000a: 42-43).

The appropriate question regarding knowledge of God, is therefore not: “How can we possibly know God?,” as if we stand outside the knowledge of God, but instead: “Who is this God whom we know in God’s Self-revelation?” (Webster, 2000a: 57-58). Knowledge of God does not entail mastering the subject-matter, but being mastered by it (Webster, 2000a: 67). It is not within humanity’s grasp to know God. It is indeed impossible to know God. But where others halted at this juncture, Barth pressed on, since this did not imply that it is impossible for God to grasp humanity. For Barth, this emphasised the wonder and grace of God’s Self-revelation (Webster, 2000a: 67, 82).

In the tumultuous early years of Barth’s theological career, with his disillusionment in modern Protestant theology and his rediscovery of the strange new world of the Bible, wherein God encounters humanity within a wholly new world order established by God-self, by God’s Word, by God’s kingdom, Barth realised that knowing God is never “owning, feasting and sharing,” but “relentless searching, asking and knocking” (Busch, 1975: 114-115).

However, even our uncertainty, even our lack of knowledge, is not something to boast in, since God does not only unsettle our human answers, but more fundamentally God unsettles our human questions, by giving the divine answer, and with that answer asking the ultimate question of humanity. When Barth in his commentary on Romans said that we as believers

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have no ground to stand on, that our knowledge of God is based upon a “standing place in the air,” a “vacuum,” a “crater formed by an explosion,” “grounded upon the groundlessness of God,” he did not mean that all our knowledge of God is plagued by scepticism. Scepticism also has no ground to stand on. All our human knowledge, not only our answers, but also our questions, are displaced by the revelation of God. Our lack of knowledge of God, our distance from God, our experience of the absence of God, is not the foundation of true asking, seeking and knocking. Only when God reveals God-self, when God draws near, when God is present, does true questioning, true asking, seeking and knocking begin (Busch, 1975: 119-120; Barth, 1933: *R*: 57, 94, 134).

The righteousness of God displaces all the ground from under our feet, giving us nothing to stand on except the righteousness of God, a foundation which must always be upheld by God. This, Barth argued, is not a negative, but a *positive* relationship between God and humanity. It is the only foundation whereupon our knowledge of God can be sure and certain, because it does not rest at any point upon a human possibility (Barth, 1933: *R*: 94).

Despite the fact that Barth said in this commentary on Romans that God confronts humanity as “pure negation,” even as the negation of our negation, “the death of our death,” “the non-existence of our non-existence,” yet Barth also affirmed that “everything hangs upon our faith”! God demands of humanity to have the faith of Abraham, to “hope against hope.” We must hear and believe God’s “Yes,” God’s promise to make all things new, God’s life beyond death, while everything within the world and within our human experience shouts “No” to us. In faith, we must walk beyond all human possibilities. We must accept that the true God is indeed our God and we must give God all the honour. With “wisdom beyond all wisdom, righteousness beyond all righteousness, worship beyond all worship, sacrifice beyond all sacrifice,” we must pray: “God, my God, gladly I believe all thy words” (Barth, 1933: *R*: 141-143).

Negatively, faith means the end of all human works, even our negative or passive works, even our negation of God, even our silence and death. Positively, faith means the personal encounter with the living Jesus Christ. In faith we echo Jesus’ words, we react to Jesus’ action (Gorringe, 1999: 255). And therefore the basic demand of God, is that we should call upon God (Gorringe, 1999: 261).

Barth not only rejected the idea of a positive “point of contact” between God and humanity, of something divine within human nature, but he also rejected the idea of a negative “point of contact” between God and humanity, for example, in our human ignorance or despair (Busch, 1975: 259).

Believers are even more aware of our ignorance than unbelievers. Believers are at the same time more aware of how lost we are without God, and yet more hopeful in our expectation of God, than unbelievers. Believers are not settled in the uncertainty of our knowledge of God, but unsettled by the certainty of God’s knowledge of us.

The incomprehensibility of God, the hiddenness of God, is not a philosophical truth or an existential experience, it is only known in faith, it is only known through God’s Self-revelation. *All* knowledge of God is grace, even knowledge of God’s incomprehensibility and hiddenness (Van der Kooi, 2002: 251). Unbelief is always more optimistic about humanity’s ability to know the comprehensibility or incomprehensibility of God, than faith is (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*:107).

Scepticism, according to Barth, is merely human questions and answers. The questions with which scepticism busies itself, are questions which can be asked in an indifferent, curious manner. Scepticism is not filled with fear, fear unto death, like faith. The knowledge of faith, the knowledge of revelation, knows God in God’s hiddenness, in God’s mystery, and thus it

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is truly humbled in the fear of the Lord. The truly troublesome questions, are not the questions outside revelation, but the questions which are born from the answer given in revelation (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 28) Only faith knows that all knowledge of God, even knowledge of our ignorance of God, is grace.

Questions and answers

Barth compared the writing of his book, *The Epistle to the Romans*, to the experience he had as a young man, when he climbed up the church tower outside Basel, and instead of grabbing hold of the handrail, he accidentally pulled the bell-rope and heard, to his great shock, the church bell ring out across the surrounding area. Similarly, his commentary on Romans caused such a noise within the theological world, that Barth decided to proceed more quietly and carefully (Busch, 1975: 20, 120).

But perhaps the greatest shock of Barth's commentary was not its so-called negativity, its unsettling of our faith, of our knowledge of God, but rather the unsettling of modern Protestantism's confidence in its questions, in its historical critical method with which the Bible was read, in its Cartesian worldview, wherein everything can be doubted except doubt, in its Kantian confidence that the individual's reason is beyond question. Maybe the furore surrounding Romans had less to do with the unsettling of faith, but rather with the unsettling of doubt, in the unsettling of the assumption that we, humans, can pose our questions to the Bible, instead of the Word of God questioning us.

Surprisingly, Barth left no room for doubt within faith. Barth affirmed the existence of *Anfechtung*, wherein humanity is plagued by the question whether we have a part in God. Doubt, however, was to Barth the misguided attempt to look for grounds for faith outside the real encounter between God and humanity. *Anfechtung* has a place in the life of faith, since it is part of the believer's sincere seeking, asking and knocking for God, it is part of the believer's prayer: "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!" Doubt, by contrast, stays at a safe distance, not willing to enter into the real encounter with God, trying to find paths to faith which bypasses the perilous encounter with God. *Anfechtung* truly awaits an answer from God, by addressing God-self in its question. Doubt does not address God directly. Doubt addresses humanity with its questions. It asks in such a way that God's answer is not really wanted or expected and thus cannot really be heard (Van der Kooi, 2002: 279-280).

The basic error of Cartesian theology, according to Barth, was the assumption that humanity has the capacity or ability to hear the Word of God. Barth asserted that the ability to hear the Word of God can only be given by the Word itself. The possibility of hearing the Word of God is only received in the actual hearing of the Word. It does not exist prior to hearing the Word of God and is not retained after hearing the Word of God. Hearing the Word of God can only happen within the miracle of faith. It can only happen as a gift of grace. It is only as the Word of God makes itself heard by grace, that those who hear it in faith have the possibility of hearing it (Bromiley, 1979: 10).

Barth said in the preface to the second edition of *Romans*, that the historical criticism with which the Bible was read and understood by his contemporaries, was not critical enough. Historical criticism, according to Barth, sought only to explore the mystery of the text, whereas Barth wanted to explore the mystery of the subject matter to which the text was pointing (Jehle, 2002: 9; Barth, 1940: *R*: xii).

Historical criticism could not stand up against theological criticism, since it was not willing to face the difficult theological paradoxes and mysteries which present themselves in the Bible. By attempting to reinterpret the Bible in such a manner that nothing in the Bible seems

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strange or impossible to modern humanity, it was not able to answer the real theological questions that the Bible posed (Jüngel, 1986: 69-70).

A personal confrontation

Barth felt we should not deceive ourselves into thinking that an objective, neutral reading of the Bible is possible. It is impossible to bring the meaning out of a text – *auslegen* – without simultaneously reading our own meaning into the text – *einlegen*. For Barth, the only way to read and exegete the Bible, was to allow ourselves to be personally addressed by the subject matter itself, by God-self, until it appears as if the gulf between the author and ourselves have disappeared and God is directly addressing us within our current day situation (Barth, 1933: *R*: ix-x).

When reading the Bible or listening to a sermon, believers know that God is addressing each one of us, personally, individually. In order to hear and obey the Word, it must be heard as personal address. Any attempt to stand outside the personal encounter of the Word of God, which is addressing me, individually, is a denial of the reality of the situation (Webster, 2000a: 32).

However, the fact that we are addressed personally, individually, by God's revelation, does not mean that the knowledge of faith is personal, individual knowledge, i.e., a matter of personal opinion or feeling. In Barth's Gifford lectures, wherein he attacked any form of natural knowledge of God, saying that knowledge of God is at all points and at all times knowledge of faith, Barth explained that our modern understanding of faith as a personal, individual opinion or feeling is far removed from the Reformed understanding of faith. Knowledge of faith, said Barth, is universally valid and is absolutely binding, not only for those who believe, but also for others. Barth insisted that, at least in the Reformers' teaching, faith is the most objective, strictest form of knowledge, binding its subjects in the most definitive way, binding all their personal opinions or feelings to itself in obedience to the object of faith (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 25). Like Paul said in 2 Corinthians 10:5: "We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Because knowledge of faith is knowledge of revelation, it is bound unconditionally to its object. And because this object of revelation is *God*, the subjects of this knowledge are bound in a manner very different from how they are bound to other objects of knowledge. Whereas other objects of knowledge do not bind their subjects with absolute obedience, this object of knowledge does bind its subjects in this manner, because God is the object of this knowledge. It is not the decision or action of believers to bind ourselves in such an absolute manner to this object, in fact, people always try to shy away from being bound in this way. But it is the object of faith, God, who binds the subjects of faith so totally in our knowledge of God. The knowledge of faith is not the personal discovery, experience or argument of the individual, but a matter of being personally bound by obedience to God's command (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 26-27).

And when the knowledge of faith speaks, it does not speak in personal, individual expression of feeling or opinion, but it speaks in obedience to God's command, saying what it has been told to say, responding to what it has heard. When the knowledge of faith speaks, it speaks in responsibility to the object of faith, God, who has first spoken to it. Therefore, when the knowledge of faith speaks, it does not speak in the form of a normal monologue or discussion, but it speaks in the form of a *liturgical* act, in the form of prayer. The knowledge of faith only secondarily and incidentally has to explain itself to others. Firstly and necessarily it must explain itself to God. But when the knowledge of faith speaks in this way, when it

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speaks to God, responds to God, gives an account to God, it speaks to all of humanity with universal validity. It is only as the knowledge of faith addresses God, in responsibility to God alone, that it addresses others rightly, with responsibility for them (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 26-27).

Knowledge of God is of necessity obedience to God. There is, according to Barth, no knowledge of God, which is not also simultaneously service of God, and vice versa. This obedience is not the obedience of a slave, but the obedience of people who have been liberated by the Holy Spirit for the life of faith. It is the freedom of people who have been liberated from the slavery of relying upon themselves, to the freedom of relying fully upon their Lord Jesus, from the slavery of serving themselves, to the freedom of serving their Lord Jesus alone. There is no faith, without the life of faith, there is no knowledge of faith, without the obedience of faith. To know God is to serve God, and to serve God is to know God (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 114-115)

It is when the church tries to speak to others firstly, when it binds itself to the approval and acceptance of others, that it speaks wrongly. By disregarding its primary responsibility to God alone, the church forsakes the responsibility it has for others. It is when the church tries to explain itself to others in apologetics, instead of explaining itself to God in prayer, that it ceases to speak from the knowledge of faith, from the knowledge of revelation, and thus it does not speak truthfully and responsibly to the world.

Revelation is God's personal address to humanity. God addresses particular people at a specific time and place, in specific circumstances. The media God uses to address humanity, Scripture or preaching, are bound to God, but God is not bound to them. They are signs, which are empty and meaningless without the One whom they are signifying, but God does not have to be signified by them. Either way, because God's revelation is personal, it necessitates a personal response, either of faith and obedience, or unbelief and disobedience (Hart, 2000: 48).

Is knowledge in need of salvation?

The Reformers battled against the doctrines of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism regarding the righteousness of our works, our obedience, with the slogans: *sola fide* / faith alone, *sola gratia* / grace alone, *sola scriptura* / Scripture alone and *solus Christus* / Christ alone. What they perhaps did not say clearly enough, maybe because it was not necessary to do so in the pre-modern world, is that not only our obedience, but also our faith, not only our service of God, but also our knowledge of God, relies on Scripture alone, on grace alone, on Christ alone. In the modern era, with our Cartesian and Kantian confidence in the reason of the individual, with our certainty in human knowledge, the danger of Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism had to be fought also regarding faith itself. In the modern world, Barth found it necessary to articulate it much more precisely that our knowledge of God is humanly impossible, except by the gracious Self-revelation of God (Busch, 2004a: 62).

Barth has been criticised that he replaced the concerns of the Bible and the Reformation, which is justification and sanctification, the righteousness of the guilty and the liberation of the imprisoned, with modernity's question regarding knowledge of God. This, argues Bockmuehl, brings about a transformation in our understanding of faith. Whereas the Bible describes faith as the acceptance of God's grace, standing in a new light before God, becoming a new creation, following and obeying a new Master, being completely transformed in our whole human existence, the modern understanding of faith, including Barth's understanding, was merely as a new kind of knowledge or insight, a new set of beliefs, regarding God. Barth's description of faith in the *Church Dogmatics*, volume IV, part

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1, as *anerkennen*, *erkennen* and *bekennen*, all forms of *kennen*, forms of knowledge, supports this criticism. And according to Bockmuehl, it is logical that an understanding of God which is enclosed in objectivity, will lead to an understanding of faith as a mere acknowledgment, recognition and confession, as mere knowledge of that objective reality, rather than a real faith encounter between God and humanity (Bockmuehl, 1988: 95-96).

Seils affirms this view to some extent. While Barth went to great lengths to describe faith as being more than merely a cognitive event, faith is not primarily a soteriological event, but rather an event of revelation. Faith is the revelatory event wherein believers acknowledge, recognise and confess the soteriological reality which is already true for all of humanity, namely the reconciliation of God and humanity in Jesus Christ (Seils, 1996: 202; Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 630, 747, 758). In faith, believers are enclosed within the soteriological reality which is true for all of humanity. While unbelievers are also within this reality of reconciliation with God, the circle remains open in their unbelief, and still awaits its future revelation (Seils, 1996: 201).

However, it is also to be noted that within the threefold structure of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation, the key point at which Barth brings faith to the fore, is in response to God's *justification* of humanity through the priestly work of Jesus, and not as the response to God's *calling* of humanity through the prophetic work of Jesus. Although faith is not limited to this one aspect, but present throughout, it is interesting that Barth chose to discuss it explicitly in the context of justification and not in the context of revelation (Seils, 1996: 208; Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 79).

If Barth saw faith only as a revelatory event, as an event which forms part of the revelation in time of the salvation that God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ, why not then place it within the prophetic office of Jesus, within the eschatological revelation of the justification and sanctification already established? By holding onto the traditional link between justification and faith, rather than linking faith with the prophetic witness of Jesus Christ, Barth kept faith firmly within the soteriological reality. But of course, and this was for Barth the crucial factor, soteriology and revelation can never be separated from each other.

Seils is not the first to observe that paragraph 63, on the nature of Christian faith, is actually a rather dull description of faith, as compared to other descriptions of faith that Barth gave, also in the *Church Dogmatics*. This paragraph should not be understood as a full description of Barth's understanding of faith, but should be viewed within the broader context of the Holy Spirit who gathers the community of faith, incorporating Christians into the body of Christ, thereby enabling us to participate in the justification of humanity in Jesus Christ (Seils, 1996: 210-211; Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 688).

Hart also mentions the criticism of Gustaf Wingren and Alister McGrath that the problem of knowledge of God dominates the God-human relationship in Barth's theology, rather than reconciliation. The problem of humanity's sin and guilt before God, which is reconciled in Jesus Christ, is at the centre of the gospel, while in Barth's theology it seems rather that humanity's ignorance of God, is Barth's main concern. To be saved seems to mean, for Barth, to gain knowledge of God, instead of being forgiven and reconciled to God. Hart agrees with this interpretation to the point that Barth was indeed concerned with modernity's preoccupation with epistemological questions. However, Barth did not attempt to solve modernity's epistemological questions on its own terms, but Barth drew these issues into the soteriological force field. Thus Barth denied the Enlightenment's optimism in human reason and autonomy, its confidence in the individual's ability to ascertain knowledge independently, and brought it into confrontation with the dilemmas of sin and human ignorance of God, which is dependent on God's reconciliation and revelation. Hart sees this not as a reduction of soteriology to epistemology, but rather as a broadening of soteriology, which, in the West,

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was previously primarily understood in forensic and moral terms. Hart sees this as a more accurate description of the all-embracing salvific action of the triune God (Hart, 2000: 54).

Although knowledge of God is indeed a central concern for Barth, he was fighting against the notion of the knowledge of God being a natural, human ability or capacity, within the grasp of human reason, to be had in a disaffected, neutral way. Barth placed the issue of knowledge of God within the self-involving, personal, transformative encounter with the living, acting, crucified and resurrected Lord, before whose judgment all our knowledge is ignorance, all our convictions unbelief, all our actions disobedience, who reveals, justifies and sanctifies by pure grace, and who claims all our knowledge, faith and obedience, taking it captive, making it obedient, and thus liberating it. When God reveals God-self to humanity, humanity is reconciled to God, and when humanity is reconciled to God, God is revealed (Hart, 2000: 55).

It is true that Barth addressed the modern question of knowledge of God. And it is also debatable that this was not the primary concern of the Bible or the Reformation. However, it would be a great reduction of Barth's theology to see it as only addressing the issue of knowledge of God. What Barth attempted to do, was to take the modern question regarding knowledge of God, but instead of allowing this question to dictate the message of the gospel, he let the message of the gospel speak to this question. Barth did not take the question of the possibility of knowledge of God as his starting point, and tried to make the gospel answer this one question. He took the message of justification and sanctification by God's grace alone, and worked out its full implications, also pertaining to our modern dilemma regarding knowledge of God.

Barth felt that the church was in his time in a sense engaged in a similar battle as the Council of Nicaea and the Reformation. In a lecture given in Paris in 1934 on "Revelation," Barth said that what was at stake in the 4th and the 16th centuries respectively, was the question to what extent God-self is present in God's revelation. For the Council of Nicaea, it was the question regarding the divinity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. For the Reformation, it was the question whether God saves us through Christ alone, grace alone, Scripture alone, faith alone, without any merit or good works on the part of humanity. Thus the church in both eras, in their own manner, addressed the issue whether revelation is merely an offer made by God, something which merely points the way to God, and that it is up to humanity to make use of that offer, to embark on that way pointed by revelation, or whether God-self is acting in revelation, drawing near to humanity in revelation, giving God-self to humanity in revelation, reconciling and redeeming humanity, justifying and sanctifying humanity, through God's Self-revelation. In both eras the church had to defend the faith that God *is* God's revelation, that God alone reveals God-self. They had to defend the faith that God does not show the way to salvation, to justification and sanctification, but that God *saves*, that God *justifies* and *sanctifies*. Barth felt that the same issue was at stake in the 20th century. Not so much in the secularisation of modern humanity, which concerned Barth's colleagues a great deal, but rather in the secularisation of the church itself. Barth felt that the church in the 20th century was not convinced that God-self is present and active in God's revelation, reconciling and redeeming humanity by God's grace and power, but the church rather seemed to believe that revelation merely points to a way which we must follow, whereby we will be able to save ourselves, to improve the world by our own efforts and to reach God through our own faith. And that is the reason why, Barth believed, the church no longer had anything to say to the modern world, because the church had itself become secular. If God does not give God-self in God's revelation, if God-self is not active and working in God's revelation, if we are not reconciled and redeemed, justified and sanctified by God's revelation, rather than by our own faith or works, then the church had no message of hope for the secular world, since it believes, or rather, disbelieves, exactly the same things that they do (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 13-16). Reconciliation is not something about which revelation gives us information, which we must accomplish. God's revelation *is* God's reconciliation,

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since it is the gracious giving of God-self to humanity, it is God drawing near to be with humanity, it is God freely deciding to be for humanity (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 17).

Barth radicalised the Reformation's focus upon the gracious action of God, to refer not only to our works of righteousness, but also to our knowledge of God. Not only salvation, not only our justification and sanctification, but also the revelation of our salvation, is completely the work of God's grace and miraculous power. Only God can save humanity by God's grace, and only God can make this salvation known to humanity through God's gracious Self-revelation (Van der Kooi, 2002: 237-238).

To think, however, that for Barth, the God-human encounter boiled down to knowledge of God, would be totally inaccurate. Because Barth saw the encounter between God and humanity as much broader than knowledge of God, he could speak to atheists, sceptics and people filled with doubt, people who claimed that they were ignorant of God, or who had questions about God for which they could not find the answers, about the content of the Christian faith, about the reconciliation of humanity to God in Jesus Christ, and tell them that this is true of them also, despite the fact that they were ignorant or doubtful of it. It was precisely the erroneous notion that our human knowledge or ignorance of God determines the whole of the relationship between God and humanity, that Barth was rejecting.

Whose knowledge is it?

In the same series of lectures in Paris in 1934, Barth also spoke on "The Church." Barth rejected two errors regarding the church. Firstly, the church is not the institutionalisation of divine revelation, as in the thinking of Roman Catholicism. The church is not, and does not possess, a way or an instrument of salvation. The church does not have secret knowledge of how humanity can save itself. The church merely worships the God who saves by God's gracious action in Jesus Christ and who makes God-self known in the mystery of faith. Secondly, the church is not a voluntary association of religious expression, as in the thinking of modern Protestantism. The church is not our human response to God's revelation. The church exists because God addresses humanity, because God reveals God-self, because God makes God-self known. The church exists because of God's decision, speech and action, not because of the decision, speech and action of Christians. Both errors involve a disregard for the action of the living God, as well as over-confidence in the possibilities of humanity. By thinking too much of humanity, these fallacies puff the church up, and by thinking too little of God, these fallacies shrink the church (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 20-22).

Rather surprisingly, Barth asserted that the church should be even more worldly than the world, that the church should be even more humanistic than the humanists, even more profane than the secular world. By this Barth meant that the church should acknowledge that which the world does not want to acknowledge, namely that we are human and that we are not God. The worship of God entails the end of worship of humanity, and therein lies our faith, our knowledge of God, in the acknowledgment that God alone is God, and that we are only human. The worship of God means the end of all idols and ideologies whereby humanity and its ideals are glorified and projected onto God. What distinguishes the church from the world, is not that it is in any way better than the world, but that it acknowledges its humanity, not through its own ideas and expressions, not even through its religious ideas and expressions of faith, but by listening to God, by allowing the Word of God to reveal who God is and who humanity is (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 26-28).

In 1935, the year Barth was fired from his post at the University of Bonn for not swearing the oath of allegiance to Hitler, and had to leave Germany, Barth preached a sermon in Wuppertal on the second commandment in Exodus 20:4-6, which forbids the worship of any

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images of God. This was coincidentally the text of the day, but Barth found it to be very appropriate at that time in the church's history (Barth, 1935: *KB*: 5).

Barth preached that we cannot produce God's revelation with our own hands, nor can we take God's revelation into our hands and make it our own. It would be foolish to do this, for whatever we make with our hands or take into our hands, is tainted by our sin. But God's revelation is a gift of grace which can only be received as such. If we do not accept God's Self-revelation, if we do not obey Jesus Christ as the only gracious revelation of God, we thereby claim the reconciliation in Christ to be incomplete and thus make Jesus into a liar, and thus cast ourselves into eternal condemnation (Barth, 1935: *KB*: 9).

Then Barth added a personal comment to the young students present (in the knowledge that he will not be able to teach them any longer) that they must let go of their own ideas, their own theology, also the theology they learned from Barth himself, in order to be free from all images of God. Theology is always a transgression of the second commandment, since it makes images of God. Good theology, Barth said, is theology that is free from theology, free from any captivity to a fixed system or guiding principle, in order to hear the Word of God alone and to serve and obey Christ alone (Barth, 1935: *KB*: 11).

Theos-logos: whose Word is it?

Just as the church cannot claim to have knowledge of God in its possession, so it is also with theology. Theology is not the study of a lifeless, impersonal *thing* within the world, but of the personal, living God, who as active Subject speaks God's own Word and does God's own work. Therefore theology is not *statements*, even statements of faith(!), *about* God, but a personal *response* to the Word and work of the living, personal, active God. And that is why theology, like faith, is in essence an act of prayer, i.e., a personal response to the Word and work of God, addressed to God (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 163-164).

If theology is *theos-logos*, God-word, then it has to be understood that in truth that word, that *logos*, has to be the Word of God, which can be spoken by God alone. Theology, seen from humanity's side, has to be the attempt to repeat, respond, witness to the Word which can be spoken by God alone, in the expectation and prayer that God will speak God's Word from God's side, thus transforming our human words into God's Word, into true *theos-logos*.

McCormack argues that from 1915 until the end of his life, Barth's theology was *critical*, i.e., it held onto the incomprehensibility of God for humanity, but also *realistic*, in the sense that God is not merely an expression of the believer, but God is real apart from the knowing subject. In this *dialectical* encounter between humanity who cannot know God by its own reason and the real God who makes God-self known to humanity by God's miraculous and gracious Self-revelation, Barth spoke about our knowledge of God (McCormack, 1995: 67-68).

In his lecture on the humanity of God, Barth affirmed that theology in its proper form is prayer and preaching. Since it takes place within the personal encounter between God and humanity, all theology is essentially a dialogue (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 55).

The very personal character of all theology is beautifully expressed by Barth:

"It is *Kerygma*, the herald's call, the message which invites and summons, not to some sort of free-ranging speculation but to special reflection upon faith and obedience, in which man steps out of the mere 'interest' of the spectator over into

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genuine participation and in which he recognises his own God in the deity of Jesus Christ as well as himself in His humanity” (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 55-56).

Barth’s whole theology, one might say, was born from his struggle to preach. After the events of 1914, and during the First World War, Barth found it increasingly difficult to preach. It was not a matter that he had lost his faith in God, but he had lost his faith in our human words about God. During those years Barth’s preaching was plagued with unrest, because he realised that there is no guarantee that our notions of God, our religious feelings, our inner experience of God, our ambitions and desires regarding God, our political and nationalistic ideals of God, has anything to do with who God really is (Green, 1989: 16).

And this disillusionment did not only apply to the theology of modern Protestantism, but to theology as such. In the years of the First World War, Barth seriously questioned whether theology is possible at all. Is it possible to speak about God? The only clue Barth and his friend Eduard Thurneysen had, was that they had to start with the Bible, because there, it seemed to them, they did not find human words about God, but divine words about humanity (Schwöbel, 2000: 19-20). Barth realised that theology is only possible if and when and where God really speaks first. Anything more or less than a response to the real speech of God, cannot be theology (Schwöbel, 2000: 23).

Revelation cannot be produced by delving deep into humanity’s consciousness or ascertaining its highest ideals. In no way is revelation related to human discoveries. Revelation only occurs where God really speaks. Revelation only takes place when God chooses to speak in human form. Thus revelation has the appearance of a human possibility, because of its human form, but it is in fact a divine reality, not a human possibility. God freely chose to speak to humanity in the human form of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was really a human being and a historical reality. But that does not mean that Jesus Christ was a human possibility. And neither does it mean that we can hear the revelation in Jesus Christ through our human possibilities of historical reconstruction. Schwöbel notes that this was Barth’s response to Harnack, who criticised Barth for not acknowledging the historical character of theology. Barth said God can only be known if God freely chooses to reveal God-self by creating faith. Despite the human, historical nature of Jesus Christ, we do not know God’s revelation in Jesus Christ through human, historical research. Because it is the *revelation* of God in Jesus Christ, a divine reality, a human impossibility, it can only be known by faith in Jesus Christ (Schwöbel, 2000: 24).

Freedom to listen

At his seventieth birthday Barth warned his theological students not to become Barthians, but to remain free theologians. Barth did not want his students to repeat his theology, but he wanted them to remain free to listen to the Word of God, to Jesus Christ, and to give a personal response to the Person, Jesus Christ (Busch, 1975: 417).

In an interview in the Netherlands, Barth said that if you are a good pupil of Calvin or Luther, you will also not call yourself a Calvinist or a Lutheran. When asked if his theology was not orientated by Calvin, Barth affirmed that he undoubtedly was a pupil of Calvin. But he added that he was not concerned with what Calvin said, but with what the Word of God says. His theology points to the Word of God, not to Calvin. What the Reformers taught us, and what Barth was also attempting to teach others, was to read the Bible, and through reading the Bible, to be addressed by the Word of God, to be addressed by the living God. We are not in an encounter with Calvin or Luther, but with the living God. Barth said that all these names: “Calvinists,” “Lutherans,” were invented by the Devil. Paul clearly told the Corinthians that there should be none for Paul, none for Apollos, none for Sefas, but only all for Christ, and

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still we are making the same mistake as the Corinthians with these divisions (Barth, 1939: *KB*: 9).

A free theologian, according to Barth, was someone who was willing to always start again at the very beginning, to make the resurrection of Jesus Christ the corner stone of all theological endeavours. This means that in our theology God's action towards humanity must always be the starting point upon which humanity's response to God is based (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 87).

This applies not only to the content of theology, as an abstract "theological principle," but also to the concrete act of doing theology. Just as humanity's response to God is based upon God's prior action, so theology also can be nothing other than a personal response to the Word of God spoken to humanity. Theology must not only speak *about* humanity's response to God's Word, but it must itself *be* a response to God's Word, it must itself be a prayer. Barth said:

"That is why it is imperative to recognise the essence of theology as lying in the liturgical action of adoration, thanksgiving and petition" (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 88).

Even early in his life, Barth realised that the knowledge of God we find in the Bible, is not a knowledge of this or that particularity, an incidental, incremental knowledge, which can be discovered bit by bit by the curious, yet unattached and uninvolved researcher, standing outside the "strange new world of the Bible." Knowledge of God, as revealed in the Bible, as believed by the church, is an all-encompassing, all-embracing knowledge of ultimate reality, of the beginning and the end of all things, it is "the last problem of all knowledge," altering our entire existence. Knowledge of God means to be plunged into the strange new world of the Bible, with no return possible. Knowledge of God means to be confronted by the living God, who addresses us directly in the Word of God, altering our complete reality and existence, and thus necessitating a personal response, a response of faith, a response directed at God directly, personally, i.e., a prayer. Very often, however, our theology seems not to be a response to this personal knowledge of God, but rather a search for God, wherein it is painfully clear that we do not really intend or desire to find God, wherein we pose more and more questions only to avoid the answer already spoken to us in the Word of God, wherein our inability to hear the answer, is in fact our unwillingness to listen to the answer (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 25, 51, 57).

Free theologians, Barth said, are free to start with the Bible, not as a law, not because orthodoxy forced it onto us, but because we are granted the freedom and the privilege to do so. This does not exclude the use of other "godly or worldly" books, nor the newspapers, but assures that we begin with God's free action towards humanity and humanity's free response to that action (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 88).

What we pray, we believe. Barth said that if believers can pray together, they should be able to take communion together. Our prayers are our primary confession of faith. All doctrinal differences outside our prayers are of a secondary nature. It is much more difficult to start a heresy in prayer than otherwise, since in prayer abstract talk "about" God has been abandoned and a personal response to God-self has been undertaken (Barth, 2002: *P*: 4-5).

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A bird in flight

When speaking on the task of theology in America, Barth said that his theology can be compared to taking a picture of a bird in flight. Since the God known in faith is the living, acting God of the on-going covenant history, the God of the on-going redemption history, theology can only follow the movement of this God, like following a bird in flight. Theology can never become like studying a bird in a cage. Theology can never “repeat, re-enact, nor anticipate” God’s being as it is revealed in history. Theology can never separate God’s past, present and future from each other, but must always follow God’s movement through history, holding fast to the dynamic relationship between God’s past, present and future. If theology, and faith for that matter, ceases to be “a living *procession*” of God’s active movement through history, God’s continuing salvation work in history, and becomes static, isolating one moment of revelation, one deed of God in history, from the on-going life of God, it will lose its object, its living subject (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 9-10).

This is an aspect of theological work that makes it such hard work. Because theology works with the knowledge of faith, faith in the personal God that must be known always anew, it cannot comfortably rest and build upon the knowledge of yesterday, but must always begin once again at the beginning (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 165).

Despite half a century of intensive theological labour, despite thousands of pages of theological work (with the *Church Dogmatics* stretching over 9000 pages, not even beginning to count all his other books, lectures, articles, sermons and letters) nobody was further from completing his life’s work than Karl Barth. With the strict conviction and endless passion to always start again from the very beginning, Barth was only getting started when he laid down his pen for the last time (Jüngel, 1986: 17-18).

When nearing the end of his life, Barth looked sad after an afternoon nap, and he confided to Eberhard Busch that he did not want to die. In an effort to comfort Barth, Busch indirectly suggested that the Bible says that Abraham was satisfied with his life. Barth responded furiously, arguing that no life is ever complete, and that it is always stopped too soon in death. When other people looked back onto Abraham’s life, they could see it was fulfilled. We can even look back on the life of Mozart who died very young, and say it was complete. But then it is only because God fills our lives with grace, because God redeems our incomplete lives (Busch, 1986:13).

In *The Epistle to the Romans* Barth described faith as a conversion, but not the conversion of a person who decides to do or say something new, but of a person who is plunged by God into a totally new reality, where everything depends upon God, and where there is no possibility of returning to the world where humanity relied on itself. This faith is stripped of all its human ideas, opinions and convictions regarding God, as well as any human piety upon which it could boast, and forced to live solely by the faithfulness of God (Barth, 1933: *R*: 98).

Even in faith, or rather, in faith especially, God must always be known anew:

“There is no such thing as mature and assured possession of faith: regarded psychologically, it is always a leap into the darkness of the unknown, a flight into empty air. Faith is not revealed to us by *flesh and blood* (Matt. xvi. 17): no one can communicate it to himself or to any one else. What I heard yesterday I must hear again to-day; and if I am to hear it afresh to-morrow, it must be revealed by the Father of Jesus, who is in heaven, and by Him only” (Barth, 1933: *R*: 98).

Veiling and unveiling

God's unveiling in Jesus Christ is a veiling. The faithfulness of God is hidden in Christ as the most profound secret. It cannot be handed down by tradition or be researched by science. It is not to be found by human history or the human mind. It is, in itself, incomprehensible, unknowable. In Jesus, God is made known as the Unknown. God's revelation of God-self in Jesus is a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. Because what is revealed in Jesus Christ, what is unveiled, is not a thing among other things within the world, but God-self. And therefore faith in Jesus is the most "hazardous of all hazards." Faith is *calling upon God* in all God's veiled incomprehensibility (Barth, 1933: R: 98-99).

The humiliation of God that Philippians 2 speaks of, is God's free decision to exchange the unveiled, transparent, immediate self-knowledge within God-self, for the veiled, hidden, mediated Self-revelation of God in human form. God's free decision to reveal God-self, was the free decision to hide God-self in a human being. Thus God was alienated from God-self, in order to reveal God-self to humanity. The unknowable God hid in a knowable form, in order to be known by humanity (Van der Kooi, 2002: 252).

Barth learned from Kierkegaard that a god which is known directly, immediately, is an idol. An unmediated god is always an idol that affirms and gives divine legitimisation to our own human agendas. If the true God revealed God-self, that unveiling had to come in a veiled form, which humanity could not abuse to further its own aims. The revelation of the true God has to depend upon a divine miracle which cannot be produced or manipulated by humanity. This miracle is found in the incarnation. The hidden God was revealed in Jesus Christ. The revealed God hides in Jesus Christ. The God revealed in Jesus Christ does not become our possession, the divine approval for our human ambitions and desires, but remains hidden in Jesus Christ (Gorringe, 1999: 58-59).

Reality precedes possibility

Faith in God, knowledge of God, can never become the property of the believer, but must again and again be received by grace, by the free revelation of God-self, i.e., by the Word of God, i.e., by Jesus Christ. Faith, and even the possibility of having faith, is never an ability or capacity or attribute belonging to the believer. Only within the actuality of faith, only within the event of active faith, is faith the possibility and property for those who believe:

"Faith is not one of the various capacities of man, whether native or acquired. Capacity for the Word of God is not among these. The possibility of faith as it is given to man in the reality of faith can be understood only as one that is loaned to man by God, and loaned exclusively for use. ... In faith, as he really receives God's Word, man becomes apt to receive it" (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 238).

Here Barth was once again taking issue with Emil Brunner and his so-called "point of contact" between God and humanity, stemming from a theological anthropology based on the created "image of God" within humanity, according to Genesis 1:27 (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 238). Barth argued that if one is to speak of any "point of contact" between God and humanity, then that point of contact cannot be a created capacity within humanity which is retained after the fall. The only possibility to speak of a point of contact between God and humanity, is the new creation in Christ, wherein completely fallen humanity is reconciled to God in Christ by grace. This is not an anthropological possibility, but it is only possible in real and actual faith in Christ. Barth explained:

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“Hence this point of contact is not real outside faith; it is real only in faith. In faith man is created by the Word of God for the Word of God, existing in the Word of God and not in himself, not in virtue of his humanity and personality, not even on the basis of creation, for that which by creation was possible for man in relation to God has been lost by the fall” (Barth, 1975: *CD I, 1*: 239).

The difference between a theology of revelation and natural theology, is not that in the former God is only knowable in one event, whereas in the latter God is knowable everywhere. The issue is not the singularity or plurality of revelation. The issue is whether (a) the reality of God precedes and determines the possibility of knowing God, or whether (b) the standards and norms of God’s knowability as prescribed by humanity, precede and determine the content of the knowledge of God. By attempting to establish the conditions under which God can possibly be known *before* God is known, humanity is, perhaps unwittingly, prescribing how the God that they are willing to worship must be and act, and thus fashioning its own idol. The dangerous allure of natural theology, of a doctrine of general revelation, is that we are tempted to kneel before our own creation, instead of the living God. And therein lies the connection between prayer and faith. If we are not allowed to set the standards and criteria of God’s being, will we be willing to bow down before that God (Busch, 2004a: 68-69)?

Barth realised that the epistemology used by theology, determined what kind of God will be found by that theology, and whether God will be found at all. He was convinced that the theology of his time followed an epistemological approach which caused them to arrive at an idol, a no-god, a thing among things within the world, merely the opposite pole of human experiences. The so-called God addressed in these theologies was not the God who is free, wholly other, above and beyond all human realities, even above and beyond the opposite poles of clever dialectical theologies. The so-called God described in these theologies was not the God who can only be known through the miracle of God’s Self-revelation, i.e., the God known in faith (McCormack, 1995: 246-248).

For theology to begin always anew at the beginning, does not mean, for Barth, to begin with the human possibility of knowing God, which is the first dogma of modernity, but to begin with the being of God. The trinitarian being of God, must always be the starting point of theology. And the being of God is to be found in God’s actions. Who God is in God’s actions, God’s actions as Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer, God’s being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, must always be the new beginning of theology (Schwöbel, 2000: 31-32).

In a lecture on the nineteenth century theology, Barth expressed his appreciation for its efforts to engage with the contemporary world, but said that its mistake was to try and make the Christian faith fit into the epistemological framework of modern philosophy. Barth asked two critical questions of this effort: Firstly, were the adherents of the modern worldview at all willing to receive this addition to their worldview from theologians? Secondly, and this is the critical question, is it possible to contemplate the relevance of the Christian faith to modern humanity, while the modern worldview is presupposed and accepted as a fixed, unalterable given? What evidence did theologians have that the modern epistemology will be able to make the Christian faith knowable to humanity (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 17, 21-22)?

Apart from its sincere effort to engage with the world, the other strength of nineteenth century theology, which Barth appreciated, was its recognition of the historical nature of theology. It is indeed this aspect of the Christian faith which distinguishes it from other religions. Knowledge of God, in the Christian faith, is related to history, and especially, to the history of Jesus Christ (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 27). However, if Jesus Christ were merely understood as a person in history, merely as the original event of the Christian faith, rather than the meaning, life, fulfilment, completer of all history, was the very basis of Christianity

not then already forfeited? If Christianity were viewed from the “outside,” as if it were just another religion of the world, as if its history stood next to other histories, was it still possible to give an accurate account of the content of the Christian faith? Barth felt that the content of the Christian faith can only be known and proclaimed from the “inside.” Only as we know ourselves to be part of the history of Jesus Christ, which covers all of time and all of humanity, which cannot be isolated to a certain place and time, can we give an accurate account of the content of the Christian faith. The moment we place ourselves outside this history, if we try to elevate ourselves above the Christian faith and look down on it as a religion among other religions, if we elevate modern humanity above the history of Jesus Christ and look down on it with our own historical critical methods, we will end up speaking about something very different from the Christian faith (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 29-30). As Albert Schweitzer said of the historical Jesus movement, we will look down the well of history and only see a reflection of ourselves.

The particular precedes the general

For Barth, revelation is found in specific historical events, not in general, timeless human principles or characteristics. That is why Barth saw revelation as always inseparably bound to the history of Israel. Natural theology lost its way by its independence from Israel’s history. Rather than looking at the specific revelation of God in Israel’s history, and working out its universal implications, natural theology determined by itself which universal principles or general human attributes are divine, and then looked for particular instances of that within the Bible (Busch, 2004a: 69).

We would be mistaken if we thought that, because Barth said that God must always reveal God-self anew, this means that the historical life of Jesus Christ is not really fundamental for Barth. It would be a misrepresentation of Barth’s theology, if it is presented as if he almost had a mythological understanding of Jesus Christ, which is relived and re-enacted throughout history.

Speaking to students in 1946 in Bonn, of whom a great number were not Christians, Barth explained that the idea of incarnation is not a foreign idea to mythology. The difference, however, regarding Christ’s incarnation, is that it is not an idea, but an event. Myths are based upon eternal ideas, universal principles or timeless realities, such as day and night, winter and spring, death and life. The myths of incarnation only serve as an illustration of these everlasting truths. But Christ’s incarnation is completely different from these, since it does not serve to illustrate any truth, but it is true. Christ’s incarnation does not explain the meaning of historical events, since it is itself the event which gives history its meaning. The gospel is the historical message of the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the ground and ultimate destiny of human history (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 68-69).

Barth’s actualism, means that Barth does not separate God’s being from God’s action. Hunsinger illustrates this in a helpful way. The message of 1 John 4:8 that “God is love” cannot be reversed to mean that love is God. Because what “God is love” means, is that God’s being is loving because God acts in a loving way. As 1 John 4:9 says “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” For Barth, saying “God is love,” without understanding that God’s love is in God’s act of sending Jesus into the world, would be to make an abstraction God’s being, of God’s love. Barth used the word “abstract” when he referred to ideas or philosophies about God, which are not narrowly connected with God’s concrete action in history. In Barth’s theology God’s relationship with humanity is an active event, always occurring, always happening, always being renewed by God’s on-going action of grace (Hunsinger, 1991: 31-32).

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The actualistic nature of Barth's theology, Hunsinger explains, was related to its particularism. For Barth, theology cannot take general philosophical principles as its starting point, and move toward particular applications, but begins rather with God's particular revelation, from where its universal implications must be worked out. For instance: we cannot assume that we know what "love" in general means, and then seek evidence of our prior understanding of love in the Bible. It is only in the particular revelation of God's love as revealed by sending Jesus Christ into the world, that we can know what love is and understand its universal implications. For, contrary to what we might have thought, the Bible reveals in 1 John 4:10 that: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins." Moving from the particular to the general, rather than vice versa, Barth's theology left plenty of room for mystery. Whereas, if we started with our own preconceived conception of "love," we would ignore or smooth away parts of the Bible which speak of love in a manner that we find strange, offensive or impossible, Barth did not shy away from being confronted by such difficulties. When he came up against the limits of comprehension, he would rather leave it there, respecting the mystery of God's revelation, than try to rationalise it or make it more plausible for modern understanding (Hunsinger, 1991: 32-34).

In 1946, in the semi-ruins of Bonn, with the atrocities of the Holocaust still utterly fresh in everybody's minds, Barth said that Christians will lose our way if we do not understand the relation between the church and the synagogue. Once more, Barth quoted one of his beloved quotes, that the best proof for the existence of God, is the existence of the Jews. The very existence of the Jewish nation serves as a witness of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and thus also with the rest of humanity. This is the reason why National Socialism was so demonic, since its anti-Semitism denied that the Jews are indeed the people of God. We, Christians, cannot have faith in Jesus Christ, if we do not believe in Jesus as a *Jew*. Jesus is not incidentally a Jew, but *necessarily* a Jew, since Jesus is the fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 75-76).

The universal truth of the Word of God proceeds from its particularity. Barth's doctrine of the election is both telling and remarkable in this regard. According to Barth, only one human being is elected: Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, God elects God-self to be the God of humanity. In Jesus Christ, God elects humanity to be reconciled with God. God elects this one particular Person, God elects to be known in this one particular Person, and in this Person, God elects to be the God of all people (Webster, 2000a: 89-91).

And also, only one human being is rejected: Jesus Christ (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 167). God elects Christ, in order to reject Christ, so that all of humanity may be elected in Christ. God hides God-self in this one Person, so that all of humanity might be hidden in God.

Action precedes being

Thus Barth not only related revelation with reconciliation, but also with election (Hart, 2000: 42, 47). Whereas revelation was often separated from the history of salvation, Barth made no such separation. Knowledge of God is not something which occurs apart from election, creation, reconciliation and redemption. We cannot know God apart from who God is in God's acts towards humanity. It is not as if there is no problem in the relationship between God and humanity regarding knowledge of God, but only in other areas, such as morality, do we encounter a disconnection between God and humanity. It is not as if knowledge of God is easy, but the service of God is a bit difficult. The gulf between God and humanity is total. It includes our knowledge of God, or lack thereof. Both knowledge of God and service of God

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are impossible, but for God's completely gracious and miraculous works or election, creation, reconciliation and redemption.

Busch says that Barth's theology of revelation does not only claim (1) that the reality of God precedes the possibility of knowing God, (2) that the specific revelation of God precedes the general implications thereof, but also (3) that the knowledge of God's action precedes the knowledge of God's being. God is who God is in the acts of God towards humanity. No other God can be known by humanity, but the God who is revealed in God's acts. God is the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, God is the Father of Jesus, God is a human being from Nazareth, God is the Holy Spirit. When this order is reversed, when humanity abstracts God's being from God's actions, when natural theology first determines how God is in God's being, and from that understanding interprets God's actions, then God can become completely different from the God who is revealed in history. Then humanity can create its own God based upon its own ideals and desires, completely abstracted from God's Self-revealing actions in history. A theology of revelation and natural theology are not different paths to arrive at the same God, but paths that lead to different Gods. In natural theology everyone can know "God," because people can fashion their own image of God, and thus have full access to their own idol. In the theology of revelation no one can know God, God is inaccessible, but everyone is known by God, God has full access to humanity, and through God's specific acts in history of turning towards humanity, God's Self-knowledge is revealed (Busch, 2004a: 68-69).

McCormack notes that this was pivotal in Barth's reinterpretation of the doctrine of election, in which he made a considerable movement away from classical doctrines, and also a deliberate move away from Calvin, whom he followed in many other respects. Calvin's greatest error, according to Barth, was not dividing humanity into two predetermined camps, the elected and the rejected. That was only his most offensive error. Calvin's greatest *theological* error, according to Barth, was to abstract a being of God, a *deus absconditus*, hidden behind the actions of God in Jesus Christ. For Barth, we have no access to such a God. We can only speak of the God we know in Jesus Christ, the *deus revelatus*. And the reason is not that the other God, or part of God, is unknown to humanity, but there is no other God or part of God! God is who God is in God's actions towards humanity in Jesus Christ. God's revelation is always full revelation or no revelation at all. Because God gives God-self to be known in revelation, because God's being is identical to God's actions, any speculation about an abstract God hidden behind the God of revelation is idolatry. That is why Barth placed the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God. As God elects humanity for God-self, God also elects to be the God of humanity. God's action determines God's being. As God elects humanity to be the object of God's mercy, God also elects God-self to be the Subject of mercy. In this way Jesus Christ is both the Object and the Subject of election (McCormack, 2000: 97-99; Barth, 1957: *CD II*,2: 3, 18-20, 79, 103, 161, 182-183).

And yet, this historical event, the advent, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is not merely an event in history, among other events, which we recall as if it is a far off memory. It has rather the power of divine *presence*. It did not merely happen in the past, but it is still happening, and it is what will ultimately happen in the future. When the church recollects this event, it also takes part in this event, and it also expects this event (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 131).

The eternal event

God's election of humanity, indeed *all* God's acts, Barth said, take place in the eternal *perfectum*, i.e., as the completed, but not exhausted work of God. In Barth's theology, God's work of creating, electing, reconciling, calling, justifying, sanctifying and glorifying are all "eternal happening" (Barth, 1957: *CD II*,2: 183-184).

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For Barth, it is not so much that God acts in history, but that history has its origin in the acts of God. Therefore, we cannot understand God's particular acts in history by deriving it from history in general, but we can only understand history in general by deriving it from God's particular acts (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 164).

The revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not limit revelation to one place and time. It is an eternal event stretching across time and history, happening always anew, being brought to its fulfilment at the end of history. Faith in this event, faith in Jesus Christ, is not faith in something that happened long ago in one place, but to participate everyday anew in this eternal event which always happening anew.

In the act of faith and obedience, our being corresponds to God's gracious being. In this way we respond and correspond to the covenant of grace. As God freely chooses to be the God of humanity, we correspond to God's action and being, through faith and obedience, whereby we act as the people we truly are: God's people (McCormack, 2000: 109).

Barth's understanding of faith as an event which is always happening anew, is not only due to his actualistic understanding of God's being as a being-in-action, necessitating faith in God to correspond to God's being-in-action (Nimmo, 2007: 139), but also due to his actualistic understanding of the Word of God.

Is God's Word always spoken anew?

For Barth, the reality of the Word of God is to be found in Jesus Christ, not in the written text of the Bible. Barth affirmed that the Bible is the Word of God, but only because it points to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. Only as we read the Bible in the prayer: "Come Lord Jesus!", only as Jesus answers this prayer and freely and graciously reveals God through the Bible, is the Bible the Word of God. For many scholars this actualistic understanding of the Word of God is problematic.

Runia argues that Barth's Christological concentration of Scripture entails an unbiblical narrowing of revelation in his theology. Runia agrees with Berkouwer's assertion in *General Revelation* (1955) that when the Bible itself speaks about God's revelation, it does not necessarily refer to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible uses words with similar meanings when referring to God's revelation in the Old Testament, and when it refers to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Runia affirms Berkouwer's view that God's "revealing activity" cannot be reduced to God's activity in Jesus Christ, since the Bible itself does not employ such a reduction. Together with Berkouwer, Runia rejects Barth's foundation of the actuality, i.e., the reality of revelation in Jesus Christ alone. This means that, according to Barth, all other forms of revelation, in nature or history, even in the Bible itself, are only real and actual revelation *in so far as* they participate in the real and actual revelation of the incarnation in Jesus Christ, or said differently, only *in so far as* Jesus Christ freely and graciously is present to them and thus makes them part of God's on-going, ever new, Self-revelation. The Bible never speaks in such a way about itself, says Runia. He concedes that there is a difference between God's revelation in the Old Testament and the revelation in Jesus Christ, since the latter is the eschatological fulfilment of the former, but denies that God's revelation in the Old Testament is any less real than God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible itself has an unproblematic view of revelation, says Runia, since it does not superimpose a precondition on God's revelation, claiming that it only becomes real as and when it participates in God's real Self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Runia admits that the Bible is very clear about the fact that all revelation before Jesus Christ pointed forward to Jesus

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Christ and was fulfilled in Jesus Christ, but for Runia this does not mean that it is not real revelation (Runia, 1962: 49-52).

Although a theologian like Runia can agree with Barth about the complete fallibility of humanity, making it impossible for humanity to reveal God, this does not have to mean that the Bible is equally fallible. Arguing that the Bible is inspired by God, that it was indeed written by fallible human beings, but that the Holy Spirit worked in and through them despite their fallibility, means that the Bible cannot be viewed on the same plane as other human activities or products, as a purely fallible document (Runia, 1962: 74). Runia admits that although Barth emphasised the completely human and thus completely fallible nature of the Bible, he simultaneously maintained that the Bible *is* the Word of God. For Barth, however, the Bible is not the Word of God because of the verbal inspiration of the biblical authors, since that would mean the text of the Bible is in some way a higher form of nature, which contains within itself, apart from God's free, gracious and on-going activity, a revelation of God (Runia, 1962: 116).

Runia grants that Barth consistently avoided a "horizontal" dualism, whereby some parts of the Bible are the Word of God and other parts are not, which would mean that the reader of the Bible must discern between the two. Barth always affirmed that the Bible in its totality is the one Word of God, and that we do not get to pick and choose which parts are the Word of God and which parts are not. However, argues Runia, Barth's actualistic understanding of the manner in which the Bible is the Word of God, created a "vertical" dualism. By this Runia means that in Barth's view the Bible in its totality is human, fallible words, but the Bible in its totality becomes the one Word of God as God freely and graciously makes it the Word of God, by the on-going, always anew, Self-revelation of God in the living Word, the resurrected Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Runia, 1962: 123).

Runia finds this problematic, for how can we be sure whether we are hearing the Word of God or not, when reading the Bible? Barth's answer was that there is no assurance in ourselves, but only in the Word of God itself. Only as the Word of God brings us to believe in the Word of God, do we know it as the Word of God, not by the power of our faith, but by the power of God's revelation. Even our faith in the Word is not a human possibility, but only real and actual as God comes to us and makes God-self knowable to faith, in the grace and power of the Word of God. Although Barth maintained that believers are the subjects of faith, that God does not believe on our behalf, he consistently said that faith is not a human ability or capacity to hear the Word of God, but faith is only real and actual in the Word of God, which can only be heard and believed by its own grace and power (Runia, 1962: 124-127; Barth, 1975: *CD I, 1*: 245).

Although Runia agrees fully with Barth that we can only hear the Word of God as God's Word itself miraculously, freely and graciously enables us to hear it in faith, he still finds the continuity of our faith problematic, if it must always be renewed by God's free and gracious Word. Runia correctly asserts that a continuity of faith can be asserted, not on the basis of a natural capacity of humanity, but on the basis of the work and promise of the Holy Spirit. Although Runia sees a lack of continuity in faith as "one of the greatest weaknesses in Barth's early works," due to an overreaction against theologies that sought assurance of faith in humanity itself, the question is whether Barth did not understand the continuity of faith precisely as the miraculous and gracious work of the Holy Spirit, even at an early stage (Runia, 1962: 127-128; Barth, 1993: *HS&CL*: 29-33).

Barth affirmed that the Bible is the Word of God, because it is the primary attestation to God's revelation in Jesus Christ. But as Runia correctly points out, when Barth said this, the word "is" must be understood in an actualistic manner. The Bible *is* the Word of God, according to Barth, because it *becomes* the Word of God as God freely and graciously uses its testimony to reveal God-self always anew. God's revelation is never given into our hands,

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but always remains in God's hands, to be given to us ever afresh by free grace. Although we can never claim to possess and control God's revelation in the Bible, we can always expect to receive God's free and gracious Self-revelation when reading the Bible (Runia, 1962: 128-129).

For Runia, however, the Bible is objectively the Word of God, because the Bible speaks in such a manner about itself. He immediately goes on to qualify this stance, by saying that this does not mean that we can possess and control God's Word, because God's sovereign freedom must be maintained. Interestingly, Runia notes that if we do with the Bible as we please, attempting to possess and control it as if it were our own word, God will abandon the Word, and we will be left with lifeless words. Only if the Bible is read and heard in faith, says Runia, thus never as something we possess and control, but trusting God to speak to us in it, do we read and hear it as God's Word. Thus, although Runia would like to emphasise the identification between the Bible and the Word of God more strongly than Barth, he appreciates the fact that we must hold onto God's sovereign freedom, so that God's Word does not become a possession within our control (Runia, 1962: 204-205).

According to some theologians, like Van Til, who strongly emphasised the given-ness of God's Word in the Bible as such, Barth's actualistic understanding of the Word of God means that faith has no objective foundation, since there is no objective revelation of God to be found in Scripture. For Van Til, Barth's attempt to give faith an objective basis, by understanding faith as participation in the event of revelation, did not succeed in escaping the subjectivism of modern theology, but rather entrenched him in it. Barth's assertion that faith *merely* participates in revelation, is for Van Til too close to a complete identification between faith and revelation, an identification between the human subject and the divine Subject (Van Til, 1962: 129, 135).

Although Runia finds Barth's differentiation between the Bible and the Word of God problematic, he disagrees that this means that Barth falls into the same subjective trap of Schleiermacher, whereby the Bible becomes the Word of God by virtue of the faith of the hearer. Barth did say that the Bible must be read in faith, for faith expects God to speak and receives God's gracious revelation, but for Barth, it is not our faith which makes the Bible the Word of God. God makes the Bible the Word of God through God's Self-revelation, thus creating and sustaining our faith in God's Word (Runia, 1962: 130). Runia rightly asserts that to understand the objectivity that Barth speaks of, one must differentiate between the objectivity of God's grace in Jesus Christ and the objectivity of a written revelation. For Barth, the former is the objective origin and object of faith, while the latter would be a natural revelation of God that could be heard outside of faith, which was unacceptable to Barth (Runia, 1962: 218).

For Barth, the resurrected Christ, the living Word, in whom faith in God's Word is awakened and renewed by the power of the Holy Spirit, is not a subjective reality, but an objective reality.

Metzger argues that in the theology of Neo-orthodoxy, wherein the wholly otherness of God is emphasised, the problem of how knowledge of this strange God is possible, is indeed resolved through the subjective encounter of faith. But Barth bypassed this subjectivity, according to Metzger, by not locating revelation within the event of faith, but faith within the event of revelation, which is an objective reality, confronting the believer from God's side. Furthermore, God's wholly otherness to the world is a qualitative distinction, not a distance between God and the world. God is completely different from humanity, by virtue of God's grace, but not separated from humanity. Barth's radically negative dialectic theology in his commentary on Romans, was eventually broadened by a growing focus on the incarnation, whereby God bridges the gulf between humanity and God from the divine side. Thus Barth could simultaneously maintain the wholly otherness of God to the world, *as well as* the

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oneness of God and the world, in the person of Jesus Christ. And in this way Barth could also, although he rejected all forms of natural theology, develop a theology of nature, whereby the creation also bears witness and points to the objective reality of the Creator's work of creation and recreation (Metzger, 2003: 71-72).

Barth repeatedly emphasised that he does not employ a Christological *principle* or *method* in his theology. With each new question confronting him, Barth tried, sometimes to the frustration of others who had to labour through the thick volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*, to view this question anew, almost as if from the very beginning, in the light of Jesus Christ (Busch, 1975: 380). Barth did not see his theology as employing a fixed dialectical method, but rather as having a fixed object: Jesus Christ. The only "method" that theology could have, according to Barth, was the freedom from all methods, i.e., the openness to receive new truth from this object (Gorringe, 1999: 115, 127).

Thus, for Barth at least, the Word of God is an objective reality, not a subjective reality. But the Word of God is not a fixed object, nor a human object. The Word of God is always given anew, by God. The Word of God does not lie still, waiting to be apprehended by humanity, but it comes to humanity, it addresses and claims humanity, it elects, reconciles and redeems humanity by its own power.

Does God's Word always win?

This is also important in relation to Berkouwer's critique, in his important and influential book *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, that for Barth grace is so victorious that it leaves no room for a decision of faith. Busch argues that Barth took Berkouwer's critique very seriously, and was concerned about the fact that his theology could be misunderstood as to imply that all has been said and done by Christ, making the rest of history meaningless and our faith and obedience redundant. Barth thought that instead of speaking of the "triumph of grace" in his theology, he would prefer to speak of "the freedom of Jesus Christ" in his theology. Barth's actualistic understanding of the way in which God the Creator is reconciling the world in Jesus Christ through the eschatological work of redemption by the power of the Holy Spirit, means the history of Jesus Christ is an on-going event full of very real struggles and battles, but with a victorious ending (Busch, 1975: 381; Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 173-180).

Tom Greggs argues that Barth's response to Berkouwer, as well as his doctrine of election, which brought on the charge of universalism by Berkouwer, makes it clear that Barth did not want to elevate grace as a principle in his theology, but that he also did not want to limit the breadth of Jesus Christ's salvific work. Barth steered clear of the word "universalism," since the word was problematic, and he felt the doctrine of *apokatastasis*, the teaching that every person will be saved, is to overreach into the freedom of God and to speak of things that we do not know. But nevertheless, Barth did indeed understand the reconciliation in Jesus Christ to be universal in scope, as long as one understood that this does not imply a static principle of grace, but rather a dynamic history of salvation by the living, resurrected Person, Jesus Christ, which will be victorious at the very end (Greggs, 2007: 196-212; Gunton, 2000: 154).

The Bible says that the first will be last and the last will be first in the kingdom of God. Do we know who these "last" are? The proclamation of the church must leave room for the freedom of God's grace that can save any sinner. However, Barth could not affirm a doctrine of *apokatastasis panton*, because grace is not something which includes all people automatically, as an inevitability. Such an understanding would not do justice to the freedom of God's grace, to the fact that it is *God's* grace. But who are we, Barth asked, to exclude the

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possibility that God might choose in freedom to save all people? 1 John 2:2 says that Jesus “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Barth said that we would be a very strange church if our greatest fear were that God might be free to save all people and that the hell might not be full, but might perhaps be empty (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 41-42).

In the third part of Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation, in the opening chapter on “Jesus Christ, the True Witness,” the first paragraph addresses “The Glory of the Mediator,” wherein Barth describes Jesus as “The Light of Life,” and also “Jesus is Victor.” Under the title “Jesus is Victor,” Barth once again makes a lengthy comment on Berkouwer’s book *The triumph of Grace in the theology of Karl Barth* (which he had already done in the foreword of the second volume of the doctrine of reconciliation). Barth respected Berkouwer as a theologian and he understood and agreed with Berkouwer’s concern. But Barth argued that, for him, grace is not a Christological principle which governs his theology, but that he is reflecting in his theology upon the victorious, on-going salvific action of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Barth argued that he is attempting to hear and obey Jesus Christ, the living, self-attesting Word of God, and not applying a principle of grace. The victory of Jesus Christ, Barth explained, is not the victory of one concept over another, giving priority to the concept “grace” over other concepts, but it is the victorious history of Jesus Christ which is being taken to its fulfilment (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: xii; Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 173-180).

Barth explained that knowledge of God, knowledge of salvation, is not a neutral, innocent, peaceful endeavour. It is not as if we can have neutral information regarding Jesus Christ, and decide freely whether we want to believe it or not, obey it or not. The on-going battle between good and evil, between grace and sin, between justification and unbelief, between sanctification and disobedience, the salvation history of Jesus Christ, consists also in the battle between revelation and ignorance. Knowledge of God, faith and obedience, is just as much a part of the history of salvation, part of the victory of Jesus Christ in the battle between grace and sin, as the justification and sanctification of humanity is. Knowledge of God forms part of total *metanoia*, conversion, of faith and obedience, which is accomplished by grace in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 183-185). Knowledge of salvation, said Barth, forms part of the victorious history of salvation in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 220).

The ignorance of the church

Barth argued that ignorance of God is not only true of those who do not believe in Jesus Christ, but also of believers. When Paul is discussing *agnosian* in 1 Corinthians 15:34, he is not addressing unbelievers, or the lack of knowledge of believers, but he is addressing the scandal that the congregation in Corinth who has full knowledge of Christ, do not act in accordance with that knowledge. Likewise, said Barth, when Calvin is discussing the parable of the sower, Calvin affirms that *all* received the seed. The mystery and miracle, the inexplicable scandal, is that the seed grew and bore manifold fruit in some instances, while it did not in other instances. The parable gives no explanation why this is so, but merely states it as an awesome and cautionary reality (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 187-191).

The worst kind of resistance to the knowledge of God, according to Barth, is the one who gives in to it, but only in an attempt to avoid it, to render it innocuous. The worst kind of opponent to the Word of God, is the one who does not become radically converted by the knowledge of God, who does not believe and obey it alone, but who instead becomes religious. This is the deceitful falsehood of humanity wherein it becomes religious, but all the offence, all the unrest, all the discomfort and disquiet that the knowledge of God brings, is avoided. The knowledge of God can only bring joy, rest, comfort and peace if it is believed

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and obeyed in all its offence, unrest, discomfort and disquiet. Our supposed knowledge of God, our piety and religion, might be the worst kind of resistance against knowledge of God, if it is a veiled attempt at avoiding being truly confronted, attacked and wounded by the Word of God (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 258-259).

When Barth was addressing the sin of falsehood in the doctrine of reconciliation, he said that this is particularly a *Christian* form of sin (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 374). Despite attacks from Lutheran colleagues, Barth maintained that the sin of falsehood can be seen when we separate faith and obedience, gospel and law, when we do not want the Word of God to confront and address the whole of our lives. In a sense, this could be said of all believers, i.e., we all commit the sin of falsehood by trying to separate our life from our faith. But this sin was not merely committed, but also *theologically justified*, by some interpretations of Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms. Barth felt that Luther himself saw more unity between the gospel and the law than some of his followers did (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 370-371).

As always, Barth saw in deception, in the most subtle and almost unnoticeable alterations of the truth, a greater danger than in clear and direct opposition to the truth. The sin of falsehood, Barth said, is especially at work within Christianity, that can avoid believing and obeying the truth, by being *for* the truth, by writing books and articles *about* the truth, by setting up institutions to *further* the truth, by organising political parties to *defend* the truth, by starting schools and universities in *pursuit* of the truth. All these seemingly noble efforts could be the most skilful trick, like the illusions of a masterful escape artist, to avoid being confronted by the truth ourselves. They could be the most deceitful form of falsehood, whereby the church gives the impression of being the most diligent seeker of the truth, while, in truth, they are all just attempts to control the truth rather than to be controlled by it. Not wanting to be confronted, opposed, attacked and wounded by the truth, deceitful Christianity avoids this confrontation by the most ardent agreement with the truth, by the false claim that it is on the side of the truth, while, in truth, it wants the truth to be on *its* side (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 436).

Christianity would do much better, according to Barth, by acknowledging that the truth always stands over against us, that God's justification and sanctification always stands over against our unbelief and disobedience, that the knowledge of God always stands over against our ignorance of God, and that truth, faith and obedience, knowledge of God, must always be received as God's gracious gift.

Barth went on to say that although the battle between justification and unbelief, between sanctification and disobedience, also contains this battle between the knowledge of God and ignorance of God, they are not equal powers, and the outcome of the battle is not uncertain. We are simultaneously sinners and justified, sinners and sanctified, but these are not realities of equal power and of similar destiny. Our justification will outlast and conquer our unbelief, just as our sanctification will outlast and conquer our disobedience. And similarly, ignorance of God is not an equal power with a similar destiny as the knowledge of God. Knowledge of God will outlast and conquer ignorance of God (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 196).

For Barth, grace can never have the last word. Grace is not triumphant. The last word, the triumphant Name, is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is grace, and Jesus Christ will have the last word to all our words of world history, church history and theology. Jesus Christ does not allow us to have the last word, even if that word is grace, even if that word is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ will speak the last word, not us. We can never have Jesus Christ in our grasp, but we are always confronted by Jesus Christ. And what Barth attempted to do through his theology, was not to work with a method of grace, or to let grace have the last say, but to always emphasise this Name, Jesus Christ, knowing that Jesus Christ will have the last say. Throughout his life, Barth wanted to repeat this message ever anew, that in Jesus Christ there is grace (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 29-30).

A modern universalism?

Willie Jonker is also critical of Barth's actualistic understanding of revelation, which, he says, allowed Barth to employ a modern universalism in his theology. Jonker makes a good argument that Barth reduced the Bible to suit modern humanity, not by reading it through the lens of human experience, like liberal theology, but by reading it through the lens of the Christ-event. And for Barth the Christ-event was not history, but it was *Geschichte*, i.e., an on-going event always happening anew. This allowed Barth, according to Jonker, to avoid or reinterpret the parts of Scripture that did not suit modern humanity. Although Barth famously emphasised the virgin birth and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which was troublesome for his contemporary modern theologians, it is an open question how Barth actually viewed the historicity of these events, says Jonker. By viewing Christ as the Word of God, rather than the Bible, Barth could shy away from the battle of faith versus unbelief, of grace versus judgment, of heaven versus hell, which was so problematic for modern humanity, and reduce the message of the Bible to the triumphant grace of God in Jesus Christ. Jonker argues that Barth's Christocentric reading of Scripture liberated him from the tradition of the Reformation, despite all his affection for it, and allowed him to reread Scripture through a modern paradigm (Jonker, 1988: 36).

It also allowed Barth to alter the understanding of the church and the sacraments, claims Jonker. Whereas the church, for the Reformation, was the body of the eternally saved, engrafted into Christ by the sacraments, for Barth the church was merely the present earthly representation of the whole new humanity, symbolically illustrated by the sacraments, which is reconciled to God in Jesus Christ and which will ultimately be redeemed (Jonker, 1988: 38).

It is obvious to Jonker that Barth had no Biblical support for his universalism, and that it was the clearest example of how he reinterpreted Scripture with his actualistic understanding of revelation to suit his modern paradigm. Rather than concluding his universalism from the Christ-event, Jonker argues that Barth's universal understanding of election was already present in his commentary on Romans, and later he only replaced the organic concepts that he borrowed from Beck with the Christ-event. This modern universalism influenced the whole of Barth's theology, especially regarding the distinction between the church and the world, which became totally blurred. The church became for Barth merely the sign of the universal salvation in Jesus Christ. The church is called to witness to the triumphant grace of God in Christ, but the warning that unbelief will lead to eternal damnation in hell, found in the Bible, did not feature in Barth's modern theology (Jonker, 1988: 39).

Jonker is appreciative of Barth's effort to be relevant to his era, as any theologian should be. Being orthodox, is not equal to being faithful to the gospel. But Jonker has reservations about the way in which Barth went about this effort, and whether he did not in fact distort the message of the gospel in order to suit the modern paradigm better (Jonker, 1988: 39).

The only counter-question to be put to Jonker's critique, is whether Barth truly had no Scriptural basis whatsoever for his universalism, as Jonker claims. Sure enough, in Barth's view God's Yes triumphs over God's No, or rather, God only says No in order to say Yes ultimately. But a case can certainly be made that Barth gave more than ample representation, based on large portions of Scriptural exegesis, of both God's judgment and God's grace, of unbelief and faith, even of heaven and hell. Could Jonker not find any universalist trajectories within Scripture?

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Barth was asked to write a foreword to a book written by his friend, Richard Imberg, and he received the manuscript the day after his friend's death. Barth wrote in his foreword that although the word *Allversöhnung* (the reconciliation of all) seldom is used by Imberg, it jumps off every page, and it is the word by which Imberg will probably be remembered. However, Barth warned, one would be mistaken to think that Imberg reached this position lightly. He walked a long road and only came to this understanding later in his life. Imberg's view of God's free grace, was not at all a position of cheap grace. The way in which Imberg understood *Allversöhnung*, namely that the reconciliation of the whole world has taken place in Jesus Christ, Barth could joyfully and with boldness affirm. For nowhere in Imberg's theology do you find God and the devil, faith and unbelief, obedience and disobedience thrown into one pot and jumbled together. And on what Biblical grounds could one object to this teaching?, Barth asked. Would anyone want to attack his teaching of *Allversöhnung* with a teaching of *partial* reconciliation? Imberg, according to Barth, never spoke of the gift (German word: *Gabe*) of God's grace without relating it to our obligation (German word: *Aufgabe*). The call to faith and obedience could be heard crystal clear in Imberg's theology of the abundant, all-embracing grace of God in Jesus Christ. Imberg was not a proponent of the principle of grace, of triumphant grace, but of the free grace of God, of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Barth said, in such a manner that one could hear his own approval and identification with this position, that Imberg had faith in the *Allversöhnung*, because of Jesus Christ, and not vice versa (Barth, 1959: KB: VII-X).

What about hell?

In 1960 Barth spoke at a conference of students, which was part of a long project "The Life and Mission of the Church," which ended in Strassburg. The lectures of Barth, Leslie Newbigin and D.T. Niles were not very popular among the students, since they focussed too much on the life and the mission of the church, while the students were more interested in the protection of the world they loved and for which they wanted affirmation. They longed, according to Barth, for a "*Bejahung dieser Welt*" – a positive confirmation of this world in its current state. When Barth was asked by these students whether hell should be part of the proclamation of the church, Barth admonished the students for their laughter at the question, and told them it is most definitely not a laughing matter. Barth affirmed the reality of hell. Hell is where we are forever lost and condemned, alienated from our fellow humanity, and torn within ourselves. But Barth asserted that even in that dreaded place, we do not lose the image of God, and we are not separated from God. Hell is to be in opposition to your own Creator and to yourself as God's creation. Hell can never be the content of the church's preaching, since Christ defeated hell. The church's proclamation must therefore always be aimed at faith in Christ's victory over hell. The doctrine of hell can only mean that we believe in God and that we therefore do not fear hell anymore. The church proclaims: Believe in Christ! The hell only exists where there is no faith in Christ. However, Barth warned once more, hell is not benign. It is a serious matter. So serious, that Christ had to be crucified to overcome it. It is not something to laugh at, nor something to fear, and most definitely not a topic for a sermon. Then Barth was asked once again whether he had a doctrine of *apokatastasis*, which teaches that all people will be saved. Barth said that although it would be pleasant to think that all will end well, he will never take this position. However, neither will he take the opposite position, wherein only a few are saved and the rest of humanity is in hell. Barth explained his view as such: the reconciliation and salvation of the whole of humanity is ready in Jesus Christ. All people are invited to believe in Christ. One day all people will appear before Jesus Christ, their Saviour and their Judge, who alone will judge them (Barth, 1995: G :108-114).

The question is whether Barth's assertion, that nobody, not even Hitler or Mussolini, loses their image of God, and that nobody is separated from God, does not make the judgment

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more fierce? If you deny your Creator and yourself as God's creation, could there be any fate worse than the loving, gracious embrace of that very same Creator? Would it not lessen God's judgment, if Hitler and Mussolini were allowed to avoid God's embrace? Of course, that is indeed the other possibility, with some Scriptural evidence, that God could, in God's mercy, weaken the judgment by leaving sinners to themselves, not pulling them into the burning embrace of God's love and forgiveness. It might perhaps be suggested that some creatures will be allowed by God to forsake their God-given image, and thus in some way cease to be God's creatures. God could perhaps allow people to have their own will, and thus cease to be human beings. But that possibility will be a weakening of both judgment and grace. If God does allow for creatures to forsake their God-given image, for human beings to forsake their own humanity, and to exist apart from their Creator, that would mean that God has spared them the awful fate of creatures facing their Creator, of human beings facing their Saviour and Judge, of sinners being forgiven, of unjust people being justified, of unholy people being sanctified, of haters being loved. Punishment is always preferred by sinners above forgiveness and love. Punishment always weakens judgment, since it allows sinners to pay for their transgressions. Punishment means that sinners can escape the dreaded encounter of love and grace. The true radicalism of God's judgment can only come to its right in the light of the true radicalism of God's grace.

Sinful humanity, according to Barth, prefers a wrathful God above a gracious God. In its pride, humanity wants to be punished for its unrighteousness and be saved by its own righteousness. But even in its sinful pride, even as humanity falls to the greatest depths of depravity, as it sinks lower and lower into the darkness of sin, destroying itself, falling into hell, humanity does not fall out of the hand of God. Even when humanity forfeits its own humanity and dignity, its image of God, God does not forfeit God's lordship over humanity, God's election and creation of humanity. Even as humanity rejects the gracious God, desiring a wrathful God, even as humanity in its pride rejects God's help and completes its own total destruction, God does not accept humanity's sin. God rejects humanity's rejection of God. God answers humanity's enmity with love. God answers humanity's pride with grace. God replaces humanity's unrighteousness with the righteousness of Christ, humanity's unfaithfulness with the faithfulness of Christ, humanity's disobedience with the obedience of Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 532, 534, 539).

Although it is debatable whether the Bible's message is as universal as it was portrayed in Barth's theology, Jonker's argument that Barth was a modern theologian, is accurate. Barth's actualistic understanding of the Word of God implies that hearing of the Word of God, believing in the Word of God, existing in and by the Word of God, is an on-going event, always happening anew. Therefore we, as theologians, always listen to the Word from within our contemporary context and experience.

Theology "from above" or "from below"?

Many scholars, especially liberal theologians, accused Barth of doing theology "from above," of merely accepting the orthodox faith as if it has fallen directly out of heaven. They accused Barth of not taking human experience seriously enough, and argued that theology should be done "from below." By this they meant that we must allow our human experiences to test and criticise the orthodox faith, even the Bible.

But for Barth, neither an orthodox theology "from above," nor a liberal theology "from below," was a proper response to the Word of God. Orthodoxy was not really faithful to the Christian faith, if it merely accepted the orthodox faith uncritically, as a fixed truth which can be handed down by tradition, without hearing God's Word always anew. But also, liberal

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theology was not really free, was not critical enough, if it could not allow the Word of God to confront its experience, instead of confronting the Word with its experience.

Barth could not simply do neo-orthodox theology, since theology, for him, meant the freedom to hear Jesus Christ always anew. Barth's theology was not only a forceful attack upon liberal theology, as it is often noted, but also a uncompromising affront to positivist orthodoxy, which is often ignored. It was unacceptable for him to simply accept the theology handed down by previous generations in an uncritical fashion, and he repeatedly warned his students not to repeat his own theology like parrots. Jüngel says that Barth attempted to let the light of the gospel shine anew on the contemporary church and world, regardless of long standing traditions, popular beliefs, common assumptions or esteemed positions (Jüngel, 1986: 19-20).

Although Barth believed that orthodoxy is a lesser evil than liberal theology, Barth was not satisfied with merely repeating the orthodox faith uncritically, but was relentless in his critical rethinking of every theological position of the orthodox faith (Jüngel, 1986: 77).

Gilkey argues that those who have not read Barth, perceive him as the champion of orthodoxy, but when reading Barth, it becomes clear that he time and again turned the orthodox tradition on its head. Barth found silent pleasure in putting orthodox teachings in a completely new and different perspective, and claiming vehemently that all the authoritative sources support his view (Gilkey, 1986: 153).

But to liberal theologians, it seemed as if Barth's theology hovered high above human experiences.

Bultmann accused Barth of not being critical enough in the second edition of his commentary of Romans, since Barth did not criticise Paul. Bultmann made the valuable point that Paul was not only speaking by the Spirit of Christ, but was also influenced by other spirits, the spirit of his time. Barth responded with the hallmark Barth-response, by radicalising Bultmann's own argument. Barth argued that he was much more critical than Bultmann, since in his view, *all* of Paul's words are born from spirits other than the Spirit of Christ. It is not as if there are some Spirit-filled words of Paul and some worldly words of Paul. And even if there were, what on earth would give us, modern humanity, the authority and ability to pick and choose which words are Spirit-filled and which words are spoken by other spirits? Such a view of the Bible, wherein some words are the Word of God, while others are the words of humans, meant an unacceptable dualistic view of the undivided one Word of God. We have to assume that all of Paul's words stand under the judgment of God as words of Paul's own spirit, or the spirits of Paul's world, but that God, by grace, through the Spirit of Christ, chooses to reveal God's Word and work through *all* of Paul's words (Jüngel, 1986: 80-81; Runia, 1962: 118-119).

Katherine Sonderegger points out a similar critique on Barth's theology, coming from feminist theology. Feminist theology, as well as other theologies, have criticised Barth for not fully appreciating that our convictions are fundamentally shaped by our human experiences. Barth might claim to ground his theology on objective knowledge of God, but that knowledge is also shaped by his own experiences. Sonderegger argues, however, that this was precisely Barth's point, that *all* our convictions are shaped by our own experiences and that we *never* escape from the closed circle of our own convictions and experiences. Thus all our experiences and all our convictions shaped by those experiences, are in their totality ignorant of God. It is only as and when God opens the door from God's side, as God freely chooses to reveal God-self, that we have knowledge of God. There is absolutely no way for us to reflect critically upon our convictions and the experiences on which our convictions are based, and to discern with our own minds which of them contain more or less true knowledge of God. What possible criteria could we use to make such distinctions? Naturally,

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while trying to separate the wheat from the chafe in our convictions, searching for true knowledge of God, we will still be enclosed within our own convictions based on our own experiences, making our criticisms self-justifying and thus self-defeating. As long as we begin our search for knowledge of God with human experience, the God we find will always be a reflection of our own faces. Feminist theology succeeds in critically exposing the male domination in our experiences, which shape our convictions in a male dominated fashion. But it should be more critical than that, and expose the ignorance of God in all our convictions, since all our convictions are shaped by our own human experiences, which has no relation to who God is. The odd meeting point between Barth and second generation feminist theologians, according to Sonderegger, is the realisation that human experience is the problem, not the solution (Sonderegger, 2000: 260-263).

Even our suffering, even the injustice we experience, even our poverty, even our victimisation, even our persecution, even our own death at the hands of our killers, cannot tell us who God is. We cannot and should not elevate our pain to be a source of revelation. And we should not wish it to be so, since we cannot be saved by our suffering and pain. There can only be salvation from our pain and suffering if God is wholly outside our human experience and if God's revelation, election, reconciliation and redemption enters our experiences from the outside.

In Berkhof's article in the book *How Karl Barth changed my mind*, with the ironic title, "Beginning with Barth," Berkhof says that he does not let his students begin with Barth, but he only introduces them to Barth's theology in their 4th year. They must first follow the path of experience, in order to discover the significance of Christian convictions. If they start with Christian convictions, without understanding its significance for our experiences in the world, then it remains lifeless orthodoxy. However, although it might seem to students that Barth's theology merely conveys Christian convictions, it is also embedded in experience, in Barth's own cultural-historical context. Because God is the God of the covenant, the God who draws near to humanity, we should expect to encounter God in our experiences. We are bound to encounter God in our search for meaning and purpose, in our struggle for liberation and equality, in our action for peace and justice. But, says Berkhof, if and when we do encounter God in these experiences, we will discover, like Barth did, that it is not our experience that defines God, but it is God that determines, limits and transforms our experience. Theology of experience always arrives too late, and looks too closely. God is already there within our experience, but never equal to it. If we want to determine the experiences in which we are willing to encounter God, we will not encounter God, but only encounter ourselves, perhaps our better selves, but still ourselves. If we try to manipulate the conditions under which God can be met, the God we meet there will inevitably be a projection of our own desires and ideals. We are not the ones who can prescribe the experiences in which God will be encountered, or what God's role in those experiences must be. God alone determines the manner in which God encounters humanity, and in that encounter, all our experiences are brought in a completely new light. We are always encountering God "from below," within our experiences, within our cultural-historical contexts, Barth included. But the point which Barth wanted to make, and which Berkhof agrees with, despite all his criticism against Barth, is that the God whom we encounter in our experiences, is the God "from above," the God who is above and beyond all our experiences (Berkhof, 1986: 26).

Basically the same issue is at stake in Kuitert's critique on Barth's theology as starting "from above" and not reaching humanity's experience below. Kuitert attempted to do theology "from below," from humanity's experience, and to work towards God "above." Berkhof argues, however, that whether "from above" or "from below," theology is always faith seeking understanding. Theology always starts from a presupposition of faith, and is therefore always guilty of *petitio principii*, i.e., of assuming the answer before asking the question. Theology that starts "from below," from human experience, already has a presupposition of faith in mind, and thus its attempt to work towards God "above" is not really honest, since it

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already has the God in mind which it is working towards. If theology starts with human experience, it will necessarily make certain human experiences authoritative, in order to arrive at the understanding of God which is already assumed in faith. Barth understood that we cannot escape our own experiences, that the attempts of our theology to seek understanding, always has faith as a starting point, whether we acknowledge it openly or hide it secretly. We cannot move from our experiences below to God above. In Berkhof's opinion, Barth started with the God of the Bible, and did not fully reach the universal experience of humanity, but Kuitert's attempt to start with the universal experience of humanity and to arrive at the God of the Bible, was not a satisfactory alternative, since it did not really arrive at the God of the Bible. Both movements take place within a faith which is already assumed, and Kuitert's alternative has the danger of ascribing divine authority to certain human experiences (Berkhof, 1989: 208-228).

Instead of elevating some experiences above others, Barth said that all our experiences are ignorant of God, even, or especially, our religious experiences. Barth understood fully that his own speech of God, his own theology, even if it starts seemingly "from above," cannot escape this reality, and also really speaks "from below." Knowing that all theology is in fact a transgression of the second commandment, since it attempts to make an image of God and is thus idolatry, Barth went straight ahead in repentant obedience and spoke of God "from above," fully aware that only God's Self-revelation, which *really* comes from above, can transform our sinful words from below into truth from above.

Jenson makes the rather interesting point, that for Barth, "natural theology" was reflection on God which happens as part of our religious endeavour. Therefore, Jenson argues, all our theology, all our reflection of God, including Barth's, is natural theology. The immediate source we use, whether it be the Bible, Christian or other religious experiences, philosophy or history, does not determine whether it is natural theology or not. One could practice natural theology while quoting the Bible word for word. Barth did not divide theology into two groups, based upon the immediate source they used for their theological reflection, namely revelation or nature. All theological reflection form part of our religious quest, and is thus strictly speaking natural theology. The question is: is it only natural theology, or does it also point to something beyond itself (Jenson, 1969: 79)?

The theologians Barth accused of doing natural theology, were not studying nature, but were studying the Bible. But the question is: does our theological reflection, regardless of whether it uses the Bible or experience as its immediate source, merely stay within the realm of human knowledge, or does the knowledge of God in God's Self-revelation come to speak through it? Of course, this radical criticism remains true for all theologians, Barth included. Theology cannot safeguard itself from this threat by studying only the Bible, or by keeping strictly to the orthodox faith of the church. People studying nature or human experience might be better witnesses to God's Self-revelation, if they allow the *God* of nature, the *God* of humanity, to be revealed through it, while people studying the Bible, might be doing purely natural theology, by only allowing the Bible to speak of *humanity's* faith, obedience and piety.

For Barth, even the Bible does not speak itself "from above," but "from below," within the language and experiences of the Biblical writers. That is why, although Barth was a theologian of the Word, he always made conservative and fundamentalist theologians uncomfortable. Robert McAfee Brown says that he appreciated this approach of Barth to Scripture. For Barth, the Word of God was not identical to the Bible. For Barth, the danger of Docetism did not only threaten our view of Jesus' humanity, but also our view of the humanity of Scripture. The Bible truly is a human document in a specific cultural-historical context. The miracle and the grace of the Word of God, is that God chooses to speak to humanity in this fallible human form. The miracle and the grace of revelation, is the miracle and grace of incarnation, namely that God freely gives God-self to be known in human

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language, experience and history. Barth, according to Brown, was not a theologian of theophany, but of incarnation. God reveals God-self in and through the material, human world, and not supernaturally. But then, if we confess this as Christians, we must remain bound to the specific human, cultural-historical form in which God has freely chosen to reveal God-self. This means we are bound to the Bible, but not because it is the Word of God in and of itself, but because it points to Jesus Christ, who truly is the Word of God (Brown, 1986: 96-97).

But for the very same reason, Barth did not only make conservative and fundamentalist theologians uncomfortable, but he also frustrated liberal theologians and critical-historical readers of the Bible. Because God chooses to reveal God-self in the human, Jesus of Nazareth, who lived in the first century, and because it is to the history of Israel and of Jesus that the Bible gives testimony, we who live in a different time and context, are not in a position to dictate what the Bible is and what it can say and do. If God revealed God-self in that limited and fallible cultural-historical context, we must hear God's revelation in that context. To achieve this, the tools of literary and historical inquiry can help us, but, importantly, they must not help the Bible to enter into our world, but they must help us to enter into the strange new world of the Bible (Bromiley, 1986: 65-66).

Despite all the appearance of certainty and confidence with which Barth did theology, especially later in his life, despite the appearance of doing theology "from above," as if he practised neo-orthodox theology, Barth truly never abandoned his axiom from early in his life: We cannot speak of God. Yet we are obligated to do so. We must accept both our inability and our obligation, and in doing so, give God the glory (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 186).

Humble confidence

Barth agreed with Overbeck, the church historian, atheist and a friend of Nietzsche, that theology must always be a risk (Hauerwas, 2001-2002: 144).

Barth experienced this dilemma even before his disillusionment in 1914, while trying to preach to his congregants in Safenwil. This was not only a personal dilemma for Barth, but it entailed, already then, a deep theological dilemma: Are we as human beings allowed and able to speak about God? While preaching in Safenwil, the answer to this question given to him by his liberal theological training, namely that we can speak about God by speaking about religious humanity, became very problematic for Barth (Willis, 1971: 8).

Martin Marty says that what Barth taught him, although he differed on many points with Barth's theology, was the boldness to accept the obligation and permission to speak "of and about and to God." Barth, says Marty, taught him more of hermeneutics than any scholar in hermeneutics, by moving onto the horizon of the text and looking into the world of the text, and by inviting his listeners and readers to do the same. For Marty, Barth was more of a "diviner" of Scripture, who is personally engaged with its content, than a scientific critic of Scripture, who stands at a safe distance from it (Marty, 1986: 106).

Marty quotes Saul Bellows, who said: "Being a prophet is nice work if you can get it, but sooner or later you have to talk about God." What Barth did, more than any other theologian in the 20th century, writes Marty, is to put this task of theology once again front and centre, i.e., to truly be theo-logy, to accept the impossible task of speaking about God. All the rest that theology can concern it with, is only secondary, and becomes totally trivial and meaningless, if the primary task is not accepted. In Marty's view, when engaged in discussions with atheists, secular pluralists and sceptics of the faith, this is actually expected

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of Christians, and if they fail do this primary task, they are not taken seriously, nor should they be (Marty, 1986: 107).

Perhaps Barth was not really more critical than his contemporaries. Barth often employed the technique of radicalising an opponent's argument, which could be seen as a clever ploy to squirm away from legitimate criticism (Jüngel, 1986: 81-82).

What Barth achieved by radicalising the argument of his critics, and saying that he is even more critical than historical-critical commentaries, or even more liberal than liberal theologians (or even more faithful than orthodox theologians?), was to expose the unnamed assumptions upon which their critiques rested, for example, the assumption that modern reason is beyond criticism and that it has the authority and ability to elevate itself above other worldviews. To be radical – the word “radical” stems from the word *radiks*, meaning “root” – means to get to the root of an issue, the most fundamental assumptions and presuppositions underlying the question at hand. Barth was always radical in the sense that he was very honest and aware of the basic assumptions and presuppositions upon which his theology was based. He was not always as “critical” regarding historical or textual issues in the Bible, or the psychological, sociological, anthropological or philosophical issues facing the contemporary world, but he felt that these criticisms were often a veiled attempt at avoiding the great criticism – the *KRISIS* – the judgment of God, which hangs over *all* our words and actions. Barth could speak more “naïvely,” more “uncritically,” more “unapologetically,” because he was absolutely transparent about the presuppositions on which his theology was built. Historical criticism and liberal theology, to his mind, were not truly honest about its roots. It did not want to admit that the autonomy and self-sufficiency of human reason was its true starting point. Those who accused Barth of not being critical enough, assumed some form of higher ground from where they could criticise the knowledge of God, without putting the ground they were standing on under the same criticism. For Barth, criticism that did not come from the basic assumption that God alone is God, and that all human words and actions fall under the judgment, the *KRISIS*, of God, was not radical enough, since it did not get to the root of the issue at hand.

Bonhoeffer said that Barth was in person even better than he was in his books, since he was open and willing to listen to relevant criticism. According to Bonhoeffer, Barth was not defensive of his theology, but had a passionate intensity with which he focused on the question at hand. With humility and confidence, with conviction and tentativeness, Barth pressed on, past theological positions, confessional affinities, political allegiances or personal agendas, toward the real subject matter at the heart of the discussion (Green, 1989: 12; Busch, 1986: 10).

Barth felt, however, that the church often displayed a false humility. Christians ought to be proud, bold and confident, not on the basis of our own knowledge or actions, but on the basis of the knowledge and action of God, to which we are witnessing (Busch, 1986: 11).

Theology, for Barth, could never be a mere description of the Christian faith, but was always faith seeking understanding. Barth's theology was to a large extent the attempt to rethink the whole doctrine of the Christian faith within his contemporary world. And although Barth felt that theologians of the past should be addressed with proper respect, that we should not think too quickly that we understand them and discard or criticise them too easily, he was not afraid of veering off the path of orthodox theology. His doctrine of election is a supreme example of how he rethought the whole doctrine, and made a clear step away from Calvin's doctrine of election, despite following Calvin in many other respects of his theology.

McCormack is of the opinion that Barth's corrective of the classical doctrines of election, was one the greatest contributions that Barth made to theology (McCormack, 2000: 92).

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Barth's son, Christoph, affirms that the First World War shook his father's confidence in liberal *and conservative* theology. What fascinated Christoph about his father's approach to theology, was that nothing was ever taken for granted. His father always wanted to rethink things, including inherited dogmas, from the very beginning. Reading his newspaper every morning, Barth always returned to the Bible to hear God's Word anew (Barth, C.F., 1986: 6-8). Christoph says:

"Negatively speaking, I mean his critical distance in view of everything that might be taken for granted – be it 'God,' religion, Christianity, inherited dogmas, or even the most cherished findings of his own reflection. Positively, I mean his awareness of the necessity or rather the chance and permission to start once again from the very beginning, as ignorant searchers, every time we venture to speak about God. Theology is a business constantly questioning itself, questioned by its own subject, or it is inevitably 'bad' theology" (Barth, C.F., 1986: 6-7)

In an interview near the end of his life Barth was asked about his relationship with liberal theology. Barth replied, in typical Barth-like fashion, that he might be regarded as more liberal than liberal theologians. Barth also said the word neo-orthodox only made him laugh. When the interviewer asked what "orthodox" means, Barth said it referred to the theology of the 16th and 17th centuries, which he respected, but he was not part of that school of thought. Barth explained that he was *so liberal*, that he could even listen to orthodox theology and find many good things in it, without being part of it. The so-called "liberal" theologians were not free to read orthodox theology. For Barth, to be liberal is an attitude of *responsibility*, of being *open*, and of being *modest*. Modesty is not the same as being sceptical. Scepticism can be very proud. Modesty means knowing that there are limits to your thoughts and words. It does not mean to refrain from thinking or speaking with confidence. It means to cheerfully think and speak, in the knowledge of your limitations. To be liberal means the responsibility, openness and modesty to think and speak always anew, to look at a subject from all sides, backwards and forwards, always afresh. Barth was not only free to listen to the contemporary world, but also free to listen to orthodox theology, to the Reformers, to the early church. Ultimately, being a liberal theologian must mean that we are liberated by God's Word to listen to Jesus Christ and to Jesus Christ alone. Revelation does not stand against being a liberal, since it liberates us. Most importantly, revelation liberates us from ourselves, so that we do not take ourselves too seriously, and also from our ideas and ideologies, the principles and points of view that imprison us. Even liberalism can become one of these ideologies, if it becomes an "ism," and therefore being a liberal means even being free from liberalism (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 33-37).

In Barth's very last, unfinished, essay of his life, he wrote that we should not return to old schools of thought, be it the theology of the 19th century, or the Reformation, but that we should always return to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ should always be our new starting point, enabling us to leave all our old thoughts and points of view behind us. Only if we do this, will we be able to move towards a new future (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 58-59).

Beginning with the Word

John 1:1 says: "In the beginning was the Word..." and this Word is Jesus Christ. We can only move forward in our knowledge of God, if we always begin afresh at this beginning, with the Word made flesh, with Jesus Christ. Only if we are ready and willing to expect and receive this Word, this beginning, anew, can theology remain vital and faithful to its subject matter (Jüngel, 1986: 19).

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And even as the possibility of faith is created in the actuality of faith in Christ, it still remains a possibility only in Christ, only by the Word of God, and never creates a possibility within humanity, not even recreated humanity, that can exist apart from Christ, apart from the Word. Faith is the capacity of the incapable. Barth said:

“To the image of God in man which was lost in Adam but restored in Christ there also belongs the fact that man can hear God’s Word. Only as the Word of God is really spoken in spite of his sin and to his sin, only in the grace with which God replies to sin, can this possibility revive. But in grace it does revive: not, then, as a natural capacity in man – it is grace after all that comes to sinners, to incapable men – but as a capacity of the incapable, as a miracle that cannot be interpreted anthropologically, nevertheless as a real capacity which is already actualised in faith, regarding whose existence there is no further room for discussion, whose existence can only be stated, since in becoming an event it already showed itself to be a possibility even before any question about it could arise” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 241).

Faith is not grounded in the believer, but in God’s Word:

“In believing he can think of himself as grounded, not in self but only in this object, as existing indeed only by this object. He has not created his own faith; the Word has created it. He has not come to faith; faith has come to him through the Word. He has not adopted faith; faith has been granted to him through the Word. As a believer he cannot see himself as the acting subject of the work done here. It is his experience and act (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 244).

And yet it is the believer who believes:

“Man is the subject of faith. Man believes, not God. But the fact that man is this subject in faith is bracketed as a predicate of the subject God, bracketed in the way that the Creator encloses the creature and the merciful God sinful man, i.e., in such a way that man remains subject, and yet man’s I as such derives only from the Thou of the subject God” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 245).

It is in this context, in the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, that Barth made the distinction between the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, and the *analogia fidei*, the analogy of faith, which became so important for him in his theological approach. The former seeks knowledge of God in some fixed connection or correlation between the *being* of God and the *being* of humanity, whereas the latter seeks knowledge of God in the dynamic correspondence between the *action* of God and the *action* of humanity. For Barth, there is not an inherent likeness of God, a remainder of the image of God that abides within the nature of humanity, apart from God, from which humanity can come to know God and do God’s will. It is only as God acts in grace toward humanity and we react in faith toward God, that we have knowledge of God and we do God’s will (Haddorff, 2010: 204).

It is important to understand in which direction the analogy moves. It is not God who can be known in analogy to human existence, but it is humanity which can be known in analogy to God’s existence (Willis, 1971: 72).

Before writing his book on Anselm, Barth shied away from speaking about any analogy between God and humanity, of any correspondence between God and humanity, whereby we are able to know God. But after this book, analogy became part of Barth’s epistemological method, not the analogy of being, not a natural correspondence between God and humanity, but the analogy of faith, the gracious and miraculous correspondence between God and humanity through the work of the Holy Spirit. In faith, in the work of Holy Spirit, there is a correspondence between God and humanity, whereby we know God, but

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this correspondence has no point outside faith, outside the work of the Holy Spirit, in the nature or possibilities of humanity. The Word of God is its own possibility. It is effective by its own power. In faith we know God. Our faith corresponds to the Word of God, but that correspondence is fully due to the effectiveness of the Word of God itself, by the power of the Holy Spirit, which creates faith, informs it and continually renews and sustains it (Rosato, 1981: 41).

The Holy Spirit is the power whereby we are at every moment enabled to believe in the Word of God. The Word of God is not only brought by the Holy Spirit to us, but also revealed in us. It is in the power of the Holy Spirit that we hear God's Word and believe God's Word (Rosato, 1981: 47).

Beginning in faith

Faith, for Barth, is always an actuality within the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. In the power of the Holy Spirit we can and do believe, our faith is real and actual. But as the Holy Spirit continually awakens this faith within us, this faith remains hidden to us. The Holy Spirit always remains the Giver of our faith and we the receivers. Our faith never becomes our possession, capacity or ability. Believers are always a mystery to ourselves. The new beings that we are in Christ, are brought about and continually renewed by the Holy Spirit, who cannot be contained by any human experience or knowledge. Yes, we believe. Yes, we experience the joy and assurance of faith. Yes, we know God in faith. But we do so in and by the Holy Spirit. We do so only in so far as we remain open for the miraculous, mysterious, hidden work of the Holy Spirit in us. Our faith is our own, and yet it is totally hidden from us as a pure miracle which can only be brought about within us by the power of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1993: HS&CL: 29-33).

As a light bulb shines by the power of electricity, so we believe by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the light bulb that shines, but not by its own power. Yes, we are the agents of our faith, but only by the continual miracle of the Holy Spirit. The moment we are cut from the work of the Holy Spirit, our faith is null and void. The second we try to believe by our own power, our faith becomes unbelief.

After discussing the necessary wonder, concern and commitment that a theologian must have toward the object of theological study, Barth asked how it happens that someone is moved in this direction, with such wonder, concern and commitment? What sets the theologian down this path (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 96)? The event which sets the theologian down this path, is the event of faith (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 97).

But this faith must be correctly understood. It is firstly not a human notion. It is not the calculated guess or personal opinion of the theologian who has reached the limit of human knowledge and who wishes to push beyond that limit. Such a suspicion, postulate or calculated probability, cannot be faith, since it cannot generate the wonder, concern and commitment that the object of faith requires (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 97-98).

“Faith in this object, therefore, is not hypothetical and problematic knowledge. It is quite basically a most intensive, strict, and certain knowledge” (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 98).

Barth even added that in light of this very certain knowledge of faith, what we consider the most certain of all human knowledge, is in actuality plagued by problems and uncertainty (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 98).

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Secondly, and very interestingly, although this knowledge of faith is so certain, it cannot be accepted and handed over on its own authority. This blind faith, this *sacrificium intellectus* (sacrifice of the intellect), speaks of disbelief rather than belief, and is not the *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding) that theology is concerned with (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 98). The theologian cannot, metaphorically speaking, take the knowledge of faith as a closed book from another respectable or renowned theologian, or from the tradition of the church, and without opening the book and reading it and applying his mind and life to the knowledge given in the book, hand it over to someone else or to the next generation.

Thirdly, the faith of the theologian cannot be fancied to be the incarnation of something divine within him- or herself. Barth said that such a presumptuous faith might be fitting for a pious Hindu, but not for a Christian theologian:

“Christian faith occurs in the *encounter* of the believer with him in whom he believes. It consists in communion, not in identification, with him” (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 99)

And lastly, very importantly for Barth, and something which he guarded against throughout his theological career, faith can never be allowed to become the object of theological study as such, as it did in modern Protestantism. If faith replaces the object in whom it believes, it is no longer faith. If theology becomes a study of humanity’s faith, instead of a study of the object of human faith, it is no longer theology, but *pisteology* (the study of faith), which is just a subdivision of anthropology (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 99).

So, if faith cannot be understood in any of these four ways, how can it be understood? What does the event of faith entail? Barth explained:

“What happens in the event of faith is that the Word of God frees one man among many for faith itself. ... He is freed to affirm this Word as something not only thoroughly comforting and helpful, but also binding and indisputably valid for the world, the community, and finally for himself. He is freed to put his whole joyful trust in this Word and to become unreservedly obedient to what this announcement of God himself expresses about his love for the world, his people, and also for the theologian. No one can take such action by his own power. A man can do this only when he is overcome by God’s Word and its Spirit of power; when he is resurrected and recreated by it for such an act” (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 100-101).

But still, remarkably, faith remains the free act of the theologian, and not of God. Theologians cannot free ourselves for faith, but we are liberated by the Word of God for the Word of God. It is indeed the *theologian* who believes, who affirms, trusts and obeys the Word of God, and not God or any other person. We believe soberly, willingly and deliberately, and not as one in a semi-conscious trance, as one overcome by some kind of unthinking ecstasy, or as one forced by some sort of psychological slavery (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 101).

This event, the event of faith, being freed by the Word of God for the Word of God, existing in the Word of God, is an event that is never finished, but is always happening anew. Theologians – and all believers are theologians (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 35)! – freely believe, not as the people we “are,” but as the people we are allowed to “become” again and again in the encounter with the Word, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 101).

This event is not just an encounter in the sense of a rather remarkable experience, but something happens, i.e., God is revealed, the believer receives in faith, knowledge of God. In this event, faith is given definite content, thus allowing the quest for understanding. And this is how the theologian is moved down the path of *fides quaerens intellectum*. The person who was blind, is now able to see, and allowed and commanded to look; the person who

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was deaf, is now able to hear, and allowed and commanded to listen, the person who was dumb, is now able to speak, and allowed and commanded to ask. Faith is not a prerequisite for theology in the sense that it is some obligation or requirement that someone must fulfil in order to qualify for the privilege of doing this work. Rather, it is the freedom given by the Word and the Spirit, whereby someone is enabled, in faith, not only to see, to hear and to speak, but also to look, to listen and to ask (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 100-101).

Although, in this event of faith, the believer receives definite content of faith, knowledge of faith can never become a fixed knowledge. The faith of the theologian can never be faith “that...,” but will always be faith “in...” – faith in God! Faith will always remain faith in the God who is revealed by the Word of God, rather than faith about the specific tenets of that revelation (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 103-104).

God is not only the origin, the object and the content of our faith, but also the only guarantee regarding the endurance and genuineness of our faith. Even faith as small as a mustard seed can be sufficient, as long as its strength is sought not in itself, but in the One *in whom* we believe (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 104).

And lastly, Barth concluded this chapter on the faith of the theologian by emphasising that all believers are very much aware that our faith is always lacking. Therefore the excuse of Goethe’s Faust: “I hear the message well enough, but what I lack is faith,” does not hold water. We all lack faith. No one can believe. Those who believe, know even better than those who shy away from faith, that we cannot believe by our own understanding or power (Third Article of Luther’s *Smaller Catechism*, 1531). We who believe, are a wonder to ourselves. We simply believe, fully aware of the unbelief that always accompanies our faith. As the believer in Mark 9, we never say “I believe” without following it up with the prayerful petition: “Lord, help my unbelief.” No believers can seriously believe that we *have* faith as a possession, but we “hope and hope and hope for it as the Israelites hoped afresh every morning for the manna in the wilderness.” And as we receive our faith again and again afresh, we activate it anew, always starting once again from the very beginning (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 104-105).

Hope in doubt

In Barth’s Gifford lectures, he said that if we think we lack faith, we have no faith at all. For faith places its confidence completely in Jesus. The right faith, the faith which justifies, is not a good or noble or strong faith, but faith in Jesus Christ. If we think we lack faith, then have sought our salvation somewhere else, but not in Jesus Christ. Because our salvation and our future is secure in Jesus, we can believe and summon others to faith. We need not fear the weakness of our faith or that of others, but only believe and call others to faith, in the real and certain hope that our salvation is secure in Jesus. False belief is always belief in other hopes next to Jesus, who is our only hope. False faith hopes in itself, in its power of endurance, whereas true faith lives by the hope that its future is guaranteed by Jesus alone, not by its own endurance (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 99-101).

When Barth addressed the different threats to theology in his lectures on evangelical theology in America, he named doubt as one of the great threats to the faith of the theologian. This threat is very real. It is not something to be toyed with. But neither is it something that the theologian must try to avoid. Rather, it is something, like the other threats, solitude and temptation, that the theologian must endure and bear, with hope. The theologian must not think that doubt is something to be proud of, some sophisticated aspect of the sceptical thinker, that can be nurtured and displayed to impress others. Rather, without denying it, the theologian should endure and bear it as a shameful, terrible reality.

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But the theologian must not despair. In the very real battle between faith and unbelief, doubt is the terrible, extremely dangerous no man's land that all believers occupy continually, but which we will never ever call our home (Barth, 1963: *ET*: 131-132).

As believers, we cannot ask ourselves whether or not we truly believe, whether or not our faith is truly faith in God, as if we stand outside faith, or as if we stand in a no man's land between faith and unbelief. We cannot afford these trivial and dangerous self-doubts. It can only lead to unbelief, since it immediately takes a position outside faith. Real and true temptation, does not come from ourselves, from our own little doubts, but comes from outside ourselves, from the judgment of God. The truly serious judgment whether our faith is truly faith in God, does not come from silly self-doubts, but from the judgment seat of God. This question, however, does not come to unbelief, but it comes to faith. Those facing the truly serious judgment regarding the truth of faith, are not unbelievers, but believers, those who are already standing within faith, and not outside it or between faith and unbelief. We, as believers, are to count it all joy when assaulted by this divine temptation, since it affords us the opportunity to start once again at the beginning, of casting our own little faith and doubt aside, and receiving God's gracious Self-revelation ever anew. Only unbelief can afford to play with its own little doubts. Faith cannot entertain these reckless little games, since it is continually confronted by true doubt, by the judgment of God, which leaves it no other option than to receive God's grace always anew (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 247-248).

In a series of lectures given at the University of Bonn in 1947 on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Barth beautifully described how God sustains our faith. While discussing the relationship between the renewal of faith and the Lord's Supper, Barth said that God renews our faith every morning, as God fed the Israelites each day with manna in the wilderness. Barth described the Lord's Supper as the "eventful witness" that gives the following assurance and promise to believer:

"You will be given food and drink. You will survive. You will exist in time for eternal life. Your faith will not cease, but will again and again be renewed. You *may* rejoice in your faith" (Barth, 1964: *HC*: 106).

The victory of faith over doubt, the assurance that the believer will *remain* a believer, the strength that the believer needs to continue "standing, walking, hurrying, pursuing in faith," is given as a free gift of the Holy Spirit to the believer, it is "new hearing of the Word, new faith" given each day to the believer. The Holy Spirit does not only give faith, but gives it again and again, and gives it until the end of time:

"I live my faith, then, not from my own strength but from the strength of the nourishment I receive" (Barth, 1964: *HC*: 106).

In faith, Barth explained, believers are in fellowship with the resurrected Jesus Christ, participating in Jesus' resurrection and already rejoicing everyday anew in our own resurrection. The path of faith is walked in the joy, in the promise and assurance of the coming age, which sustains and renews our faith ever anew (Barth, 1964: *HC*: 105-107).

What drove and sustained Barth through half a century of intensive theological work, was his *expectation* and *longing* for the eschatological action of God. It was his sigh: *Veni Creator Spiritus!* / "Come Creator Spirit!", his prayerful petition for God's Word and work, which made Barth so resolute in his theological work (McCormack, 1995: 31-32).

Obst describes Barth's theology as "pneumatic theology," i.e., as reflection (*Nachdenken*) which occurs in the sphere of power (*Machtbereich*) of the Holy Spirit. By this, she does not mean to say that Barth merely did theology *about* the Holy Spirit, or that the role of the Holy Spirit played a very important part in Barth's dogmatics, but that *all* theology is only theology

in so far as it is done within the movement and power of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit does not accompany and criticise our theology, if theology is not done in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, if it is not the Holy Spirit who is speaking through theology, it is not theology at all. That is why theology can only be done within the prayer: *Veni Creator Spiritus!* / "Come Creator Spirit!" Prayer is the movement towards God which corresponds to God's movement towards us, and therefore praying in hope: "Come Lord!" is the proper response to God who is always coming towards us (Obst, 1998: 11, 33).

All theology is prayer. Faith is not knowledge "about" God, but the personal encounter with God. Faith is not to grasp God, but to be grasped by God. If theology has any truth, it must be based upon the prayer: "Reveal Thyself," since God alone can reveal God-self. All theology must therefore always start at the beginning, not relying on tradition handed over or theological systems already established, but asking God in prayer and faith to graciously reveal God-self once again through the Word and the Spirit (Saliers, 2002: xviii-xix).

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Prayer of acknowledgment, recognition and confession

When Barth described the effect of the reconciliatory work of Jesus Christ in the life of the Christian, he used the headings: "The Holy Spirit and Christian faith" (CD IV, 1), "The Holy Spirit and Christian love" (CD IV, 2) and "The Holy Spirit and Christian hope" (CD IV, 3). In his discussion of Christian faith, Barth described faith as three forms of knowledge (*kennen*), i.e., an acknowledgment (*anerkennen*), a recognition (*erkennen*) and a confession (*bekennen*) of Jesus Christ.

It has seldom, if ever, been noted, and Barth does not explicitly mention it in this instance, that these three actions are not only three forms of knowledge, but also three forms of *prayer*. Acknowledgment is nothing other than to bow before Jesus Christ as Lord, in faith and obedience. But what is this bowing down, this kneeling before the Lord, if it is not *prayer*? And the same is true of recognition. When Mary Magdalene recognizes the resurrected Lord, and she turns toward Jesus and exclaims in recognition: "Rabboeni!" (John 20:16), is this not a *prayer*? If we confess: "Jesus Christ is Lord!," do we do this in self-assurance, relying on our own knowledge, while standing on our own feet, or is this not also in essence a prayer, a prayer which confesses the lordship of Christ, but which also confesses our own sinful ignorance?

The acknowledgment, the recognition and the confession, the *knowledge*, that Barth is speaking of, is not knowledge of dogma or even of Scripture, but it is knowledge of Jesus Christ, it is to acknowledge Jesus' lordship and to bow before Jesus Christ in faith and obedience; it is to recognise who this Lord is in whom we believe, whom we follow and obey with the whole of our lives (thus not a blind consent to power, but faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ, as attested in Scripture and proclaimed by the church in a very definite, concrete, recognisable form); and yet, if faith only takes cognisance of Jesus Christ, acknowledging and recognising Jesus Christ, repeating this knowledge like a parrot, without conviction or urgency, it is not yet Christian faith, since the very goal of faith is to bear witness and confess the lordship of Jesus Christ to the world, to be the salt of the earth, the light to the world (Barth, 1956a: CD IV, 1: 757-779).

This knowledge of faith, is therefore *personal, relational* knowledge, which can only truly be expressed in the language of a personal address, i.e., of *prayer*. It is to acknowledge: "You,

Jesus Christ, are *my Lord!*" It is to recognise: "*You, Jesus Christ, are my Lord!*" And it is to confess: "*You, Jesus Christ, are my Lord, and the Lord of the world!*"

For me, for us, for the world

What I, the believer, acknowledge, recognise and confess, is the fact "[t]hat Jesus Christ is *pro me*, just for me." In this personal, individual acknowledgment, recognition and confession, lies the event of faith, "the newness of being, the new creation, the new birth of the Christian." Of course this is not an abstract event, but an event embedded within the larger reality of Jesus Christ *pro nobis*, for us, the community of faith, and Jesus Christ *propter nos homines*, for the whole of humanity. But it is impossible to speak of the larger reality, of Jesus Christ for the community of faith and for the world, without acknowledging, recognising and confessing Jesus Christ for me. Barth conceded that the *pro me* of faith, emphasised in certain passages by Luther, by the old and the new Pietism, by Kierkegaard, by W. Herrmann, and by the theological existentialism of Barth's day, is a legitimate emphasis (Barth, 1956a: CD IV,1: 755).

Barth said:

"Without the *pro me* of the individual Christian there is no legitimate *pro nobis* of the faith of the Christian community and no legitimate *propter nos homines* of its representative faith for the non-believing world. The being and activity of Jesus Christ has essentially and necessarily the form in which He addresses Himself, not only also, but just to the individual man, to thee and to me, to this man and that man, in which He makes common cause with the individual in his very isolation, in which His Holy Spirit speaks just to his spirit" (Barth, 1956a: CD IV,1: 755).

Barth also conceded that it was an "unfortunate necessity" in his earlier career to criticise the I-hymns stemming from the 16th and 17th century (CD I,2, p. 252 f.) and the I-piety which supported them. This criticism was necessary in view of "the general subjectivist trend of modern Protestantism," but it can only be a relative criticism and not an absolute one, since the I-Psalms in the Bible make it clear that I-hymns and I-piety are part and parcel of the Christian faith. Also, the *Credo* as a baptismal confession of faith, is said in the first person singular, emphasising the faith of the individual believer. It is always important to hold onto the unity of the *pro me*, *pro nobis* and *propter nos homines* of faith. If this unity is lost, then I-piety becomes abstract mythology. But the same is true of communal and universal faith: if it is divorced from the faith of the individual believer, it also becomes the stuff of idle speculation and irrelevant theorising (Barth, 1956a: CD IV,1: 755).

Individual faith can never be ignored, but it only makes sense within the proper context of the covenant history whereby God is saving the world, of Jesus Christ as the fulfilment of that history, of the church as the community of faith who participates in that history, and of the Holy Spirit, who works through the Word and the sacraments.

Near the end of his life, Barth considered the question: What is Jesus Christ for me? This is a question very much like the questions of Pietism and existentialism that Barth rejected early in his career. Barth admitted that it is indeed a serious question. But still, Barth maintained that Jesus Christ can be no more or less for the individual than that which Jesus Christ is for the church and for the world, according to the message of the gospel. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of God's eternal covenant. Jesus Christ is the fellowship between God and humanity. Jesus Christ is the reconciliation of the relationship between God and humanity, which is forever restored in Christ. The individual is also a human being. And thus Jesus Christ is all these things for the individual as well. Jesus Christ is God's grace, God's

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forgiveness, God's justification and sanctification, for the world, for the church, and therefore also for the individual (Barth, 1977: *FT*: 13-14).

The *pro me* of faith can never become a systematic principle, guiding our knowledge of God, as it did in much of the theological existentialism of Barth's day, which he did not seriously regard as *theological* in nature. The essence of the *pro me* of faith, is not the fact that *I believe*, but the fact that Jesus Christ is *for me*. If the I-hymns are correctly understood as hymns *to Christ*, they are a legitimate way to glorify and confess Christ. If the *pro me* of faith is correctly understood in this way, then it always implies the *pro nobis* and the *propter nos homines* of faith, since it is not an acknowledgment, recognition and confession of the fact that I as an individual believe my own individual faith, but it is the acknowledgment, recognition and confession that Jesus Christ is for me, just as Jesus is for you, for the whole community of faith and for the whole world (Barth, 1956a: CD IV,1: 755-756).

The *pro me* of faith cannot mean that the faith of the individual becomes the measure of all things, that God's being and activity is limited to that which is existentially relevant to the individual. Jesus Christ is not merely the counterpoint of the individual's I-faith, being determined by the existential problems of the individual. Who Jesus Christ is, the Word and work of Jesus Christ, are not governed by the needs of the individual. Jesus Christ is not the answer to the questions that I, the believer, ask. Jesus Christ, rather, brings me, the person of faith, into being, and thereby puts my whole previous existence into question. In Christ, in faith, the "I" who believes, is de-mythologised as Paul explained in Galatians 2:20: "...I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Barth, 1956a: CD IV,1: 757).

I, myself, cannot be for me

T.H.L. Parker, a pietistic evangelical Anglican, who contributed to translations of Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, says that he, to his shame, learned from Barth the objectivity of God. Although it might seem very obvious, it is very easy for a pietistic believer to be so concerned with your own faith, with your own, inner spiritual life, that God eventually becomes equated with your own faith, and ceases to be the objective God above and beyond your own faith and spirituality. Parker experienced this new found objectivity of God in Barth's theology, not as a threat, but as a liberation, since the being and activity of God was no longer dependent on his own faith. It liberated him from prayer which turns inward to himself, to prayer that turns outward to God (Parker, 1986: 83).

But as Barth's theology developed, Parker came also to understand that this objective God, the *Gans Andere*, the Wholly Other, was not a God who stands at a distance from humanity or from the individual, but the God who in Jesus Christ is for us and also for me, with us and also with me. The objectivity of God and the nearness of God are not contradictory statements or two poles to be held in a balanced tension, but they are the reality of one and the same God, who is not only God, but also the God of *humanity*, who is not only with humanity, but truly humanity's *God* (Parker, 1986: 84-85).

Hunsinger explains that the objectivism of Barth's theology is directly related to its personalism. God has to be an objective other, if God is to truly encounter us personally, relationally. If God was to be found in some natural capacity of humanity, then inevitably God would not be Another whom we can encounter, with whom we can stand in relationship, but will end up being merely an extension of ourselves. The objectivity of God means that we encounter God, not as a part of ourselves, but as our Lord, and furthermore that our knowledge of God is not determined by our knowledge of ourselves, but that our knowledge of ourselves is determined by our knowledge of God (Hunsinger, 1991: 40-41).

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Speaking on the Church's confession of faith, in the words of the Apostles' Creed, Barth reminded his listeners that the earliest confession of the Church was simply: *Kyrios Jesus Christos*, with no real distinction whether Christ is *my* Lord, or *our* Lord, but simply: Jesus Christ is Lord! Barth said that it was good of Luther to emphasise that the Christian should confess that Jesus Christ is "my Lord," thereby expressing the actuality and urgency of Christian confession. But the individual always confesses his or her faith as part of the community of faith, in Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of the individual, the Lord of the community of faith, as well as the Lord of the entire cosmos (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 88, 92-93)!

Talking to children

When Barth preached or gave lectures, many unbelievers or people from other faiths often came to listen to him. So also when he preached in the post-war ruins of Bonn in the summers of 1946 and 1947. Surprised by the explicit, unapologetic Christian content of his message, Barth was asked whether it did not bother him that many of his listeners were not believers. Barth laughed and replied that it made no difference to his message, the message "to rejoice," because the world was lost, but Christ was born, which is true for all of humanity, believers and unbelievers alike. If believers see it as their job to distinguish between believers and unbelievers, rather than uniting all of humanity under the lordship of Christ, then they are not bearing witness to the good news of the gospel (Busch, 1975: 337-338).

This answer of Barth was not insensitive or frivolous, but related to Barth's understanding of the knowledge of God. No one can know God. Believers know this better than unbelievers, because we know that our knowledge of God is grace, it is not our own knowledge, but God's gracious Self-revelation to us. We know God, only because God knew us first. Believers are in solidarity with unbelievers in two ways. Firstly, we know we are sinners. Secondly, we know that our knowledge of God does not have its beginning in a step that we gave towards God, but in a step that God gave towards us. And God has given that very same step to all of humanity. Therein lies the second solidarity. Therefore, we do not have to make a step towards the unbeliever, since God has already done that. We should not try to create a connection with unbelievers apart from the connection that God has already made with unbelievers and believers alike. By giving witness to God's revelation in the Word of God, we can hope that God's Word will address unbelievers as it does believers, as people known by God, as people who do not stand outside the knowledge of God, but inside the knowledge of God. If we do not address unbelievers in this unapologetic fashion, if we somehow think we are in a different situation than they are, if we do not know our solidarity with them, we will not address them in all seriousness, with all the attention they deserve, but we will underestimate them, speak down to them and withhold knowledge from them (Busch, 2004a: 81). We will speak to them like some adults talk "about" children, as if the children are not present, talking past them, as if these things do not concern them.

Barth was of the opinion that we should not use a different language to speak to people standing "outside" the Christian faith than the language of faith. Indeed, the message of the gospel is strange, but it is just as strange to believers than it is to unbelievers, even more so, because we know its content! And yet, when the Word of God confronts us in its utter strangeness, in its bizarre reality, we are enabled by that very Word to know it. Who can believe that God loves human beings? A child can. The Word of God will not come back empty if we proclaim it in all its absurd strangeness. It is rather in our efforts to make the Word of God more believable, more reasonable, easier to accept, that it has become incomprehensible (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 57).

After giving a lecture on the "The Christian as a Witness" in 1934 to students from all over the world, an Indian replied to Barth's lecture by saying that India has a particular history and

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needs, which makes it impossible for the church to merely say: "It is written." Barth responded by saying that he does not know anything about people's needs in India, but that we cannot address unbelievers as if they stand outside God's grace. There is already a connection between believers and unbelievers in the fact that Jesus Christ died for us both, which makes it possible to witness the good news to them (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 131).

Barth said:

"Is it possible to address a man first as a heathen, or is it not rather indicated to address the man in India also as a man for whom Christ has already done everything? I can only call the heathen into the fellowship of Christ if I believe that he is already in Christ. It is not I that place him under grace. He is there because Christ has already placed him there" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 130).

If we should attempt to address unbelievers from their viewpoint of unbelief, we will deceive them and ourselves, by which no one will be helped. As believers, we do not stoop down when speaking to unbelievers. Rather, God has in grace stooped down to all of humanity in Jesus Christ, to believers and unbelievers alike. As believers, we do not view unbelief as a strange and foreign thing in unbelievers, but as a very familiar and well known reality within ourselves, which we cannot overcome ourselves, but which is overcome by God's gracious Self-revelation. Believers address unbelievers with the utmost humility, since we know unbelief first-hand, but also with the utmost urgency, since we know that unbelief is not something innocent and harmless that can be toyed with. Just as unbelievers cannot decide to discard their unbelief by their own power, believers cannot take the position of unbelief, not even for a moment, not even to show solidarity with the unbeliever. In solidarity with all of humanity, we as believers can only speak from a position of complete and total faith in the God who has stooped down to all of humanity in Jesus Christ, a faith which we did not choose or create, and which we can never abandon or set aside, but which exists and lives by the power of the God to whom we are bound unconditionally. As believers we will give witness to the God in whom we believe and pray that God's Self-witness will be met by a faithful counter-witness in all of humanity, we will do so in the strictest obedience of faith, loving God with our whole being and our neighbour as ourselves, and therefore we will do so as people of faith, and never as people of unbelief (Barth, 1957: *CD II, 1*: 92, 95-97).

Barth explained that we who regard ourselves as Christians, we who confess that Christ is our Lord, we who pray: "Lord, I believe: help Thou mine unbelief!," we will not help unbelievers if we paint for them a picture of the Lord; if we try to explain an idea of Christ. If we do that, we will only be speaking about some idol. Only as we confess: "Jesus Christ is Lord!," only as we pray "Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief!," only as we address God directly, only as we point to God-self, only as we speak in the language of faith and prayer, will we give an accurate and helpful account of real knowledge of God. Any other language will be the construction of an idol (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 93-94).

Christian language has this absolute character. It is not a matter of opinion. It is not a point of view. It is not a conviction. It is not an inspiration. It is always the language of confession, of faith and prayer. It always addresses God directly (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 86-87).

The Church's confession of faith, such as at the Council of Chalcedon, regarding the divine and human nature of Christ, was not an attempt to explain in rational terms its faith. Rather, it was a defence of the mystery of faith, a witness to the Church's confession of faith. It was a rejection of attempts from all different sides to lessen the mystery of faith by some rational reduction of the faith, whether it be the attempt to view Christ as merely human, or be it the attempt to view Christ as merely divine (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 98). Whenever one flees away from the mystery of faith, for instance by rational rejections of the virgin birth, there is a

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theology at work which wants to work against the mystery of faith, against the miracle of grace, against the Self-revelation of God (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 100).

Very much aware of all the difficult issues regarding modern hermeneutics and epistemology, Barth still believed that modern humanity will only be helped if it heard the simple message that God loved them. The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ could be understood by modern human beings, regardless of all its troubles regarding knowledge of God, and this was the one thing that modern humanity truly had to know in order to be helped. Barth felt that the mistake of modern theology was not its attempt to be relevant to modern humanity, but the way in which it went about this attempt. It tried so hard to address modern human beings within the confines of their own structures of knowledge, that it could no longer give them knowledge of God. Modern theology did not allow for the simple knowledge of God, in all its mystery, to transform the structures of modern humanity's knowledge (Jonker, 1988: 34).

If one asks "How is it possible to believe?" and one tries to answer this question for people standing outside the faith, unbelief is presupposed and a way is sought from unbelief to faith. Such a way does not exist. Taking the stance of an unbeliever, the question regarding the possibility of faith, cannot be asked, since it is already assumed that God does not exist and that faith is not real. It is only as one stands within actual faith, within the real encounter with God, that one can give an account of the knowledge of faith, whether it be to believers or unbelievers. Therefore prayer will always be the only true form of apologetics. Therefore evangelism will always happen as an act of worship.

No apology

In Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, his prolegomena, he explained that theology cannot be intentionally apologetic, but only unintentionally. This is so, because if theology intentionally attempts to be apologetic, it takes unbelief too seriously and does not take its own faith seriously enough, and thus it is no longer being done from a position of faith. If unbelief truly seeks faith, then what it will ask of faith is to be faith. It might be faith seeking understanding, but it must truly be faith, unapologetically. Unbelief, if it really seeks faith, will not desire of faith to be unbelief seeking faith, since this is already its own experience (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 30).

Also, if theology is done apologetically, it makes the mistake of confusing the necessary presupposition which allows it do its task, with the task itself. Theology can only be done in faith. But defending its presupposition, i.e., faith, is not its task (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 30).

Furthermore, Barth added, theology cannot be intentional apologetics, for then it will suffer the risk of thinking that it can discard the continuous threat of unbelief, by answering preliminary apologetic questions in the prolegomena to theology. The real battle between faith and unbelief, according to Barth, is not the battle between people of faith and people who do not believe, but the battle within the church itself, between faith in the God who reveals God-self, and heresies of faith in other idols, veiled by theological language of faith. If theology pretends to deal with this battle between faith and unbelief once and for all, and with people outside the church, thus allowing itself to continue happily doing theology within the church, as if it is not threatened with unbelief at every point by the church's own heretic faith, then it will be guilty of a dangerous and evil deception (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 30-34).

Rather interestingly, Barth asserted that Anselm's motivation for writing his proofs for the existence of God, was not polemics or apologetics, but joy! Barth saw in Anselm's proofs the motivation of helping the faithful to rejoice in their faith, by explaining to them the rationality

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of their faith. Thus Anselm was not trying to answer the search for understanding of those who stood in opposition to faith. Anselm was addressing the search for understanding of those who longed to worship God in faith. Without the faith that is willing and longing to rejoice and worship God, without prayer, the search for understanding has been abandoned even before it has begun (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 15-17).

This does not mean to say that Anselm only longed to address believers. Barth suggested that perhaps Anselm did not take the unbelief of unbelievers as seriously as they took it themselves, which probably says more about Barth than it does about Anselm. Anselm provided for Barth the great liberation from the nervousness of apologetic theology. Barth found in Anselm's proofs a new way of doing theology, wherein believers and unbelievers are addressed equally, not upon the common ground of philosophy or universal experience, nor even on the common ground of a faith that might perhaps be latently present in the unbeliever, but upon the common ground of God's grace towards all of humanity in Jesus Christ, regardless of faith and unbelief. Barth wonders whether Anselm was not able to address the unbeliever as a believer, the non-Christian as a Christian, the sinner as one without sin, not due to any quality in the unbeliever, but due to the Word of God which addresses all of humanity equally. Perhaps Anselm could speak to unbelievers as if they already believed, since the gospel is not a gospel of words, but a gospel of power, which establishes faith by its own power, and which has its own inherent rationality on its own terms (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 70-71).

The Person of faith

It is important to remember that the person of faith is in fact none other than Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ humanity's unbelief, its disobedience, its resistance against the grace of God, its rejection of the love of God, is overcome (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 153).

Unbelief is not primarily an issue of ignorance, of a lack of information, or an inability to understand, but of pride, sloth and falsehood, i.e., the sinfulness of humanity, which does not want to accept the grace and love of God, which does not want to submit to the command and judgment of God. Believers truly know that unbelief, i.e., sin, cannot be overcome by our own decision or power, but only by God's grace, by the faith of the one and only true Person of faith, Jesus Christ.

Believers have no ground to stand upon. We do not rely on ourselves and most certainly not on our faith. But just as surely as we cannot rely on our own abilities, capacities or knowledge, we also cannot hold onto our inability, incapacity and ignorance, we cannot hold onto our unbelief. Our whole existence has been displaced from under our feet, all our supposed faith, but also our sinful unbelief. We have truly died with Christ, and now it is no longer we, but Christ who lives within us. We do not live from our own faith or unbelief, but we live in and with Christ, we live from Christ's grace, we participate in Christ's faith (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 159).

Asking for God's presence

Barth learnt from Anselm that the most important condition for theology, is prayer. Without the prayer for God's grace, theology will not be able to exhibit knowledge of God. The prayer in which the task of theology is undertaken, is not merely the prayer that we will seek knowledge of God in the correct manner, but it is the prayer that God-self will be present in our knowledge of God. No theological method can protect us from heresy and idolatry. Only the real presence of God-self can transform our theological heresies and idolatries into true

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and actual knowledge of God. Knowledge of God consists in the real encounter between God and humanity, wherein the primary movement is God's gracious coming to us, and the corresponding, secondary movement, is our prayer for God's presence (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 37-39).

Anselm seriously asked the question whether it is at all permissible to inquire with our reason into God's existence and being. The answer Anselm found, was that we are allowed to seek understanding of God, based on the fact that God has given God-self to be known in faith. It is thus God's preceding gift of grace, the knowledge of God given by God-self, that allows us and enables us to seek understanding of God. That is why theology begins in prayer, for there can be no rational seeking of God, without the prior Self-revelation of God to faith. The God whose existence and being Anselm was seeking to understand rationally, was not a god who is merely present in our consciousness, in our own reasoning, but the God who truly exists and acts outside our consciousness, beyond our reasoning, and for whose presence and revelation we can only ask in prayer (Seils, 1996: 194).

Understanding that all knowledge of God is a gift of grace, Anselm continually prayed for God's grace throughout his proofs of God, prayers like this prayer: "I thank thee ... that what I at first believed because of thy gift, I now know because of thy illumining in such a way that even if I did not want to believe thine Existence, yet I could not but know it" (Barth, 1975: *FQI*: 170).

God is unlike all other objects of knowledge in the fact that God has to give God-self to be known, and thus knowledge of God is grace. To know God, is to know the living Lord. To know the Creator is to know the one who knew and created us even before we knew ourselves. To know the Reconciler is to know the one who closes the gulf between God and humanity, thus making knowledge of God real and possible. To know the Redeemer is to know the one who will fulfil our knowledge of the promise of the future between God and humanity. Thus to know God is to receive a gift of grace, of God giving God-self to be known. And that is why knowledge of faith is knowledge in prayer. We can only ask in prayer that God will graciously grant that our knowledge of faith is true knowledge of God as God has given God-self to be known. We can only ask in prayer that God will graciously grant that our current knowledge of faith will be fulfilled and be made true and real by the Creating, Reconciling and Redeeming action of the living Lord. It is not only so that God's grace is the truth, but it is also so that God's truth can only be known by grace. And grace has to be received as a gift. And to receive a gift, one must ask and give thanks (Barth, 1957: *CD II,1*: 21-23).

The problem with apologetics, is that it severs the existence of God from the meaning of God's existence. It only tries to answer the question "if" God exists, and leaves out the significance of God's existence for the world. When philosophers reflect upon Anselm's proofs of the existence of God, they mostly reflect on Anselm's first proof of the existence of God, and disregards what was truly important for Anselm, namely his proofs regarding the unique nature of God. Apologetics searches for a proof of the existence of God which will leave the one who discovers and understands the proof unaltered. It wants a proof of God, which will not necessitate prayer. It desires proof of a "God" which has no influence upon the world. Apologetics does not want the world as it is known and understood by it, to be disturbed in any way by its discovery. The "God" it longs to prove, must fit neatly into its assumed worldview, next to other things in the world, and must not be the Creator of and Lord over all things, including the apologetic (Barth, 1975: *FQI* : 129-131).

The *pro me* of faith, means that Jesus Christ, the Lord of heaven and earth, the Judge and Saviour of all of humanity, the Head of the community of faith, encounters me, as my Lord, as my Head, as my Judge, as my Saviour. It is the Word of God, which created the world out

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of nothing, which became flesh and came to live among us, addressing me personally, allowing and commanding me to give a personal response in prayer.

And yet, Jesus Christ encounters me personally, as the Head of the body, of which I am a part. Acknowledging what God has done for me, means acknowledging what God has done for all of humanity. Only as I pray for “us” in the Lord’s Prayer, do I pray for myself. Only as I, as part of the community of faith, pray for the world and bear witness to the work of God for the whole world, do I have knowledge of what God has done for me (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 61-62).

In his Gifford lectures on the knowledge and service of God, Barth concluded with a short observation about prayer. The Scottish Confession of 1560 that Barth used as the basic text for his lectures, ends with a prayer, wherein the Reformers ask the Lord to give them strength to speak God’s Word in boldness, and to let the nations cleave to the knowledge of God (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 243-244).

Although the Gifford lectures are given for the development of natural theology, Barth felt the only way he could accept the invitation and contribute to natural theology, was by stating very clearly his opposition to natural theology. After concluding his 20 lectures over the course of two years, wherein he diligently opposed the possibility of natural theology, he concluded with this observation, or rather this question, regarding prayer. The theology Barth had set forth in his lectures – a theology that, like the Scottish Confession of 1560, confesses that all knowledge of God depends on the gracious Self-revelation of God, on the Word and work of God in Jesus Christ, that humanity has no natural capacity or ability to know God, but can only believe and obey God in the freedom granted by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit – this theology necessarily begins and ends in prayer. This theology must always ask in prayer for God’s Self-revelation, it must always ask for faith in God’s Word, it must always ask for the strength to believe and obey the Word of God, it must always ask for the strength to cleave to and serve the knowledge of God. According to this theology, all our faith can be unbelief and all our service can be disobedience, if not enclosed by the prayer wherein we ask God to make our faith true and our service obedient. All our knowledge of God can be false, if not enclosed by the prayer wherein we ask God to make our completely sinful, completely ignorant knowledge, true knowledge of faith, true and right knowledge of God. Natural theology has no such need. That is its advantage over the teaching of the Reformation. But Barth ended his 20 lectures over two years with the open question: “Is this an advantage?” (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 244-245).

The content of our knowledge of God, is personal, relational content. It is knowledge of Jesus Christ, the crucified, resurrected, ascended Lord over heaven and earth and Lord over our lives, who is living and present in this world and in our lives through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is our Lord. There is no knowledge of Jesus apart from this lordship over our lives. Therefore there is no neutral, unaffected, apathetic, exclusively cerebral knowledge of Jesus. To know Jesus is to obey Jesus, our one and only true Lord.

Hunsinger explains that the personalism of Barth’s theology implies that no neutrality is possible in relation to knowledge of God. There is no neutral access to knowledge of faith, since it takes place within the personal encounter with the living God. Knowledge of God is self-involving knowledge. Knowledge of God means primarily communion, fellowship between God who gives God-self to be known in revelation, and those who know God in faith. Only secondarily does this knowledge, this intimate *yada* between God and believer, have rational content. Reflection and understanding always follows the prior faith, the prior communion, the fellowship between God and believer. That is why theology cannot be done in any other way than in the attitude of self-involving, personal prayer (Hunsinger, 1991: 50-51).

Obst argues that prayer is the foundation for all theological work in Barth's view. The fact that God gives us the freedom, the permission, as well as the command, the obligation, to pray, means that we are allowed and commanded not only to hear the Word of God, but also to respond to it. God not only speaks to us, but we are allowed and commanded by God's Word to speak to God in prayer. If it were not for this gracious gift and command, theology would be impossible for Barth, since we cannot speak of God unless such speech is made possible by God's own Word (Obst, 1998: 153).

The true Witness

Speaking to ministers on "The Word of God and the task of the ministry," Barth explained why all theology is in fact doxology:

"As ministers we ought to speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory" (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 186).

Jesus is the true witness in our knowledge of God. The truth of our preaching, confessing and witnessing depends fully upon the witness of Jesus, who is the Truth. Our faith, hope and love in Jesus takes place in the power of the Holy Spirit who miraculously and mysteriously gives us, the Christian community, the gift of knowing Jesus. We know Jesus, but at the same time we know that we cannot know Jesus by the power of our own abilities. We know Jesus as we pray: *Veni Creator Spiritus!*, "Come Creator Spirit!," come and give us the gracious gift of knowing Jesus. Our knowledge of God has no external basis or witness outside the presence and self-witness of Jesus, who by the powerful, miraculous and mysterious working of the Holy Spirit grants us to know what we cannot know of our own accord (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 126).

Even as we pray, we do so because Jesus has already prayed for us and is still praying for us through the Spirit (Romans 8). It is not our prayer which sustains our faith, but Jesus' prayer for us. Just as we have faith because of Jesus' faithfulness, we pray because of Jesus' prayer for us. Our faith is taken up in Jesus' faith, just as our prayer is taken up in Jesus' prayer. Praying in the Name of Jesus does not mean to recite a magical incantation, but to be taken up in Jesus' prayer. Praying in the Name of Jesus, means praying *in Jesus*, praying together with Jesus. As we pray in the Name of Jesus, our prayer becomes part of Jesus' prayer for us, which is the prayer that sustains not only our faith and life, but all of God's people and God's creation (Barth, 1956a: *CD IV,1*: 271).

As prayer, our faith is pure asking, seeking and knocking: "Come Lord Jesus! Come Creator Spirit!" And through this asking, seeking and knocking our faith is obedience to God; it is an *answer*, a proper *response*, to God's justifying and sanctifying Word. This prayer is the genuine act of hope that we must do with childlikeness, without hesitation and with complete confidence in Christ (Barth, 1975: *CD IV,4*: 210).

The reason for asking, seeking and knocking, for true questioning in prayer, is not our ignorance of God, but our knowledge of God. The only real reason to call upon God, is because God has already answered humanity's call (Barth, 1933: *R*: 383). God is not found by those who seek God, but God is sought by those who have been found by God (Barth, 1933: *R*: 408).

Even our faith in the Creator, even our faith that the world was created by God, and even our faith in the existence of the world as such, cannot be preliminary building blocks towards establishing our faith in the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, but follows from our faith in

the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ. Turning natural theology on its head, Barth argued that knowledge of nature cannot lead to knowledge of God, but that only knowledge of God leads to knowledge of nature. Declaring our faith in the Creator, for Barth, already means complete and total faith in the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, from which all statements or convictions of faith follow. It has to be already a response to the Self-declaration made by God in Jesus Christ, if it is to be faith at all. If our faith in the Creator were to be some cautious, preliminary, hesitant, conditional theory or conjecture, it would mean nothing and would give us no comfort or hope at all. The hypothesis that the world could possibly have been created by a Creator, holds no significance for humanity, since it says absolutely nothing about who this possible Creator could be and what this Creator's relationship with the created world could entail. Only as faith responds to the complete Self-revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ, giving Self-witness to the triune God's complete character and the full covenantal and redemptive history between God and the created world, do the statements of faith regarding the Creator, the creation of the world and the existence of the created world as such, become meaningful and significant. The fundamental question is not whether God exists, but whether and to what extent we exist, and in what relationship we exist to the Creator of existence. This question can only be answered by God's complete Self-revelation, and not by natural science or natural theology. If we ask the question of creation as a mere curiosity regarding the origin of things, next to other equally interesting questions, the answer will be meaningless. But if we ask this question as the true pursuit in prayer to hear the divine answer regarding the complete meaning and purpose of our total existence as God's created creatures, the answer we find will form the basis of all other knowledge we pursue (Barth, 1958: *CD III,1*: 3-8).

Furthermore, knowing in faith the Creator as our Father, does not come from anthropomorphic fatherly attributes of the Creator, or from the benevolence and goodness of the Creator, but from the Self-revelation of the Creator as the Father of Jesus Christ; from the Self-revelation of Jesus Christ as the Son of the Father. Believing and praying in and with Jesus Christ, we are invited to address the Creator in the same manner that Jesus Christ addresses the Creator, i.e., as "Father." It is not as we get to know the Creator, that we discover the Creator's fatherliness, but as we know the Father of Jesus Christ, whom we also address in prayer as our Father, that we come to know the Creator in faith (Barth, 1958: *CD III,1*: 39).

Future knowledge

Our whole existence, the new beings that we are in Christ, our knowledge of God in faith, our knowledge of God in prayer, is eschatological in nature. We pray to "Our Father" as the children of God that we are to become. We do not know how we should pray, and therefore we groan in our inability to pray, and within our groans the Spirit of Promise makes our useless prayers true prayers. As we pray: *Veni Creator Spiritus!*, "Come Creator Spirit!", the Spirit recreates our ignorant groans into prayers for the future kingdom of God (Barth, 1993: HS&CL: 68).

God's Self-revelation is always eschatological in nature. The Word of God does not address us from the past but from the future. It comes to us in the form of a future promise. The Holy Spirit awakens faith in the Word of God as the Spirit of Promise. We are confronted in faith by our ultimate reality, our future existence, and that establishes the starting point of our existence in faith, our life of faith, our obedience, in the present (Barth, 1993: HS&CL: 59-61).

Prayer is an eschatological cry that God will be the God who was promised to us by the Word of God and that we trust in faith. It is the hopeful yearning for God's Name to be

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hallowed, God's kingdom to come and God's will to be done, on earth as in heaven. It is the acknowledgment of what is yet to come, the faith in God's future, "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," as Hebrew 11:1 says. In prayer we actualise our eschatological reality, that we trust in faith within the present. In prayer we act as we believe we will become (Saliers, 2002: xvi).

Faith, Barth said, means to await the bodily resurrection. Knowing full well how difficult the topic is for modern Protestant theology, Barth's book *The Resurrection of the Dead*, addressed the bodily resurrection as the fundamental starting point of our faith, without which our faith would be in vain, and Christians would be the most miserable of all people, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15. But Barth made it clear that faith in the bodily resurrection was not only a difficult thing to grasp for modern people. Paul's chapter makes it very clear how difficult this was for the Corinthians. Paul was not trying to make the resurrection easier to believe in by explaining it in reasonable terms for the Corinthians. Barth argued that Paul was not attempting to educate the Corinthians. Faith in the resurrection cannot be achieved by a gradual process of learning and understanding, by growth in knowledge or logical argumentation. The very point is the impossibility of faith in the resurrection. If anybody should be comforted by 1 Corinthians 15, it is unbelievers. We cannot come to faith in the resurrection, since it is the resurrection that brings us to faith. Without the resurrection, there is no faith, because without the resurrection there is no revelation to believe in, without the resurrection there is no Messiah to obey. But we must be clear that the resurrection, and the faith it creates, does not form part of the present world and its possibilities, it does not belong to things we know within the current world. Our faith, our resurrection faith, is faith in what is to come. Christ's resurrection does not awaken a faith that looks to the past, but that looks forward to the future, to our own bodily resurrection, to the recreation of heaven and earth, when God will be all in all. Christ's resurrection is the revelation of the future, it is God's future, God's reality, the recreation of the world, which has been revealed in our present world. The faith awakened by Christ's resurrection, is the faith that prays in expectant hope: "Come, Lord Jesus!" Knowledge of God is future knowledge, and therefore it is the knowledge of faith, the knowledge of hope, the knowledge of prayer (Barth, 1933: *RotD*: 156-180).

In faith we pray: "Lord, you have conquered death. You have gone down to the depths of Sheol and risen again to life. Help us to remember as we suffer with you that we will also rise with you to a life that never ends. Amen" (Claiborne & Wilson-Hartgrove & Okoro, 2010: 100).

Speaking to a group of pastors in 1922 on the topic: "The need for Christian preaching," Barth said that people ultimately come to church to hear the answer to one question: Is it true? Every Sunday morning (the day of Christ's resurrection), every Sunday service, is eschatological in nature, as it looks forward to the end of world history and the beginning of God's salvation history. It celebrates humanity's last day and God's first day. People do not, whether they always realise it or not, come to church to hear about penultimate things, but about the ultimate thing, not about this longing or that ideal, but about their final hope. Even if people only come to church to be baptised, confirmed, married and buried, it still shows that they expect of the church to address their most fundamental question in life and death, which is remarkable enough. But Barth wondered whether the church has not, in the sincere effort to address people's secondary needs and ambitions, become trapped in secondary issues and thus forfeited the answer to the real question they have when they come to church (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 110-111)?

Even if people do not come to church with this question, Barth continued, surely the moment the Bible is opened, it takes us there, skipping past all penultimate issues in life, destroying all humanity's relative certainties and assurances, and placing humanity before God. Suddenly all our questions are exposed and it becomes painfully clear to what extent they

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are real questions, a true seeking after God, and to what extent they are thinly disguised evasions of true asking, seeking and knocking. It unveils whether we are truly asking after *God*, seeking *God*, knocking on the door of the kingdom of *God*, whether we truly desire to be answered by *God*, to be found by *God*, to enter the kingdom of *God*. Being confronted with the answer, having been found by God, the door being opened from the other side, the true earnestness of our asking, seeking and knocking are brought to the light. Here we have no ground to stand on, here the answer that God speaks to us, radicalises all our preliminary questions to the one fundamental question: Will we believe it? Whereupon the only possible answer is the prayer: "Lord, I believe, help Thou my unbelief" (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 116-120).

Barth closed his lecture to pastors in 1922, on the topic: "The need for Christian preaching," by referring to the eighth chapter of Romans. There we read that there is more hope in the sighing: *Veni Creator Spiritus!*, "Come Creator Spirit!," than in joyfully exalting as if the Spirit is our possession. Barth said that a person who has heard this sigh, who knows this eschatological prayer, has been introduced to his theology (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 134).

4. Obedience and prayer

It would be foolish to think that Christians should pray less and act more. Despite all their hard work and devotion, Barth maintained that the Reformation was not brought about by the acts of the Reformers, but by their confidence in prayer, by asking God to turn their flawed action into Godly service. We should indeed act and work in obedience, but it is only in prayer that we can ask God to incorporate our action in God's action, and that we can become fellow-workers with God (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 22-23).

4.1 Freedom to obey

The disobedient theologian

It would be difficult to grasp the unity of obedience and prayer in the theology of Karl Barth, if it is not understood that, for Barth, obedience means freedom, and freedom means obedience. It comes as a surprise that Karl Barth – the extremely rebellious voice within the German church and German academic world, the disobedient theologian, who was banned from Germany in 1935 for disobeying the order to pledge allegiance to Hitler at the beginning of his lectures at the University of Bonn – emphasised *obedience* so often in his theology. Surely Barth, if anyone, must have seen and understood the danger of blind obedience, and therefore it would perhaps have made more sense for Barth to emphasise “decision,” “character,” “responsibility” or perhaps even “individuality.”

The relationship between obedience and freedom must be understood, in order to understand Barth's emphasis on obedience. Barth realised that we are always obeying some master. And we cannot serve two masters, but only one, as Matthew 6:24 says – a text on which he preached on Sunday, 29 September 1935, in Basel, after being banned from Germany (Barth, 1935: *KB*: 331-338).

Obedience to other masters, other than the one true Lord over heaven and earth, brings slavery, since they are false lords, usurpers of God's throne, whereas obedience to Jesus Christ, the one true Lord over heaven and earth, who has come to give us life and life in abundance (John 10:10), brings true freedom.

In his lecture on “The Gift of Freedom. Foundation of Evangelical Ethics,” Barth said:

“Human freedom is the God-given freedom to obey. *Faith* is the obedience of the *pilgrim* who has his vision and his trust set upon God's free act of reconciliation” (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 79).

Freedom from versus freedom for

Whereas modern humanity attempted to be liberated from God in order to be free for itself, Barth understood true freedom as liberation from ourselves, by which we are made free for God (Steenberg, 1983: 92).

Green explains that Barth rejected the modern notion of freedom, established by the likes of John Locke, John Stuart Mill and Adam Smith, as the *laissez-faire* freedom to choose, and rediscovered the classic notions of freedom, as exhibited by Augustine and other classical theologians, as freedom with specific content. The Bible's understanding of freedom, the

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way the church has understood freedom through many, many centuries preceding the Enlightenment, is not the liberation from obligation, but the liberation for doing the good. True freedom is not to be liberated from God and God's command, but to freely live for God. True freedom is not freedom from your neighbour, but freedom for your neighbour, not to be loosened from other human beings, but to be bound to them. It is not the freedom to follow your own will, but the liberation from the captivity of your sinful, selfish will, in order to have the freedom to do God's will. True freedom is not the freedom to escape all limitations, but the freedom to fulfil your life's calling within the limitations of your finite God-given life (Green, 1989:12; Barth, 1961: *CD III,4*: 46).

By this understanding of freedom, says Migliore, Barth was attempting to steer clear of two opposing views: 1) the human being as an absolutely autonomous moral agent, as understood by Enlightenment thought, and 2) the human being under submission to absolute divine authority. Freedom for Barth, is not freedom from all constraints, the freedom to do as you will. This kind of "freedom" is not freedom at all, but is the dilemma of "Hercules at the crossroads," it is the enslavement of humanity to its own arbitrary will, a humanity that is unable to live freely, because it is overwhelmed by all the possible paths stretching out in front of it. True freedom is freedom for God and others. It is the freedom that corresponds to the freedom of God for humanity. God is freely the God for humanity, God is freely the God of the covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ, and thus true human freedom, is to respond to the freedom of God and to freely be a human being for God and for others, to freely be who you are in Jesus Christ. God is free to love, and thus true human freedom is correspondingly also, not the freedom to do what you want, but the freedom to love (Migliore, 2010: 13; Barth, 1960: *HG*: 69, 73; Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 56).

Nimmo explains that, in Barth's view, when Christians are obedient, our actions conform to our being. That is why Christian obedience implies true freedom, since we act as the human beings that we are, i.e., human beings created, reconciled, and redeemed by God. In this way our self-determination corresponds to our divine determination, we act as we truly are, and therefore we act in freedom. Just as God's true freedom is not the freedom to act arbitrarily according to a multitude of different possibilities, but to act in correspondence with God's being, i.e., to act as the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer of humanity, so also true human freedom is not to act in any which way that we please, but to act in correspondence with our being, i.e., to act as the created, reconciled and redeemed human beings that we are by the grace of God. Thus our action, obedience to the law, gives concrete expression to our being, people who are defined by the gospel of grace (Nimmo, 2010: 238).

Simultaneously

However, it is not as if the one follows on the other. Barth works with an actualistic ontology, wherein God's being is in fact a being in action. God's being is not something apart from God's action. God is who God is in the action of creation, reconciliation and redemption of humanity, in the covenant history between God and humanity. Correspondingly, true humanity, true freedom, is humanity's being in action in correspondence to the being in action of God. We are not human beings apart from our action. We are human beings in the act of responding to the Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer. We are human beings in the act of living and working as God's covenant-partners. God's being in action has two sides. On the one hand, God elected God-self, in Jesus Christ, to be a God for humanity. This is the grace by which God acts as humanity's Lord and Helper. On the other hand, God elected humanity, in Jesus Christ, to be a people for God. This is the command that humanity should act as a witness to God's glory (Nimmo, 2007: 1, 10-11; Willis, 1971: 435).

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In grace, God is everything. Yet, to say that God is everything, does not mean that humanity is nothing. Humanity is indeed a prey to nothingness, but the whole aim of grace is that humanity is no longer nothing. Grounded upon God's gracious reconciliation, humanity is established as a subject. Corresponding to God's free action of grace, humanity may take up its freedom in obedience (Bromiley, 1979: 178).

In the second part of the doctrine of reconciliation, when Barth is discussing the exaltation of humanity, the sanctification of humanity, the edification of the community of faith, and Christian love, he is not discussing this event as if he is addressing what we should now do in the present, in response to what Jesus Christ has done for us in the past. What Barth is discussing, rather, is what Jesus Christ is doing in the present, how Jesus Christ is exalting humanity, sanctifying humanity, building up the community of faith through the Holy Spirit, and establishing Christian love in us. The reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, has happened, is happening and will happen. Jesus Christ was and is and is to come (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 107).

Traditional Christology also said Jesus was, is and is to come, but according to Barth, they saw the Jesus of the past, present and future as radically different from each other (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 110). For Barth, the action, work and being of Jesus Christ in the past – as the Son of God and the Son of Man, as divine and human, as humiliated and exalted God, as the one who justifies and sanctifies humanity, as the faithful covenant partner of God and obedient servant of God – is the very same action, work and being of Jesus Christ in the present (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 112). The freedom to obey, is the freedom to act in correspondence with what Jesus Christ did, is doing and shall do.

The politics of God

This understanding lay at the bottom of Barth's politics. For him, correct human action corresponds to the action of God. Politics is the predicate of our theology. Theology is not the predicate of politics. Wrong political choices did not indicate, for Barth, the wrong application of good theology, but was the logical result of bad theology. Therefore, whenever Barth did not agree with certain political choices, he looked critically at the theology underlying those political choices (Jüngel, 1986: 104).

Luther's attempt to separate theology from politics with his two kingdoms doctrine, was one of the greatest dangers in the Lutheran church, which Barth criticised severely. For Barth the one Word of God, the one revelation of God, was severed into two opposing realities with Luther's separation of gospel and law. Barth found this separation theologically incorrect and politically hazardous (Jüngel, 1986: 110).

The Word of God cannot be divided into two, and accordingly, the Word of God does not speak differently to the church and to the world. God's one Word, the one revelation of God, the gospel of grace which forgives, but also claims, is addressed to all of humanity. God does not say one thing to the church and another thing to the world. God does not give the gospel to the church and the law to the world. God's justification as well as God's sanctification applies to the whole world, because it is based upon God's election of the whole of humanity. God has only one Word, Jesus Christ, and this Word is addressed to all of humanity, independent of humanity's differing attitudes to this Word. Whether inside or outside the church, whether heard by believers or unbelievers, God's Word stays the same: it is the election of humanity, it is justification and sanctification, it is the gospel of grace which forgives and claims all of humanity, it is Jesus Christ (Jüngel, 1986: 119-120).

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Lovin shows that Barth's understanding of the church was not that it should be a political movement or the initiator of social reform, but that the church should worship and obey its Lord in freedom. However, the freedom of the church to worship and obey its only Lord, is not practiced only in private, for its own sake, but also practiced in public, for the sake of the world. In its freedom to live under its Lord, the church does not only proclaim and witness to ultimate salvation for all under the future lordship of God, but the church must also work and fight in pursuit of freedom for all under the present lordship of God (Lovin, 1984: 122).

The great danger would be if the church, in its noble pursuit of freely living under the authority of God's Word alone, became so concerned with its own life and freedom, that it forgot that God's Word also has authority over other spheres of life outside the church. Lovin feels that Barth was to a great extent spared to be confronted with this difficult problem, when he had to leave Germany in 1935. It was in the time that followed that the most difficult problem occurred, namely, what if the church fails? What if the church practices its freedom under the Word, but remains isolated to its ecclesial sphere, no longer taking up space in the world, and thus no longer giving witness to the claim that the Word of God makes, not only over the church, but also over the rest of humanity, the rest of life, the rest of the world? Lovin asserts that it was a new generation, led by Bonhoeffer's theology, who was confronted with this problem, more than Barth (Lovin, 1984: 123).

It can be noted, however, and will be discussed as we progress, that not only in the years after Barmen, but also before and *during* that time, Barth was accused of focussing too narrowly on ecclesial affairs, for instance, at a student conference at La Châtaigneraie in August of 1934 (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 132).

However, as will be argued further, it is precisely Barth's concern that the church should live in the freedom of worshipping and obeying its only Lord, that the possibility of an a-political church, a dualistic church, which worships God in the church, but obeys other powers in the rest of the world, becomes an impossibility. The danger that the church might not take up space within the world, that it might not give witness to God's authority over all areas of life, is a real danger. It was a danger that Barth saw and fought against from 1914 until the end of his life. The proper way to fight against this danger, according to Barth, was not in putting other important problems next to the church's one calling of worshipping and obeying its Lord, but rather to understand the all-embracing nature of this calling, to emphasise the universal implications of it for all people, to underline the fact that if the church truly worships and obeys Jesus Christ as the Lord over the whole earth, then all our actions in all areas of life must be determined by our Lord.

Busch points out that it was Barth's understanding of the first commandment and Matthew 6:24 ("You cannot serve God and mammon") that made him clash head on with the Lutheran two-kingdoms doctrine of the German church and, especially, with the centrist faction of the church. For Barth, this part of the church, although it opposed the German Christians, would not be a free church, if it only obeyed the Word of God with regard to spiritual matters, but left justice uncritically in the hands of the Nazi state and remained silent about the state's handling of political issues, especially its handling of the Jewish question. Busch notes that the radical implications of these statements of Barth were clearly understood at the time and, very interestingly, remarks that it was not merely Barth's refusal to swear allegiance to Hitler at the beginning of his lectures, but also these remarks regarding the state's handling of the Jewish question, that led to his dismissal at Bonn University, the rift between Barth and the German church, and ultimately his banning from Germany (Busch, 2004b: 57-58).

For Barth, the text of Matthew 6:24, which says "You cannot serve God *and* mammon," was an even harsher critique on the centrist faction of the church than on the German Christians. While they differentiated themselves from the German Christians and resisted the interference of the state into the church's affairs, they left the political realm in the hands of

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the *Führer* and the *Volk*. They found it possible to simultaneously reject the ousting of Jewish Christian pastors and accept the state's anti-Jewish laws. Only if the church heard the *one* Word of God, if it obeyed the *one* Lord over all, in *all* aspects of life, in the ecclesial *as well as* the political sphere, could it be a free church (Busch, 2004a: 33).

Barth believed that it was to a large extent Luther's doctrine of two kingdoms that allowed the church to live with such a split personality and to ignore the political implications of their faith (Busch, 2004b: 55-57).

Only one Master?

In the third part of his doctrine of reconciliation, when Barth discussed Jesus Christ as the True Witness, he used the first line of the Barmen declaration of 1934 verbatim as the thesis at the head of the Christological section:

"Jesus Christ as attested to us in Holy Scripture is the one Word of God whom we must hear and whom we must trust and obey in life and in death" (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 3).

Barth was fully aware how offensive and troublesome it is to say that Jesus Christ is the one and only True Witness, the Light of Life, who must be believed and obeyed completely and utterly with the whole of our lives, closing our ears to all other voices, and even worse, that this is not only true for the community of faith, but that Jesus Christ is the one and only True Witness, the Light of Life, that must be believed and obeyed by *all of humanity!* He said:

"What inexcusable presumption it is to say that we can and must regard and proclaim Jesus Christ not merely as one among many witnesses for the truth (which is quite legitimate), nor even as one who occupies a privileged or even leading place among these witnesses (which might be allowed), nor even as one who is normative for us personally (which is still tolerable), but as the one and only Witness confronting all men with an absolute claim to allegiance!" (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 89).

It is not only offensive to unbelievers, but it is just as offensive for believers (or perhaps we feel even greater offense?), to confess that Jesus Christ is the only Light of Life and that Jesus Christ alone can give Self-witness to the reconciliation between God and humanity. Barth fully acknowledged this offense:

"We may begin by saying that, not only for those who are without but initially and constantly for those who have already come to faith in Jesus Christ, it is a hard and offensive saying which provokes doubt and invites contradiction. It is like a hurdle which has to be jumped, and jumped again and again. There are horses which constantly shy at this hurdle and think they should refuse it. Why should we follow only one Prophet? Why should we not give at least a little honour to our own prophecy alongside and in opposition to His?" (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 87).

Barth conceded that such complete obedience to Jesus Christ, is an argument that is 1) intellectually and aesthetically obscurantist, 2) morally, it is arrogant and makes discussion impossible, 3) politically, it is unconcealed intolerance and disruptive of co-existence of diverse peoples, and therefore it might lead to the repression and persecution of those who think or believe differently, causing the church to repeat all the horrors of church history, in fact, it might very well be argued that it supports totalitarianism (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 89-90).

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But even in the light of these horrible dangers and accusations, Barth continued:

“But we have no option in this matter. Christian freedom is really the freedom of the confession of Jesus Christ as the one and only Prophet, light of life, and Word of God. It stands or falls by whether it is freedom for this confession” (Barth, 1961b: *CD IV,3a*: 90).

Barth admitted that other human words are also spoken, words that are not necessarily bad or false or misleading, words that might be good and correct and true. But the difference is that Jesus Christ alone is the Word of God, the revelation of God, the light of life, the Word that gives life and life in abundance, the Word that gives freedom, the Word that must be believed and obeyed in life and death, the Word whereby all other words will be measured. No human word can replace this Word of God or stand next to it. No human word can claim our allegiance and obedience like this Word. No human word can do what this Word of God does, transforming us into new creations, freeing us to believe and obey our one true Lord, who is the light of life and who gives us new life, life in abundance (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 97-98).

Barth would rather suffer this offense, than be tempted by all the good words that subtly try to usurp Jesus Christ as the only Word of God that we must hear and obey in life and in death, luring us masterfully into a life of slavery. As he explained in his interview with a Methodist journal in 1937, it is much easier to recognise that allegiance to Hitler means the end of the church’s freedom, than to recognise that listening to humanism as a good word, next to Jesus Christ, the one and only true Word of God, might lead to exactly the same kind of slavery (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 3).

We cannot serve two masters, but only one. If we serve and obey the true Master, the one and only true Lord of heaven and earth, the only Head of the community of faith, the only Judge and Saviour of all of humanity, if we hear and obey the Word of God and no other word, we are freed to enjoy life to the full. If, however, we serve another false master, who is not our true Lord, who is not the light of life, if we hear and obey other words other than the Word of God, then our obedience turns us into slaves.

Only in complete obedience to Christ, there is freedom. In 1934, the first national synod of the German Evangelical Church, which met at Barmen, unanimously recognised the Theological Declaration, largely composed by Barth himself, which stated that Jesus Christ is the one and only Word of God which the church must obey, thereby founding the Confessing Church. When working out the implications of this declaration, Barth indicated that, although he was a *state* official as a professor at the Bonn University, he had to disobey the obligatory oath of obedience to Hitler. This brought about the tension between Barth and the Confessing Church, who was already retreating to a position in line with the centrist faction of the church. Barth was removed from his position of leadership within the church and soon thereafter deposed as a professor of theology at Bonn University (Busch, 2004a: 33-34).

Yes, indeed, obedience is extremely dangerous. But we cannot guard against this danger by trying to avoid obedience. We are always serving a master. And the more subtle the master – if the master can deceive us into thinking that we are not serving any master – the more powerful our slavery becomes. The greatest weakness of all the great dictators throughout history was in the explicit display of power over their subjects, which inevitably led to their downfall. The truly powerful dictators are the ones who will never be written up in history as dictators, but who will be heralded as scientific progress, world changing technology, inspirational leaders, influential cultures, powerful empires or successful economies.

Who do we serve, in truth?

When speaking on the nature of the church in a lecture in 1934 in Paris, Barth said that although the task of the church is humility and service, there is a kind of service which can very easily turn into a kind of tyranny. The greatest tyrants always believe they are serving others. The Grand Inquisitor in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* was sincere in his intention of serving God and humanity, which turned into a subtle tyranny. The only way in which the church's service can remain free from turning into a subtle kind of tyranny, is if we do not serve any principle, ideal or universal law, any institution, movement or cause, regardless of how good or noble they may be, regardless of how sincere our intentions are. The church only remains free for true service of God and humanity, if we serve the *Lord*, and nothing else. Therefore, Barth said, the church can have no plans or programs, no themes, and cannot endorse those of others, but can only hear and obey the command of its Lord (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 33, 35-38).

Christian ethics begins with listening to God. Christian ethics responds to the Word of God, reacts to the action of God. Christian ethics is not based on any worldview or philosophy or idea or principle or program, but it corresponds to the covenant history of God, which has taken place, is taking place and will be fulfilled in the future. Christian ethics is based upon the church's calling for active participation in this history, the history of Jesus Christ. Christian ethics does not attempt to say its own words or to do its own deeds, but only to respond and point to what God has said to humanity and done for humanity in the history of grace in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 106-108).

Also in 1934, when Barth gave a lecture on "The Christian as a Witness," Barth asserted that true witnesses do not bring forth their own theme, they do not talk about a subject which moves them, they do not have their own message. We, the church, do have something to say, but only as witnesses to what God has said. Like John the Baptist, we can only point away from ourselves to what God has done. We can only be true witnesses by pointing to God. But how can we remain true witnesses? How can we be sure that we are pointing to God, and not to something else? The truth of our witness is bound to God, but God is not bound to our witness, and therefore we have no guarantee that our witness is true. And therefore we can only remain witnesses in the prayer: "Come, Creator Spirit! Come!" We can only remain true witnesses in the hope that God gives witness to God-self, and that God will continue to do so, despite the errors, inadequacy and incompleteness of our witness. Barth asserted that we become witnesses through our baptism and we remain witnesses through the Lord's Supper, i.e., it is as God gives God-self, as God gives testimony to God-self, that we become and remain witnesses. It is within the gracious, sacramental reality and presence of Jesus Christ, who does what we cannot do, who acts in ways that we dare not act, who completes what we do not finish, that we give witness to the action of God (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 107, 110-113).

Andy Alexis-Baker makes the valuable point in an article on Barth's ethics, that Immanuel Kant's ethics does not provide the protection from the abuse of powerful authorities and foreign influences as it proposes to do. Kant's categorical imperative: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law," was intended to enable the individual to reasonably deduce what is ethical, without any influence from authorities outside him- or herself. This categorical imperative, Kant argued, would liberate people from the clashes between conflicting moral codes and empower autonomous individuals to discern what is good and right with their own reason. Individuals need not ask themselves whether their actions conform to a foreign moral code, but only whether they can will that their action should become a universal law for all people. But Alexis-Baker argues that this ethical approach actually establishes even more, unnoticed conformity to foreign authorities, since people easily assume that the laws and principles

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which are forwarded by the powerful and influential elite of the society, are identical to the universal laws which should apply to all people. That is why Kant's categorical imperative was enthusiastically adopted by the bureaucratic regimes of the eighteenth-century. Alexis-Baker says: "Ironically, Kant's attempted escape from external authority leaves people vulnerable to subtle powers and authoritarian regimes whose imperatives we obey mechanistically." Barth experienced how Christians who were formed by Kant's philosophy were swept helplessly along by the powers of the world with the start of the First World War and also with the rise of Nazism, unable to swim against the stream of supposed universal laws and principles given by the academic elite and the powerful authorities (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 426-427).

The moral reasoning of the individual does not take place within a neutral, empty space, but within a moral ontology, which already shapes our reasoning even before we start to discern what is good and right. By uniting ethics with theology in the way that Barth did, he showed that Jesus Christ is not only normative for our actions, but also for our thoughts, our reasoning, our discernment of what is good and right. The resurrected and living Lord Jesus Christ who is reigning over heaven and earth at this moment, the kingdom of God inaugurated by Jesus Christ which is present and which surrounds every human being, is the moral space, the ethical geography, wherein Christians live and think, wherein we find our meaning and goal, our *telos*, wherein we hear and obey Jesus' command (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 428).

Alexis-Baker mentions that the word obedience derives from the Latin words *ob* and *audire*, which could be translated as "hearing." The meaning and purpose of the human life, according to Barth, is found in God's obedience, in God's humanity, in Jesus Christ, the son of God incarnate, who heard and obeyed the Father. Alexis-Baker explains: "Enclosed within divine nature, Jesus' human nature finds its home and *telos*." Jesus Christ disrupts humanity's history of disobedience by being the obedient human being and thereby giving graciously to humanity its true purpose (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 429-431).

In this way Barth restored the notion found in the classical moral philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, that people will know how to act if they know who they are, if they understand their *telos*. Of course, who we are in fact, is not identical to who we are teleologically – who we are destined to be. But the important insight lies therein that our identity and our actions are closely interwoven. We do not first exist as a human being, as a person, as someone with a certain identity, and then apart from this existence, decide to take certain actions. We exist as we act. We act in accordance with our existence. Who we are and what we do are inseparably linked, since there is no way of existing without simultaneously acting (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 431-432).

Barth criticised Kant's view of the moral agent as a man-god, who is able to discern and do the good autonomously. Barth viewed people rather as creatures within the natural cosmos, creatures who are unable to know and do the good of their own accord, who can only know and do the good in so far as they are engrafted into Jesus Christ, the only obedient human being (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 432-433).

True obedience, and thereby true humanity, is epitomised in Jesus' obedient prayer at Gethsemane: "not as I will, but as You will." We are acting ethically, we are obedient, we are truly human, in so far as we, as the body of Christ, pray this prayer in communion with Jesus (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 435).

Because Christian ethics is embedded within the covenant history between God and humanity, within God's creation, reconciliation and redemption of humanity and the world, Christian ethics is doxological. As Alexis-Baker puts it: "In the doxological actions of prayer, Sabbath-keeping and confession, Christians act as they were created to act." By these

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doxological actions we act in accordance with our being, i.e., human beings which are created, reconciled and redeemed by God. In this way we respond correctly to our Creator, Reconciler and Redeemer (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 436).

This obedient life, this doxological life, is not a life of an individual directed at God, isolated from the rest of humanity and creation, but it is a life as part of the community of faith, as part of the body of Jesus Christ, which is directed at the world, as God's being and action is directed at the world and its salvation. Praying: "not my will, but Thy will be done" means precisely that the Christian life is directed towards the salvation of humanity and the world, which is the will of God (Alexis-Baker, 2011: 437).

For Barth, right actions are those actions which correspond to who we truly are in Jesus Christ, to our true humanity, to our future destiny in Jesus Christ. And thus obedience to our Lord Jesus Christ is not enslavement to authority, but the liberation from all relative authorities, thus restoring our true freedom and humanity, our true purpose, which is faithful obedience to the God who is graciously faithful to humanity.

Authority and power

Although Barth embraced Kant's philosophy thoroughly as a young student, and while academics may differ whether Barth disposed of Kant's ethics or merely re-employed it in a different fashion, it remains clear that Barth's ethics poses a very serious question to Kant's ethics. Barth's ethics questions whether Kant's ethics provides a strong enough safeguard against the very subtle "principalities and powers" – as Paul so famously said – that guide our thoughts and actions, without even being noticed by the individual, even before we start our moral reasoning. We are always serving a master. We are always obeying a law or principle given by a foreign authority outside ourselves. The question, according to Barth, is whether we are able to discern who or what those principalities and powers are and whether we will allow ourselves to be freed from their relative power or authority, by a greater power and authority, i.e., the absolute power and authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. The question is also whether Kant's ethics is thoroughly aware and thoroughly honest about the unspoken moral ontology within which it functions, and whether it enables the individual to be aware of the way in which his or her thoughts and actions are guided by this unspoken moral ontology, even before moral reasoning begins.

In his philosophical essays in response to the theology of Karl Barth, found in the book with the title, *The Authority of Grace*, W.A. Whitehouse makes the interesting distinction between authority and power. Authority can only come from the one who is the Author, but those with power who claim absolute authority, while not being God, while not being the Author of all things, commit blasphemy. Nietzsche's statement that "power always lies," might be taking it too far, since there is a place for relative, practical authority within the world, but the warning is apt: any claim by worldly powers to absolute authority is a blasphemous lie. The difference between the authority of God, the authority of grace, and the powers within the world, is that "...authority creates freedom and the concern for freedom, whereas power always threatens these." Authority establishes "certainty" and "obedience" since it is the Author of "truth, health, reliability, competence" (Whitehouse, 1981: 240).

Barth does not put forth an ethics of obedience, in the sense that obedience, *per se*, is a good thing. Barth's ethics is one of obedience to the God of grace, who gives us freedom: the freedom to obey this good and gracious God, who gives us life in abundance. Obedience as such is a terrible thing, since it means enslavement to powers that bring us death. Only obedience to the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ, the giver of life, is the source of true freedom.

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It is exceedingly important to fully understand this aspect of Barth's ethics, i.e., that the commanding God is not an arbitrary or capricious god, who has the will of an immoral tyrant, nor an abstract moral principle or imperative, but it is the gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ (Migliore, 2010: 10).

Maßmann explains that in Barth's theology we are not called to obey commands, but we are called to obey *God*. God gives God-self as our commanding God. The obedience that Barth speaks of is the obedience of faith, and the law Barth speaks of is the law heard in the gospel. We do not obey laws or commands given long ago by an arbitrary god, a *deus absconditus*, but we obey God, the *deus semper actuosus*, i.e., the God who gives God-self to us always anew in Jesus Christ, our Lord who gives and commands ever afresh (Maßmann, 2011: 178-179).

If this is not understood, Barth's emphasis on absolute obedience to the will of God, which cannot be generalised in any way, and which must be heard and obeyed always anew in every new time and place, can become extremely dangerous. It can become the ethical justification of serial killers, mass murderers, terrorists, war mongers or brutal dictators guilty of genocide, who in their sinful delusion believe they are obeying the will of God. The God who commands obedience here and now, is the God of grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Any action, no matter how well it can be justified ethically, which is not obedience to this God, is in fact disobedience. Although Barth's ethics does not rely on universal principles or moral imperatives to guard itself against wrongheaded moral justifications of sinful actions, it has the very concrete God of the covenant of grace, revealed in Jesus Christ, as the ultimate safeguard. The gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ is the only true Guard against such distortions, since even the most noble general principle or moral imperative can be twisted and distorted to suit sinful ideologies.

Furthermore, the human being who is addressed and commanded by the Word of God, directly, personally, form part of the "we" who are claimed by God, the people of God, the community of faith, representing the whole of humanity. Although the human being is addressed and commanded directly, personally, although she is claimed as a covenant-partner with God, and thereby unable to escape her personal responsibility, she is this new person within the community of faith, in solidarity with the whole of humanity, and therefore never as an isolated individual (Nimmo, 2007: 21).

This explains why, when Barth came to the specific ethics in his doctrine of creation, when he wanted to describe our obedience to God the Creator, our obedience to the Lord of creation, he described this obedience as essentially *freedom*: freedom before God, freedom in fellowship, freedom for life and freedom in limitation. For Barth, true freedom is not freedom *from* any masters or obligations, because there is no such thing, but only the illusion of it, which is the ultimate form of slavery. But true freedom is freedom *for* God, *for* our fellow humanity, *for* life, *for* our vocation in this world (Barth, 1961: *CD III,4*: 46).

Barth's son Markus, said that the one thing he learnt from his father's theology, was that the free grace of God enables us to live as free, happy children of God. It was Barth's obedience that gave him his freedom. Markus Barth puts it like this: "The secret of my father's authority is in the way in which he is under the authority of Jesus Christ" (Barth, M. 1986: 1).

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Community of prayer

Nimmo asserts that the two key criticisms against Barth's ethics, are that it is too abstract (to which we will return later), and that it does not address the role of the church sufficiently (Nimmo, 2007: 73). Nimmo cannot agree with Stanley Hauerwas that Barth "overlooked" the importance of the community of faith for the Christian life, but agrees that Barth "radically relativized" the role of the community, in order to emphasise the living encounter between God and the church as a whole, as well as the living encounter between God and the individual. Ultimately, God is the one who teaches and forms our moral character, and not the church. Thus the church, for Barth, has only a relative, indirect part to play within moral formation (Nimmo, 2007: 84).

Migliore also points out that quite a few scholars, for example Stanley Hauerwas, Reinhart Hütter and Joseph Mangina, have asked the question whether Barth made enough of how the free moral agent is nurtured and formed within the community of faith. Did Barth properly take into account how the character of the moral agent is cultivated and developed within specific ecclesial practices? Could Barth not enrich his ethics by giving more concrete illustrations of the new forms of life within the community of faith, wherein the Christian life and Christian witness is embedded and embodied? Migliore believes that Barth said much more about how ecclesial practices shape and form the Christian life, than is acknowledged. Barth wrote a lot about baptism (for instance, in *Church Dogmatics IV,4*) and the Lord's Supper (although he died before he could write the chapter on the Lord's Supper as part of the Christian Life in *Church Dogmatics IV,4*). And importantly, "[a]s every reader of Barth knows," says Migliore, the practice of prayer, not just individual prayer but also the communal practice of prayer within the community of faith, is to be found throughout Barth's theology and ethics as "the epitome of human freedom before God" (Migliore, 2010: 14-15).

Mangina notes that when we read Barth's special ethics of reconciliation, the lecture notes printed posthumously as *The Christian life*, we should keep in mind that what Barth says here about invocation of God, was supposed to form part of one volume, *Church Dogmatics IV,4*, which would also contain Barth's understanding of baptism and the eucharist. The fragment on baptism was printed in *Church Dogmatics IV,4. Fragment*, since it became clear that Barth would not be able to finish this volume, and because there was much interest in Barth's controversial rejection of infant baptism. Mangina points out that prayer, invocation of God, the life of the Christian as an ethical agent, was to be the second part of this volume, sandwiched in between the foundation of the Christian life in baptism and the renewal of the Christian life in the eucharist (Mangina, 2001: 170).

Thus not only in the plural nature of the *Our Father* prayer, whereby the church lives and prays together as a community of faith, but also in the actions of baptism and eucharist in which this prayer is embedded, it is clear that for Barth the life of prayer takes place within the life of the community of faith, and cannot be separated from it.

Mangina says that prayer, invocation of God, gives an appropriate understanding of the special ethics of reconciliation, precisely because in Barth's doctrine of reconciliation the community of faith plays such an important part, as the community which is gathered, built up and sent out by the Holy Spirit. The Christian life is lived as part of the community of faith, who is called by God to call upon God, and thereby to give witness to what God has done for the world in Jesus Christ (Mangina, 2001: 173).

Hütter finds in Barth's theology a path towards understanding the ethical nature of the church, as well as the ecclesial nature of ethics (Hütter, 1993: 22). In Hütter's own conclusions, after a thorough discussion of the relationship between the church and ethics in Barth's and Hauerwas' theology, he says with poetic beauty that the church is not only the community who acts according to the promise that God will act, the promise that God will turn the church's action into a witness of God's action, but also the community whose action is "Einübung in die Geduld der Hoffnung," i.e., practicing or learning or training themselves in the patience of hope, in the active waiting upon the action of God (Hütter, 1993: 282).

Permission to pray

Within the context of freedom before God, Barth explained that we obey the Creator by exercising the freedom to pray, a freedom that is granted to us by God. This immediately shows Barth's unique understanding of obedience, because exercising the freedom to pray, is not something we give to God, but something we receive gratefully from God. There is nothing that humanity can give to God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the Lord of the universe. But this Creator, this Lord, allows us and commands to ask for that which we need to receive from God, which is everything. We honour God, we glorify the Creator, we serve our Lord, when we use this freedom granted to us. Obeying our true Master, means asking and seeking and accepting everything we need from God alone, who alone can and will give us everything we need, and not trying to fulfil our needs by our own efforts or by seeking and asking and accepting gifts from other masters, who cannot give us that which we truly need, i.e., the gift of life, the gift of freedom (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 87).

Understanding prayer both as the freedom granted to us and as the obedience demanded of us by God, all objections against prayer are destroyed.

One might object: "May I ask these things from God?" Yes, you may. It is the freedom granted to us by God. Thus the objection is destroyed.

One might object: "But why should I ask these things from God, who is all-wise and all-knowing, who knows what I need and who knows what I am going to ask even before I ask it?" Because God commands it. Thus the objection is destroyed.

One might object: "I do not know what or how to pray. I am not very good at it." And yet God grants us the freedom to pray our pathetic, inadequate and sinful prayers, graciously forgiving its failures, sanctifying it, and hearing and answering it nonetheless. Thus the objection is destroyed and exposed as a false humility, which is pride.

One might object: "I am not sure what to ask for." You may ask for everything. That is the freedom granted to us by the Creator from whom we receive everything. Thus the objection is destroyed.

By explaining that prayer is both freedom and obedience, Barth showed that the one who objects: "I cannot pray," actually means: "I will not pray." Barth exposed this lie as the pride of sinful humanity who wants to avoid the judgment of God and who does not want to live by the grace of God (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 96).

Barth said:

..when the bolt of disobedience is pushed back any man can pray" (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 97).

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Prayer is obedience to the command of God, but it is God's commandment of *grace* (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4: 97*). God gives us the command to pray, but also gives us the freedom which enables us to pray, which enables us to obey this command.

It is a strange command, because it is not a command to give something to God, but it is the command to ask, seek, receive and accept from God everything we need (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4: 87*).

That is why Barth calls it a commandment of grace. That is why Barth can say that we are not only *commanded* to pray, but also *allowed* to pray. That is why this obedience is freedom, the freedom to pray, the freedom to ask everything from God, who graciously gives us everything we need.

Why *this* command?

But why *should* we pray? Why is this the obedience that God *demand*s of us?

For Luther, the issue was laid to rest simply by the fact of the matter that God commands it. But not for Calvin. Calvin inquired further into the matter and came to the conclusion that it is in reality Jesus Christ who prays, and because we belong to Christ, because we have communion, fellowship with Christ, because we are united with Christ, because we are the body of Christ and Christ is the Head, we pray with Christ, in Christ (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4: 94*).

The *Heidelberg Catechism* followed in the footsteps of Calvin, explaining that the reason we should pray, is not merely because it is demanded, but because it is the "chief part of the *gratitude* which God demands of us" (my emphasis). It is how we receive God's *grace*.

Barth said that we cannot disagree with Luther that God commands us to pray and that no further questions are needed. Indeed, the fact that God commands us to pray lays aside all the so-called "problems" regarding prayer, be it the proper form of prayer or the piety of the one who prays. But Calvin's and the *Heidelberg Catechism's* further remarks place this command within the proper frame, which is the grace and freedom granted by God, which invites and enables a response of gratitude (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4: 94-95*).

The correct response to grace, the way in which we as forgiven sinners can receive and cooperate with the grace of God from our side, is through gratitude and obedience. The whole third section of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which deals with humanity's proper response to grace, is described under the heading: "Gratitude." In this third part the law is discussed, but also prayer, because prayer is the primary form, the *chief exercise* of grateful obedience, in response to our salvation by grace, according to Question 116.

Barth put it as follows in his lectures on the *Heidelberg Catechism*, Questions 116-119:

"The work of God's righteousness and the work of man's obedience come together in the freedom given the Christian to join with Jesus Christ in calling upon the one true God, whom the Christian knows he has to thank for everything and from whom he may ask everything" (Barth, 1964: *HC: 115*).

Prayer and ethics

Hesselink points out that it is in many ways unique to the theology of Karl Barth, and it comes as a surprise to many, that Barth addressed the topic of prayer within the context of ethics. Of course, for Barth, ethics cannot be separated from dogmatics, but precisely therein lies the uniqueness of Barth's theology. Whereas other theologians might address the topic of prayer within the context of dogmatics and faith, the piety of the believer, Barth placed prayer right in the heart of ethics and obedience, the Christian life. This shows once again the inseparability of dogmatics and ethics, faith and obedience, spirituality and the Christian life, in the theology of Barth (Hesselink, 2002: 77).

Already in Barth's commentary on Romans, when discussing the Christian life, as described by Paul in Romans 12, Barth saw and understood the link between prayer and ethics, when reading Romans 12:12: "Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer." Barth asked himself how hope can be an ethical action. He wondered what distinguishes Christian hope from the normal every day experience of any human being. What makes hope *moral*? And he realised that it is in the *rejoicing*. Christian hope rejoices in the knowledge of the future action of God, without seeing the evidence of that action, and thus moves towards that action with corresponding action. The same is true of "patience in affliction." We are able to love those who oppress us, because our faith in God's future action gives us patience here and now. And the same is true of prayer. To pray is to *act*. It is a paradoxical act, which seems absurd to the world, but corresponds to our expectation of God. To pray is to act ethically. Nothing in our prayer as such makes it ethical. It is to act ethically simply because it is an act wherein we ask for and expect the action of God. It is to act morally, because of its endurance in waiting upon God (Barth, 1933: R: 457-458).

This understanding of the relationship between prayer and obedience is not incidental commentaries on Paul's letter to the church in Romans. What Barth was trying to comprehend in works like his first commentary on Romans in 1919, his Tambach lecture in 1919 on "The Christian's Place in Society," his lecture in 1922 on "The Word of God and the Task of Ministry," as well as his second commentary on Romans in 1922, argues Haddorff, was how our human actions relate to God's action. Because all our ethical actions can be no more than parables of God's action, they must point to God's action. Therefore, already in his second commentary on Romans, Barth claimed that our "primary" ethical action is worship, or prayer, i.e., to love God, and our "secondary" ethical action is to love our neighbour. Love for our neighbour always follows and is grounded upon love for God, expressed in worship, in prayer. Worship is our primary response to God's action, God's love, and loving our neighbour is our secondary response. Both actions, worship and neighbourly love, respond and give witness to the same action of God, i.e., God's gracious love (Haddorff, 2010: 68-69).

This does not imply that prayer, or worship, is a better human act than love for our neighbour. It is simply "primary" because it is a direct response to God's action, whereas love for our neighbour is an indirect response to God's action. What is truly "primary" or "prior," what is truly "better" or "righteous," is God's action, God's love, God's grace. All our actions, also our worship and prayer, is in fact a secondary response, a reaction, a parable, a witness to God's action. We do not pray better when we pray out of love for others, and we do not love better, when we first pray for others. We pray and we love rightly when our prayer and our love is our reply to the Word of God, our reaction to the action of God, our response to grace and love of God.

More than fifteen years after writing his widely read book on Barth's ethics, *The Hastening That Waits* (1993, 1995), Nigel Biggar looks once again at Barth's ethics in his essay "Karl Barth's Ethics Revisited." During these fifteen years he only wrote two pieces on Barth, and

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engrossed himself mostly in concrete ethical deliberations. Looking back, Biggar not only feels that he has departed somewhat from Barth's ethics, but is becoming more and more convinced that his book was already a reconstruction of where he thought Barth should have gone, rather than where Barth actually went with his ethics (Biggar, 2010: 26). However, one of the features of Barth's ethics that Biggar still appreciates greatly, is what he calls, for lack of a better word, the "spirituality" of Barth's ethics, meaning that Barth's ethics is embedded within the relationship between God and humanity, it is an ethics of personal response to God (Biggar, 2010: 27; Biggar, 1993, 1995: 166).

Biggar launches into a wonderful litany of prayer as the most basic element of all ethics, which I quote at length, for its sheer beauty, and because it shows how dear this spiritual foundation of ethics is to this very practical ethicist:

"At the very beginning of all that we ought to do – and remaining basic to it – is prayer. The importance of this is that prayer is the basic condition of human freedom and gladness – or what I call human 'flourishing.' When the human being acknowledges God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer in prayer, she is freed from the intolerable burden of coping with her finitude by trying to shoulder divine responsibility; she is freed from guilt over past sins; and she is freed from anxiety about the future. In prayer to the triune God, the human being is freed to be a creature who has been graciously reconciled and who will be sanctified at the end. Through prayer she grows the virtues of humility, faith, gratitude, and hope, which enable her to flourish in the only way that a sinful creature can. Prayer is the first and the last thing that we should do" (Biggar, 2010: 28).

Biggar says that to this day he regards the central place of prayer in Barth's ethics as one of the greatest virtues of his ethics. According to Biggar, the central place that Barth gives to prayer in his ethics, treats moral issues with all the existential seriousness that it deserves. Furthermore, it helps us to remember that Christian ethics is not in the final analysis about finding a solution to this or that dilemma, but about coming to terms with deepest reality of the human condition, namely that we are sinful creatures standing before a gracious God. Prayer, as the basis of all Christian ethics, assumes the correct position: "...on our knees, humble, grateful, hopeful, and glad" (Biggar, 2010:28).

Haddorff explains the central place of prayer in Christian ethics with two contrasting scenarios. In the one scenario, accepted by many Christian and secular ethical theories, moral agents are autonomous, self-reliant, able to freely make decisions between good and evil by virtue of their own reason, as "Hercules at the crossroads." For Barth, this scenario is not one of freedom, but of captivity to humanity's corrupt, sinful, arbitrary and capricious will. The other scenario, which Barth is pleading for, is for moral agents who invite in prayer God's command, God's judgment over ourselves, knowing that God's will is not arbitrary or capricious like ours, but that God commands in grace, that God judges in love. Therein we find true freedom, praying and acting as justified sinners, living responsibly as people saved by grace. We act ethically and responsibly in the knowledge that with every act we are sinning and increasing God's judgment over us. But we do so confidently and freely, while praying for forgiveness, while asking for God's reconciliation and redemption of our incomplete and imperfect actions (Haddorff, 2010: 85-86).

For Barth, not only our human will, but also our conscience, is not to be understood as an independent, self-sufficient human reality of reason or experience, but something which has to be understood within the eschatological drama of creation, reconciliation and redemption. Our conscience does not make us the judges between right and wrong, but it can bear witness to the gracious judgment of God which is being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Our conscience must also be liberated so that it can witness to God's covenant-history with humanity, wherein humanity is graciously made witnesses and co-workers of God's work of

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righteousness. Our conscience will remain captive if we regard ourselves as the judges between right and wrong. But in prayer and obedience, by invoking the gracious judgment of God and reacting to the righteous action of God, we are liberated from the anxieties and uncertainties which plague and paralyze our conscience. In obedient prayer our conscience is liberated to give witness to the gracious judgment of God (Haddorff, 2010: 241-242).

Although this approach to ethics might have been unique within his contemporary context, Barth was of course not doing something novel, but was placing himself within a long theological tradition. The inseparable relationship between Christian prayer and life, was not only recognised by the Reformers, but also by the early church fathers. The Lord's Prayer especially, was not only understood to be a model for Christian prayer, but also for the Christian life (Saliers, 2002: xii).

Why ask?

If we have received everything we need by God's grace, why then does Barth maintain that prayer is primarily an act of *petition*? Should prayer not rather be understood as act of *thanksgiving*, thanking God for the grace bestowed upon us, or *repentance*, confessing our sins, our disobedience and inadequate obedience, or perhaps *worship*, giving this gracious God all the glory and honour?

It is important to note that Barth was following Luther and Calvin, who maintained that prayer is at its centre petition. According to Barth, it was later theologians who "tried to be cleverer" and who described petition merely as one element of prayer next to other equally important elements of prayer, such as worship, thanksgiving, repentance and intercession. It is not that these elements have no place in prayer, but they lose their proper meaning and place if they are not understood in light of the heart of prayer, which is petition (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 97).

And the reason why prayer is in essence petition, is precisely because it is the chief exercise of our free and grateful obedience to God, wherein we bring nothing to God, give nothing to God, offer nothing before God, achieve nothing by our own power, do nothing that is of any value or worth, but ask God for everything. Responding to God with all our requests, is responding with empty hands. All that we can present to God is ourselves, with our absolute need of everything in relation to God (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 97).

Understood in this way, it is clear that this petitioning prayer, necessarily contains within it also thanksgiving, since it acknowledges that everything we receive, we receive from the hand of God (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 99).

And it is also worship, since it gives all the honour and glory to God, acknowledging that there is not one good work that we can do, in which we do not receive all that we need to do that good work, from God. We honour God by obeying the command to ask from God all that we need (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 100).

Prayer can also take the form of repentance, for when we ask God for everything, we confess that our own efforts are always sinful and lacking. It cannot, however, end there, but must continue, as the Psalms always do, to ask from God, not just for forgiveness, but for all that we need to do God's will (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 99).

Barth admitted:

"Obviously, then, it is indubitable and incontestable that true prayer is also thanksgiving, repentance and worship. But the fact remains that decisively, centrally

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and essentially it is petition, and that only as such is it also thanksgiving, repentance and worship. The other elements are not independent of this; they are all elements of petitionary prayer (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 100).

Barth would also concede that petitionary prayer contains within it intercession, since we do not only ask for ourselves, but as part of the community of faith, as representative of the whole of humanity, praying in the first person plural as in the Lord's Prayer, we ask that God will give everything needed for the salvation and liberation of the church, the whole of humanity and the whole of creation (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 102-103).

But by claiming that petition still remains at the heart of prayer, Barth made it very clear that any attempt to shy away from real and actual prayer, asking specific things from God in specific words, no matter how beautiful our prayers or our theologies of prayer are, will simply not do. God grants us the freedom and gives us the command to pray, which exposes all our theological justifications not to do so, as gross hypocrisy and sinful pride (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 89-90).

Barth said:

“What is demanded in general must be realised in particular” (Barth, 1961, *CD III,4*: 89).

Gorringer says that Barth knew very well that his ethic of invocation was like “rat poison” for modern humanity, since it did not allow the person “come of age” to be autonomous and self-sufficient. Seeing invocation as the basic meaning of all obedience, did not imply a “personal” or “private” ethics of spirituality. That would suit modern humanity much too much. Rather, an ethic of invocation was to be understood as a social ethic, a public ethic, a political ethic, a cosmic ethic. It is an ethic wherein we display our complete need of God's grace, our complete readiness to learn from God's answer, as well as our complete dependence upon the help of God. An ethic of invocation is the opposite of modern humanity, since all claims to our own abilities, power or possessions are forfeited. The Christian life entails calling upon God, asking for God's gracious help, which is the exact opposite of an autonomous, self-sufficient, modern life (Gorringer, 1999: 261, 263).

McCormack is of the opinion that Barth's view of theology as being nothing more than to pray, to sigh: *Veni Creator Spiritus!*, was an expression of his anti-*bourgeois* spirit, of the eschatological expectation and longing which drove his theology and ethics throughout his life (McCormack, 1995: 31-32).

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Being specific

The freedom to pray, the permission and command to ask for very specific and concrete things, have important ethical implications, because the same holds true for our whole life of obedience. We cannot hide behind the general command, in order to escape the particular actions and obligations that we are to do. Basically the same objections that people make regarding prayer, is made in regard to the whole life of obedience. People complain: “May I do this?” “Why should I do this, if God alone can act righteously?” “I am not able to do this!” “I am not sure what to do.” “How can I tell if I am doing the right thing?” But these objections do not hold water, since God allows us and commands us to do God's will.

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Although all our actions are always plagued with doubt, sinfulness, incompetence and imperfection, God allows us and commands us to do it nonetheless, all the while praying and asking that God will show us what to do when we do not know what we should do, that God will enable us to do what we cannot do by our own power, that God will sanctify our sinful actions, and that God will perfect and complete our imperfect and incomplete obedience.

Why prayer, and particularly petitionary prayer, can truly be described as the chief part of our obedience, is precisely because it is such a clear, specific, particular action, with no place to hide behind theological generalisations. Even very good and proper descriptions of our obedience, such as “a Christian life,” “freedom” or “repentance” (the last being related to the equally proper terms “conversion” and “decision”), might be understood in too general a fashion. Although there is nothing wrong with these descriptions of obedience, it might perhaps remain unclear what exactly the content of a Christian life is. As we repent and become converted from our former, disobedient lives, as we decide to lead a life of obedience, to what kind of life are we turning *towards*, *specifically*? As we live within the freedom granted to us by the grace of God, what exactly does this freedom entail, what does this freedom allow us and obligate us to do, *for* what kind of action are we freed, *in particular* (Barth, 1981: CL: 37-38)?

Even “faith” can be viewed too generally. Luther called faith the “captain” of all goods works, which, in some sense, cannot be denied. Faith no doubt is what God expects of humanity, i.e., to trust God, the Word of God, the grace of God in Christ, completely and utterly, with the whole of our lives. Surely that is the meaning of obedience. As we have seen above, the unity of faith and obedience is undeniable. But Barth warned against a new tyranny of concepts. Paul’s emphasis on faith and faith alone in his letters to the Romans and Galatians, which was rediscovered by Luther and which played such an important role in his theology, the Reformation and Protestant theology ever since, should be understood within the context of Paul’s attack upon Judaizing elements in Rome and Galatia. Faith is indeed “formally” the obedience that God commands of us, but must still be filled out “materially” with the particular content of that faith (Barth, 1981: CL: 38-39).

Barth experienced first-hand how the Word of God can be pulled eschew, up to the point of being ignored completely, if faith is elevated too highly and seen as the central and guiding concept of theology as a whole, as it happened in modern Protestant theology. Also, surrounded for much of his life by Lutheran colleagues, who do not emphasise the unity of faith and obedience as strongly as the Reformed tradition stemming from Calvin, but who is more prone to let obedience be absorbed by faith, Barth knew how important it is to clearly spell out the specific obedience demanded by God, and not to equate obedience with faith.

Even “faithfulness,” which is a wonderful understanding of obedience, with very firm Biblical support, one that Barth describes at length and with which he can find no fault, still does not explicitly give us the specific human *action* which is commanded in obedience to the grace of God. It might also, like the other terms above, be understood (wrongfully!) merely as a certain attitude or disposition, that we can assume passively (Barth, 1981: CL: 39-42).

Very interestingly, according to Mangina, Barth *did* at first settle on faithfulness as the best term to describe the special ethics of reconciliation. Barth appreciated the reciprocity of the term, i.e., the fact that our faithfulness corresponds and is analogous to God’s faithfulness. Barth felt that the term went further than the term freedom, which was the guiding term in the special ethics of creation. As Christians, reconciled to God in Christ, we do not only live freely for God, as creatures living under the Creator, but we are also bound to God, bound to be faithful to God as God is faithful to us. However, Mangina tells, after delivering this argument in a lecture, Barth revised it, because he felt it was not specific enough in pointing to a particular human action corresponding to God’s reconciliatory action in Jesus Christ (Mangina, 2001: 171).

The term that comes the closest to the specific, obedient *action* that God demands of humanity, is “thanksgiving,” since it is not only formally the proper response to the grace of God, but it also has material content. Furthermore, there is a linguistic connection between thanksgiving (in Greek: *eucharistia*) and grace (in Greek: *charis*), as well as a historic connection, since the *Heidelberg Catechism* describes our proper response to the grace of God under the heading “Of Gratitude.” Gratitude might perhaps be too vague or general, but *thanksgiving* gives specific material content to the obedient action which is appropriate in response to God’s grace (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 39). Mangina mentions that it is in fact rather surprising that Barth did not choose “thanksgiving” as the guiding term in his special ethics of reconciliation, since gratitude plays such an important part in Barth’s theology (Mangina, 2001: 171).

Can a gift be commanded?

Elsewhere, Barth said that in Christian ethics, what is good can be summed up as gratitude for God’s grace, while what is evil can be summed up as ingratitude for God’s grace (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 108-109).

C.K. Huebner makes the very interesting point in his article “Can a Gift Be Commanded? Theological Ethics without Theory by Way of Barth, Milbank, and Yoder” that both Karl Barth and John Milbank use grace or gift as a central category in their ethics. Yet, in stark contrast to Barth, Milbank comes to the conclusion that if ethics is to be an ethics based on a gift, then there is no place for “command” in such an ethics. Huebner asks whether these contradictory positions does not pose a valid critique against Barth’s use of “command.” Although Milbank does not discuss Barth’s ethics at length, for him the logic of a gift is irreconcilable with the logic of a command, and Huebner views this as a valid critique against Barth’s ethics, which tries to hold on to both gift and command (Huebner, 2000: 472-489).

Migliore responds to this article by pointing out that the divine command was understood by Barth as “permission,” i.e., as something which is allowed rather obligated. Barth admitted that our response to the divine grace or gift (in Greek: *charis*) should be that of gratitude and thanksgiving (in Greek: *eucharistia*). For Barth, God does not give a command (*Aufgabe*) for which God has not already given the gracious gift (*Gabe*), enabling the free obedience to that command. Most importantly, for Barth, grace or gift, and command, are not philosophical concepts, which might seem contradictory on a purely logical plain, or might lead to extremes if taken out of context, for instance violent dictators “obeying” the “command” of a vengeful god, but they are concrete realities embedded within the covenant history of Creation, Reconciliation and Redemption between the triune God and humanity, whereby God is bringing shalom to the whole of creation (Migliore, 2010: 12).

For Barth, gift and command are not contradictory, because God commands us to ask in prayer for everything which has already been given to us (Barth, 1960: *CD III*,3: 270-272). We can pray to God, as Augustine did repeatedly in his *Confessions*: “Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will!” (Augustine, 1961: 233).

Barth does not give any reason why he does not use “thanksgiving” as the guiding term in his specific ethics in the doctrine of reconciliation. He concedes that he might as well have used this term. Since thanksgiving is also a form of *prayer*, wherein we respond with gratitude to God’s grace, it could very well describe the primary act of obedience (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 39).

Gratitude is indeed the proper response to grace. It means the reception of grace as well as turning to God with an openness, thus accepting our responsibility. A life of gratitude in word and deed, entails all that God expects of humanity: knowledge of God, obedience to God, invocation of God, and freedom before God. It entails not merely being an object of grace, but a responsible subject, who, by the miracle of God's grace, is willing and able to hear in faith, to freely obey and prayerfully seek God's grace (Bromiley, 1979: 127).

Perhaps Barth could not find as many clear and direct Biblical references, wherein God explicitly commands thanksgiving, as with the term he did finally decide to use, i.e., "invocation." Of course, we have already established that Barth understood petition to be the heart of prayer, and therefore it would have been difficult for him to choose thanksgiving above petition, or invocation.

It is also worthwhile to note that even in the *Heidelberg Catechism*, where our response to God's grace is described under the heading "Gratitude," the ten commandments and the Lord's Prayer is discussed, and prayer is described as the chief part of our gratitude. But the Lord's Prayer does not consist of thanksgiving, but it consists of six *petitions*.

Furthermore, Barth's understanding of the encounter between God and humanity, the Word of God addressed to humanity and humanity's response to it, as being an "event" which is never finished and which is always happening anew, always starting from the beginning, that we are always seeking and finding and seeking anew, might perhaps have made him a bit cautious about thanksgiving. The term "thanksgiving" might perhaps give the wrong impression that the grace of God in Christ revealed to us by the Word, is an event of the past, something which has already occurred, something that is finished, and therefore, that we have no part to play in it anymore, other than being thankful for it.

Being an unfinished, on-going event, the obedient, prayerful response to God's grace in Christ, would be better understood, if it is not described as thanksgiving, but as invocation of God: asking God again and again, ever anew, for God's presence, for God's grace, for God's reconciliatory work in Christ, without which all will be lost, without which we are lost, without which all of our actions will remain sinful and disobedient and will never come to any good.

The chief exercise of faith

It is in this context, in the search for the specific, particular action by which we give material, concrete content to the obedience with which we are allowed and commanded to respond to the reconciliatory grace of God in Jesus Christ, that Barth referred to Calvin's statement at the beginning of his chapter on prayer (*Institutes of Christian religion*, III, 20), where Calvin calls invocation of God the "chief exercise of faith" (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43). The freedom to act, is the freedom to call upon God, as God has allowed and obligated us to do. This is the specific action that God demands of us, the chief exercise of our faith.

Webster argues that Barth followed Calvin, rather than Luther, in this regard. It would be inaccurate to say that Luther saw the Christian life as passive and that Barth saw it as active. But for Luther, even in our actions, we are fundamentally passive, because God acts upon the believer. But for Barth, even in our passivity, we are fundamentally active, because the believer acts in correspondence to the action of God. And that is why, for Luther, at the heart of the Christian life, is faith, whereas for Barth, as for Calvin, at the heart of the Christian life, is prayer. Luther also understood prayer to be a "special exercise of faith," but not its very centre. For Luther, prayer is a part of faith, one way in which we trust God to do God's work. But for Barth, like Calvin, prayer is more than that. Not only do we trust God to do God's

work in prayer, but we also work with God in prayer. That is why Barth chose “invocation” rather than “faith” as the guiding term in the Christian life, since it establishes the correspondence between God’s action and our action (Webster, 1998: 159-160, 172-173).

Jüngel addressed the issue of the correspondence between God’s action and human action. Faith is firstly the reception of a gift, an orientation of the person towards the action of God. In this respect, it is in no way a human achievement. And yet, faith is an act of humanity. It has always been a problem for Protestant theology, especially Lutheran theology, whether we can speak of the *act* of faith. However, Jüngel indicated that if faith is understood as an act of worship, as prayer, the problem is overcome, since in prayer we actively receive, utilise and participate in the action of God. In this regard, Jüngel was in agreement with Barth’s understanding of the relationship between liturgy and ethos. For Barth, “the law of prayer (*lex orandi*) is the law of action (*lex agendi*).” To invoke God in prayer is the first act of the Christian life, because it is grounded upon the action of God and it corresponds to the action of God in Jesus Christ (Webster, 1998: 195-198).

Jüngel has shown in his essay “Gospel and Law,” about the difference in understanding of the relationship between the gospel and the law in Lutheran and Reformed theologies, that this difference related to their respective understandings of human agency. In Luther’s theology true humanity is marked by creative passivity, whereas for Barth, true humanity is marked by the free obedience, the self-determination of acting in correspondence to God’s free, self-determined action. God is an active God, whose being is found in action, and therefore, true humanity is also to be found in action which corresponds to God’s action (Webster, 1998: 202).

Anrufung und Rufung

In a lecture at Dürrenroth in 1955, Barth said that the terms “conversion” or “renewal” have too often been misunderstood as an end in itself. We do not become converted and we are not renewed only for our own sake, or even just to serve the Lord. We are converted and renewed for the sake of the world, to partake in God’s work in the world. Conversion and renewal means taking up your personal and public responsibility. It means to stand in service of God’s will being done on earth as it is in heaven. It means bearing witness to God’s renewal of the entire world (Jehle, 2002: 81).

We should not miss the connection between *Anrufung* and *Rufung*, invocation and vocation, in Barth’s thought. Our salvation does not only entail our justification and sanctification, but also our vocation. And as faith corresponds to justification, and obedience to sanctification, so prayer corresponds to vocation. As God calls us to be Jesus’ disciples, to be Jesus’ witnesses in the world, we respond to this calling by calling upon God. As God gives us our vocation in the world, we respond by invoking God in the world (Gunton, 2000: 154).

Harvey Cox writes grippingly how in the 1960’s, he at first resonated with Tillich’s theology, and found Barth’s *Church Dogmatics* very depoliticised. That changed, however, when he came to Berlin and met Friedrich-Wilhelm Marquardt. Marquardt introduced Cox to the political Barth, the *lingua franca* of politically engaged theologians, both in East and West Berlin at the time. Suddenly Cox was surrounded by Christians with a very strong sense of vocation. They believed that they were called to witness to the love of God for all people in a divided Berlin. They were urgent to be with their neighbours, believers and unbelievers alike, Christians and atheists alike, capitalists and communists alike, because God had elected to be the God of humanity, because God was with humanity and God was for humanity. In those critical times, Karl Barth was the bread and butter of those passionate Christians on both sides of Checkpoint Charlie. Barth’s theology kept them humble when arguing, debating

and living side by side with communist functionaries, by reminding them that these people were also included in God's election of humanity. When Cox slipped books into the East from time to time, pastors, teachers and lay people wanted Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* from him. Smuggling in a book by Bultmann would have been an unnecessary risk. The issues that concerned the *bourgeois* preachers in the West, like Bultmann's "modern man," the demythologisation of the Bible or existentialism, did not concern them. In the East they were concerned with serious matters of justice and peace. There they wanted to know about the implications of Jesus Christ's death for all people, including communist atheists (Cox, 1986: 145-147).

Nimmo points out that one of the great strengths of the actualistic ontology of Barth's ethics, is its co-humanity. Because God's being is established in God's action towards humanity, therefore our being is also established in our active response to God's action, actively living for God. But actively living for God, means actively living for God's being-in-action, i.e., actively living for God who is Creator, Reconciler, Redeemer of humanity, i.e., actively living for humanity. Therefore, God's gracious action towards us, does not merely enable us to sit back and say "Thank You," but it enables us to act, to live actively for the sake of the world. Because God is free to act for us, we are free to act for the world. The church does not exist over and against the world, but we are free to take part in the activities of the world, actively living out our vocation, serving and witnessing within the world, enacting our mission in word and deed (Nimmo, 2007: 189).

God's freedom to act in love towards humanity in Jesus Christ, gives us the freedom to act in love towards our fellow human beings in all spheres of life, be it politics, art, economics, science, theology or the church, and thereby to give God all the honour in every action of our lives (Green, 1989: 11).

Because God is the God who is with humanity in Jesus Christ, we, the church, who are in Christ, are called also to be with our fellow humanity. The fact that we are in Christ and Christ is in us, means that we are with our fellow humanity, as Christ is with humanity (Steenberg, 1983: 61, 65).

Co-humanity and tolerance

But co-humanity should not be confused with tolerance, especially within the community of faith. In his commentary on Romans, Barth argued that unity within the diversity of the church, can only be established by obedient submission to God and by correspondence to its purpose. Barth admitted that tolerance is an essential virtue, without which life would be impossible. But we must never forget that Christ, that unites the church, is the great intolerant presence in our lives. And therefore, strictly speaking, tolerance cannot be the rule by which the community of faith lives. The saying "to every one his own" is unethical at its core, and should be revised to say: "to every one the One," according to Barth (Barth, 1933: R: 444-445).

In the doctrine of reconciliation Barth said that the whole of humanity is elected, justified, sanctified and called in Jesus Christ, believers and unbelievers alike. Therefore, believers must hold onto unbelievers and never let them go, not only as fellow human beings, but also as future fellow Christians. With a quiet confidence in their future calling in Jesus Christ, believers must tolerate and bear with their unbelieving neighbours. However, Barth added a further nuance to this, by saying that within believers' tolerance of their unbelieving neighbours, there ought to be a hidden, but definite intolerance. Absolute tolerance, whereby we tolerate unbelievers fully, also their unbelief and disobedience, would be to deny their future in Jesus Christ. Taking our unbelieving neighbours truly serious, truly believing in their

election, justification, sanctification and vocation in Jesus Christ, we cannot let them go, we cannot leave them in peace, accepting their unbelief. In order to be true to our vocation, responsibility and freedom, we must not allow our unbelieving neighbours to let go of their vocation, responsibility and freedom. On the surface we must give them rope, quietly and confidently allowing for their disregard for their own vocation, responsibility and freedom, but secretly we must not allow them to let themselves go, we must suffer their captivity on their behalf, we must intercede for them and pray for the future realisation of their vocation, responsibility and freedom (Barth, 1961: *CD IV, 3b*: 495).

Perhaps the greatest test of co-humanity in Barth's time, was the question regarding the relationship between Christians and Jews, the church and Israel. Despite Barth's fierce resistance against the Nazi regime and his open condemnation of its anti-Semitism, not all scholars are in agreement whether Barth's theology was completely free of anti-Semitism. Eduard Busch is of the opinion that those scholars are mistaken, to which we will return later.

It is true, however, that Barth did not ascribe to an "absolute tolerance" of the Jews. Rather remarkably, despite all his public outspokenness against the Nazi regime and specifically its anti-Semitism, Barth still pursued a nuanced and a Biblical view of the relationship between Christians and Jews in his *Church Dogmatics*, especially in his doctrine of election. Despite his fierce attacks in public against the Nazi regime's intolerance towards the Jews, Barth's view was not based upon an uncritical, un-nuanced, unbiblical tolerance which is so prevalent today. Barth was not being "politically correct" or "socially acceptable" in his views – to the contrary, he was saying out in the open exactly the opposite of what most people accepted and said! Some of the things Barth said in the doctrine of election regarding the relationship between Christians and Jews, especially his exegesis of Romans 9 to 11, seem politically incorrect and socially offensive, especially to us who have become so accustomed to the dominance of "absolute tolerance" within the current pluralistic context.

When Barth was asked late in his life, whether he thinks the word "tolerance" will become increasingly significant in the future, Barth responded by saying that he is not too fond of the word "tolerance," since it describes a relationship with our neighbour which is too loose, and not binding enough. If we really meant by "tolerance" the same as the root from which the word came, i.e., the word *tolerare*, which means "to carry," Barth would be more sympathetic towards the word. If we really meant by "tolerance" that we intend to carry our neighbours, and not merely to endure them, then Barth would accept it¹. True tolerance would then mean to help each other, to lift each other up. That would be in accordance with the summary of the law, to love your neighbour as you love yourself. Jesus is our Neighbour, who does not tolerate our sins – the German word Barth uses is *dulden* – but who carries all our sins. If tolerance was understood in this way, it could have great significance in the future (Barth, 1966a: *KB*: 61-62).

Barth's understanding of the gospel message, and especially of Romans 9 to 11, was that the Jews resist their election, that they reject their Messiah (which are dangerous formulations, since Christians with anti-Semitic views were eager to point out that the Jews killed Jesus), but that they are God's elected, even more so than Christians are, because Jesus is a Jew, Jesus is the King of the Jews, Jesus is God's elected as the Messiah of Israel, despite Israel's resistance against and rejection of Jesus. According to Barth, we cannot think of Jews as rejected by God, but can only think of them as God's elected, in unity with the church's election. The church can only hold onto Israel, Christians can only

¹ Interestingly, in Afrikaans, there is a subtle but important difference between the word *dra* – "to carry" – and the word *verdra* – "to tolerate." Barth suggests that we merely mean the second, that we merely mean enduring each other, by the word tolerance. He uses the German word *dulden* to describe our apathetic endurance, our distant tolerance of each other (Barth, 1966a: *KB*: 62).

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hold onto Jews, in the faith that Jesus was rejected in their place in order for them to be elected. We can only suffer their resistance, in the hope that their resistance will not be able to withstand their election in Christ. As Paul, who was willing to be cut off from Christ, to forsake his own election for the sake of the salvation of Israel, we are also to suffer the unbelief of the Jews, being willing to be rejected for the sake of their election. Like Paul, we can only hold onto our faith while holding onto the Jews, praying and interceding on their behalf (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 198, 202).

Barth argued that we must not respect and tolerate our unbelieving neighbours despite our own faith, but that we must hold onto our unbelieving neighbours because of our faith, because we believe in the God who is also the God of those who resist and reject God in unbelief and disobedience, because we believe in Jesus who was rejected in their place for the sake of their election and salvation. We must not tolerate our unbelieving neighbours at a distance, with an aloof endurance which is in fact veiled apathy. But we must suffer their unbelief. We must carry them, by believing in their election while they do not believe it themselves, by praying and interceding for them, while they resist and reject Jesus' prayer and intercession on their behalf (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 202, 205).

If the church does not hold onto its unbelieving neighbours, if the church does not hear the gospel message of its election in Jesus Christ as the gospel of the election of the whole of humanity in Jesus Christ, if the church believes, obeys and prays for its own sake, rather than for the sake of the world, then it will forfeit its own faith and it will cease to be the church. In our believing, obeying and praying, we act in solidarity with the world, for the sake of the world, in the faith of our unbelieving neighbours' election, in the hope of our unbelieving neighbours' future faith, future obedience and future praying (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 234-235).

Barth said:

“In view of the relation of this God to man it is impossible to expect too much from God, to fail to recognise the supremacy of this God and therefore the promise resting upon this man, to despair of man and therefore to believe in a pertinacity of human unbelief. We can never believe in unbelief; we can believe only in the future faith of those who at present do not believe” (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 295-296).

In an article in 1961, in the American evangelical magazine, *Christianity Today*, a panel of scholars, including Barth, was asked to identify the contemporary idols with which we are confronted today. Barth replied that the primary place where idols are created and worshipped in our society today, is in the church. The church, according to Barth, has been seduced by the temptation to believe in the righteousness of its own morality and piety, and thus it has made its own images of God which it worships. Whereas the world outside the church is very honest in its idolatry of money, sport, technology, sex and a comfortable life, the church tries to hide its worship of its own goodness, by disguising it as worship of God. And herein lies the church's idolatry: that it believes “the indifferent, the atheists, and the Communists” are depraved sinners, while believing that it is righteous and good. The only cure for idolatry within the church, is the true faith in God who declares that all of humanity is unrighteous and godless, but in Jesus Christ all of humanity has been made righteous and reconciled with God (Barth, 1961: *KB*: 37).

In Barth's view, we as believers cannot believe in the rejection of our unbelieving neighbours. Barth asserted that we cannot accept our neighbours' unbelief as an ultimate reality. Not that we can deny their unbelief, for we know our own unbelief, which we could not overcome ourselves and which has been overcome by Jesus Christ. But as we address the unbeliever, what differentiates us, i.e., our faith and their unbelief, is infinitely less significant than that in which we are united, i.e., the fact that Jesus Christ has borne the

rejection of the godless, so that the godless will be accepted by God, despite our unbelief (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 327).

Barth said:

“We cannot – essentially – believe against unbelievers but only for them; in their place, and as we address to them the promise which is to them also” (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 327).

But because we do believe and confess what God has done for the godless in Jesus Christ, that in Jesus Christ God rejected our rejection of God, that in Jesus Christ God contradicted our contradiction of God, we do not simply go along with our unbelieving neighbours, tolerating and accepting their unbelief. Because we act in correspondence to who we are in Christ, because we act in obedience to our calling in Jesus Christ, we act in contradiction to the world, not against the world, but for its sake (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 345).

Barth said that those who believe in and proclaim Jesus Christ...

“...are silent when others speak; they confess when others deny; they stand when others falter; they adore when others blaspheme; they are joyful when others are sad, and sad when others are joyful; at peace when others are restless, and restless when others are at peace. They are different because of their calling. In and with the whole community of God, they are strangers among others” (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 345).

The church’s solidarity with the world, does not mean conformity to the world. The church must at times take in an unpopular or a minority position in the world, or take the initiative of a completely new, alternative course of action, thus giving needed resistance or transformation in the streams of society which drag people along. But we are always to do so out of love for people. The church can never be against any group, or even a single individual, but must always be for humanity as God is for humanity. We are not permitted to become “either purely pessimistic and reactionary, or purely optimistic and revolutionary,” since we act not on principle, but in correspondence to God’s love for humanity. We can never commit ourselves fully, unconditionally to penultimate events or movements in history, but we will participate in them in so far as they give witness to the ultimate hope of humanity in Christ (Willis, 1971: 300).

Not acting in vain

Nigel Biggar, more than fifteen years after writing his famous book on Barth’s ethics, *The Hastening That Waits*, years in which he wrote little on Barth, but concerned himself with many concrete ethical deliberations, ponders in his essay “Karl Barth’s Ethics Revisited” about the elements in Barth’s ethics that he would like to reject, keep, or develop further. Among the elements that he would like to hold onto, apart from the spiritual nature of Barth’s ethics as a relationship between God and human creatures, which is embodied in prayer, is the eschatological tension in Barth’s ethics, as indicated in the title of his book, *The Hastening That Waits* (Biggar, 1993, 1995: 166; Biggar, 2010: 49).

Bringing eschatology into the heart of the Christian life, Barth established a wonderful and ever important tension in all Christian ethics, between modesty and boldness, between humility and hope. It is important to remain humble about what we are able to do, since it is ultimately God and God alone who will renew heaven and earth. But at the same time, precisely because we are realistic about what can and cannot do, and because we have

hope in God who will do that which we cannot do, we are liberated to do what we can, and to disregard what we cannot do. We are not allowed to hide behind our limitations, but commanded to bravely do what we can, in all its imperfection, sinfulness and limitation, in the hopeful confidence that our actions will not be in vain, but will be perfected, sanctified and completed by God's eschatological action. Both hubris and cynicism are denied by the eschatological tension within the Christian life, which enables humility and commitment. Because we wait upon God, in trust, confidence and faith, we can hasten towards God, with boldness, commitment and hope (Biggar, 2010: 45-46).

In a lecture on ethics, entitled "The Gift of Freedom. Foundation of Evangelical Ethics," Barth repeatedly emphasised the we do not fully realise here and now the new beings we are in Christ. In the present we do not live fully as children of the Father, who are free to obey, but we move towards those beings as pilgrims and witnesses. In this eschatological movement towards our free obedience, we call out to "our Father" in prayer. We call out in prayer as the children of the Father that we are bound to become. By calling out to "our Father" in prayer, we live in the expectation of our future freedom and obedience as children of God. In prayer we are free to hope, to hope for the world, the church, our neighbours and ourselves (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 80-81).

Even much earlier, at the time when Barth negated in his commentary on Romans any possibility that religious people can establish God's righteousness by our own efforts, Barth did not view our actions as futile. Speaking in 1919 on the "The Christian's place in society", Barth said it is precisely because we expect the recreation of heaven and earth that we know that our actions now will not be in vain and that we therefore can act confidently and boldly (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 323).

Barth affirmed that even our smallest, silliest and most insignificant acts within this world, make a great, profound and significant contribution to the world, because God chooses to utilise our little actions in the divine action of renewing the world. Barth said:

"We believe there is an inherent meaning in relations already existent, and we believe also in evolution and revolution, in the reform and renewal of relations, and in the possibility of comradeship and brotherhood on our earth and under our heaven, *for the reason* that we are expecting wholly other things; namely, a new heaven and a new earth. We throw our energies into the most humdrum tasks, into the business nearest to hand, and also into the making of a new Switzerland and a new Germany, *for the reason* that we look forward to the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven (Barth, 1928: *WG&WM*: 323).

4.4 Freedom to respond

Call on Me

"Invocation" is not exactly the same as "petition," but it is very closely related to it. The word that Barth uses in the German is "*Anrufung*," which means "to call upon God." In essence, it is the same action as petition, i.e., *to ask; to cry out to God* in our need, *to shout out* to God in our troubled predicament. It comes from Psalm 50:15: "And call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you will honor me," which Barth viewed as the clear and explicit command to call upon God in our need (Barth, 1967: *CFG*: 34).

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Interestingly, Barth made it very clear that the idea that “necessity teaches prayer” is a lie that we must not be deceived into believing. God alone teaches us to pray, by allowing us and commanding us to call upon God in our need. Necessity does not teach us to pray, but teaches us all sorts of other things, like innovation, like making a plan of our own, like relying on our own efforts, or even looking and asking for help from other masters, other lords, who claim that they can help us, but in fact cannot (Barth, 1967: *CFG*: 34-35).

It was very important for Barth, as it was for Luther and Calvin, that prayer is not born from our need, but from the fact that all our prayers have already been heard and answered in Jesus Christ. Barth repeatedly emphasised that the reason we can and must pray, our freedom and command to pray, comes not from all that we need or lack, but from all that we have already been given in grace. It is the only manner in which we can understand, and freely and obediently pray the Lord’s Prayer (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 46).

But why then continue to pray, why then continue to ask, why not just be thankful for what God has already done in Christ? The reason we still ask, although we have already received everything, is because God allows us and commands us to ask ever anew, because the grace of God is new each and every morning, because the reconciliation between God and humanity established in Jesus Christ is not finished, but is a continuous event always happening, moving to its eschatological fulfilment. The reconciled relationship between God and humanity is not a forensic relationship, but a real personal encounter. By the reconciliatory grace of God in Christ, we are allowed and commanded to “invoke” God, to call upon God, to cry out to God, to ask from God all that we need, which is everything already given in Christ, again and again, ever anew.

Ever changing circumstances

One of the aspects that have frustrated ethicists about Barth’s ethics, and that have caused a lot of criticism against Barth’s ethics, is his rejection of ethical “casuistry” and his resulting reluctance to give any fixed rules or generalizations regarding ethics (Migliore, 2010: 4).

R.W. Lovin has made this point in a book widely read: *Christian Faith and Public Choices. The Social Ethics of Barth, Brunner, and Bonhoeffer*. Contrary to the complaint by many ethicists that Barth’s ethics is not specific enough, it is rather its specificity which is the problem, says Lovin. Barth argues that God’s Word, God’s command, speaks in specific, particular contexts, which cannot be generalised for other situations (Lovin, 1984: 24).

According to Lovin, Barth stressed the freedom of the living God to act in each new situation so fiercely, that it makes ethical conclusions impossible. We are required to obey nothing but the will of God, and yet no generalisations regarding the will of God are allowed. This makes public ethics impossible. To obey God’s will, one must choose a reasonable course of action, which you are able to defend in a public argument, which will inevitably entail a generalisation regarding the will of God (Lovin, 1984: 42)

Although this can indeed be very frustrating, making the task of ethics at times almost impossible, the reason for Barth’s rigorous rejection of moral generalisations is understandable. Migliore explains that for Barth, Christian ethics is embedded within God’s “living word and work, personally addressing particular human beings here and now.” Therefore generalisations or rules which will be true for all people at all times in all possible situations, cannot be part of Christian ethics. Christian ethics always takes place within the personal response to God’s word and work addressing this person, or these people, now, at this place, in this situation (Migliore, 2010: 6).

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Nimmo points out that the actualistic ontology within which Barth's ethics functions, implies that God's command must be understood as an "event," not as a reality that "is," but as a reality that "occurs." It cannot be delegated to humanity in general, because it is a personal event happening between God and this specific person, here and now. It is not a static command, but a dynamic, active command. However, it does not command blind obedience to an impersonal and absolute authority, to an arbitrary, capricious god, but it is the event taking place within the covenant relationship between God and humanity. It claims this person as a covenant-partner of God. It binds this person to Jesus Christ. God's universal covenant history claims this person individually, totally. It commands obedience personally, directly. It acts on this person, now, addressing her in this time and place (Nimmo, 2007: 18, 20).

There is no command of God in abstract, but only the command of the triune God, taking place within the covenant history between God and humanity, addressing and claiming someone directly, personally, within a specific time and place. Therefore, no general rules can be abstracted from Scripture, since Scripture bears witness to the triune God of the covenant, who is our living Lord, our Saviour and Commander in action (Nimmo, 2007: 39).

Nimmo affirms that one of the key criticisms against Barth's ethics is that it is too abstract, since it avoids any laws or rules that can be generalised. He gives a few examples. Gustafson believes Barth's confidence in a divine command that can be heard with absolute clarity and can thus provide unwavering moral certainty, is unwarranted. Willis has a similar view, i.e., that Barth's ethics is not realistic about the ambiguity and complexity of moral dilemmas, as well as the moral uncertainty that accompany these genuine dilemmas. The criticism of an abstract ethics, is true, Nimmo concedes, in the sense that Barth does not describe in detail the concrete circumstances in which the command of God might be heard and obeyed. Barth's ethics is not, however, abstract in the sense that it is unaffected by concrete circumstances. That is precisely why Barth continuously resisted general rules or laws, so that his ethics will not become abstracted from ever changing times and contexts. Barth's actualistic understanding of the command of God is what ensures that his ethics is always concrete and contextual. Barth's emphasis on the command of God addressing and claiming a specific, concrete person, directly and personally, giving a divinely commanded vocation to that person within a specific time and place, makes his ethics very concrete (Nimmo, 2007: 73-75).

Although it is true that Barth avoided concrete ethical specifications within the academic task of theological ethics, in particular within his *Church Dogmatics*, preferring not to describe in detail how God's command might be heard and obeyed within certain specific situations, it is questionable whether that would fall within the scope and purpose of the task he was undertaking. To be sure, in his ecclesial and ecumenical ministry and work, in his social and political involvements, in his private and public letters, newspaper articles and interviews, i.e., in the living out of his own vocation within concrete situations, Barth most definitely did not shy away from very concrete and very specific ethical conclusions (Nimmo, 2007: 78-79).

It might be interesting to hear how Barth's critics will respond, if one reverses the criticism, and asks of those who would prefer that Christian ethics provides general rules or laws commanded by God, whether those general laws or rules will avoid the danger of becoming abstract within ever changing circumstances. Barth's use of the words "abstract" and "speculative," referred to general principles, systems, rules or laws, which were abstracted from the concrete covenant history of God moving through history, which speculated on possible courses of action apart from the living, personal, on-going action of the triune God in the world.

God's commanding action

Haddorff responds to critics of Barth's divine command ethics, like Robin Lovin, James Gustafson and William Schweiker, by asserting that all divine command ethics are not the same, and that Barth's unique divine command ethics must not be misunderstood. Haddorff agrees that divine command ethics can be an insufficient and problematic approach to theological ethics, if it is a form of act-deontology. But this is not how Barth employed his divine command ethics, according to Haddorff. Haddorff argues that for Barth the divine command does not mean that the moral agent hears particular divine commands in different situations, which must be obeyed without ethical deliberation. For Barth, the divine command to which humanity responds in obedience, is not different commands in different situations, but God's one act of grace within covenant history. For Barth the primary question is not: "What should I do?" If this was the primary question, then indeed, hearing and obeying the divine command in differing situations becomes problematic. But for Barth the primary question is: "What is God doing in Jesus Christ?" And thus our ethical deliberations are not based on possible human actions, but it is obedient response to the commanding action of God (Haddorff, 2010: 205-207).

Haddorff notes that it is not a coincidence that the ethics of the divine command in *Church Dogmatics* II,2 follow directly upon the doctrine of election in *Church Dogmatics* II,1. Haddorff explains that for Barth, the election is the content of the divine command, just as the gospel is the content of the law, and the divine command is the form of the election, just as the law is the form of the gospel. When God claims humanity by divine command, God claims it by electing Jesus Christ. And humanity which obeys the divine command, is none other than Jesus Christ, God's elected. In Jesus Christ, humanity is elected and claimed as God's covenant-partner, and in Jesus Christ humanity responds obediently as God's faithful covenant-partner. Participating in Jesus Christ, who is the electing God and elected humanity, we act freely and responsibly as God's covenant-partners, elected and claimed by God's commanding grace in Jesus Christ (Haddorff, 2010: 215).

And to the critics who say that if Jesus Christ is both electing God and elected humanity, this means that God's action in fact overwhelms humanity and makes human freedom and agency impossible, the reply would be that Barth's theological ethics is precisely a critique upon the modern (as well as postmodern) notion of human freedom and agency in isolation and independent from the freedom and agency of God. True human freedom and agency, according to Barth, is not the freedom to act apart from God, but freely acting for God, freely responding to God's free action for humanity (Haddorff, 2010: 216).

Biggar makes a very valid point when he notes that the German word that Barth uses for God's "command" is *Gebot*, which is a rather ambiguous word. It can either denote a direct, personal command, even the command of a commanding officer in the military (although the German word used for a military command is *Befehl*), or a promulgated law, which must also be obeyed, but which can be generalised and interpreted in different ways². Barth's emphasis on a direct, concrete, personal command is understandable, since he is emphasising ethics as a personal response to God. However, Biggar fears that this direct command might be seen as a military command of a commanding officer, which must be obeyed without any reflection or interpretation. Furthermore, Biggar has no problem with a God that commands general precepts or laws, as the ambiguous word *Gebot* would suggest, as long as the Commander is never forgotten in our reflection over the command. Whereas

²This ambiguity is rather clear in Afrikaans, which has a similar word *gebod*. The ten commandments are known as the *tien gebooie*. Although the word *gebod* has the notion of a direct command, it definitely also has the notion of law which can be generalised, the second notion being perhaps even more prominent than the first. Interestingly, it does not denote the command of a commanding officer in the military, but similar to the German, that would be described with the word *bevel*.

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Barth is leaning towards the understanding of *Gebot* as the direct and absolute command of God, without the possibility of interpretation, Biggar is leaning towards the understanding of *Gebot* as a general precept or law. Biggar asks the pertinent question: “When did *you* last hear an absolutely definite command of God?” Although he does not deny that ethics involves listening (the first chapter of *The Hastening That Waits* bears the title “Ethics as an Aid to Hearing”) or that God’s command comes with absolute authority, he contends that the freedom to obediently respond to God’s command, if it is a real, active response by a moral agent, must entail the possibility of ethical reflection, which is only possible if the command, the *Gebot*, is in some sense both a personal, direct command, as well as a concrete, promulgated law, which can be reflected upon in general terms (Biggar, 2010:29-31; Biggar, 1993, 1995: 7).

Perhaps Barth’s use of the ambiguous word *Gebot* was not completely unintentional? Although Barth would not be in favour of a generalised *Gebot* which is true for all people at all times and places, it is clear that the command does take a concrete form, commanding concrete action, necessitating concrete reflection, enabling concrete explanations for this action.

Maßmann reminds us that because of the actualistic nature of Barth’s ethics, Barth denies that God gives us commands, but affirms that God gives God-self to us as the commanding God. Because God’s being is only to be found in God’s action, because God can only be known as God acts towards us, therefore God’s command can also only be known in God’s on-going action towards us. It is not by God’s commands, but by God’s Self-giving action that we are claimed, that we are called to responsible action, that we are commanded to respond in correspondence to God’s action (Maßmann, 2011: 177-178).

As Willis points out, it does at times seem as if Barth leaves no room for ethical deliberation, by emphasising that God’s Word demands immediate obedience, sweeping away all questions of right and wrong, and leaving only the question of obedience or disobedience (Willis, 1971: 183).

God’s command is not an independent reality, which encounters us apart from God-self. God-self *is* God’s Word and *is* God’s command. God *speaks* and God *commands*. Thus when we are confronted by God’s command, we are confronted by God-self, thus ending all deliberations and requiring immediate, total obedience (Willis, 1971: 184).

But Barth does, however, allow for ethical *reflection*. This is not simply an analysis of the situation, nor an analysis of our actions, but to view a given situation in the light of God’s prior decision and act, which determines our action in this situation. Nothing in the situation can tell us what to do. Only God’s prior decision and action, which is true for every situation and present in every situation, determines our response and reaction. The only ethical option for the church is to participate in the action of God. And therefore the church must always reflect upon God’s action firstly, in order to react appropriately (Willis, 1971: 180).

Willis asks the important question, whether it is possible for the church in its ethical reflection, to know God’s prior action, God’s Word, God’s command, so unambiguously clear in any given situation, that no further ethical deliberation will be necessary, leaving only the question of obedience or disobedience (Willis, 1971: 199)?

It remains an important question, still open for discussion. What Barth was doing with this approach to theological ethics, was to put the question before modern humanity, whether we are seeking to hear God’s Word, God’s command, in earnest. For if the church should hear God’s Word, if we should hear God’s command, if God’s action were revealed to us, then doing God’s Word, then obeying God’s command, then reacting to God’s action, would truly be the only option, without need for further deliberations. Barth was exposing the extent to

which our ethical deliberations are veiled attempts to shy away from obedience to God's Word; veiled attempts at rationalisation, compromise and self-justification. Barth was witnessing to the Biblical message of Genesis 3, that behind humanity's apparent desire to acquire knowledge of good and evil, hides the sin of simple disobedience to God.

Migliore is of the opinion that Barth's rejection of general ethical rules which applies to all people at all times and places, does not imply a rejection of ethical reflection. To the contrary, it asks for much more ethical reflection, since the task of Christian ethics is never finished, or even half-way finished, but is always starting anew, in each new time and place. Because the covenant history between God and humanity is an on-going history, because God is the living God addressing humanity and acting within the world, requiring of humanity an ever new personal response to God's Word and work, because the Holy Spirit is actively guiding and teaching the church through the Word, Christian ethics can never fall back on the moral knowledge which it has accumulated up to now, but must always begin its reflection from the very beginning. This, on the other hand, does not imply that ethical reflection takes place in a vacuum, disregarding history, tradition or academic findings. Christian ethics is about the personal response, here and now, to the triune God who was, is and will remain faithful to humanity and creation. Christian ethics requires a personal response, here and now, to the living God of salvation history, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God who reconciled the world to God-self in Jesus Christ, the God who is actively addressing us here and now through the Word and the Spirit, the God who will bring the purposes of creation to fulfilment. As Migliore puts it rather beautifully: "Christian ethics is informed, formed, and reformed by the covenant history of God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer with humanity" (Migliore, 2010: 7).

The practical Barth

There are many examples of how Barth engaged in ethical reflection, indeed at times very "practical" ethical reflection regarding the issues of the day. Although not always found in his dogmatic works, Barth was addressing the practical conclusions of his theology in letters, newspaper articles, radio interviews, political speeches and more.

One such an example, is a speech by Barth in 1954, wherein he cautioned the West German government against rearmament. Barth said that the government of West Germany must not believe the illusions that it will be restored to greatness by gaining arms under the leadership of America. Barth reminded them of the horrors of World War II and the Holocaust, and warned them that Germany's rearmament will lead to a Third World War, in which Germany will lie at the very heart of, thus entailing in effect a civil war for Germany. In very clear and practical terms, Barth explained the steps the government must avoid, and the illusions it must expose as lies, in order to prevent starting a war within Germany itself, being at the centre of a Third World War and suffering a nuclear disaster (Barth, 1954: *KB*: 571).

Another example, is a statement in 1958, signed by Barth and three other theologians, in response to the question whether the Swiss army should acquire nuclear weapons. In this statement Barth and his colleagues gave eight very clear indications in plain language, to explain what the church's stance towards warfare should be, and why nuclear warfare can in no way be theologically justified (Barth, 1958: *KB*: 6-7).

We would be mistaken if we thought that Barth's theology, even his *Church Dogmatics*, contains eternal truths, and that it does not address specific, contemporary issues. As have been said, Barth repeatedly rejected the idea of universal ethical principles, and emphasised that the Word of God, the command of God, is always heard and obeyed within a very

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specific context. And when Barth was doing theology, also in his *Church Dogmatics*, he was always engaged with contemporary questions and problems, even very private and practical problems.

Eberhard Busch says that whenever he came to Barth with personal problems, Barth would listen very attentively, while smoking his pipe, but he would rarely respond with more than a word or two. However, in the next lecture, even lectures on his *Church Dogmatics*, Busch would be startled to hear lengthy responses to his personal problems. Busch said that although the *Church Dogmatics* might seem like eternal doctrines, there are many answers given to actual questions posed to Barth by students and colleagues (Busch, 1986: 12).

Migliore uses a distinction made by Oliver O'Donovan in his book *Common Objects of Love*, between "moral reflection" and "moral deliberation," to explain Barth's emphasis on an ethics that always starts again at the beginning. Whereas "moral deliberation" looks a few steps forward, weighing up of different courses of action in order to make a decision regarding the imminent future, "moral reflection" turns backward, not looking at the past, but looking at what has already taken place, what is already present, what long term future has already been promised, who we are and where we find ourselves within the greater narrative. Although Barth also did quite a bit of "moral deliberation," he is always helping us to embed our "moral deliberation" within proper "moral reflection." Barth helped us to always take a step back in order to remember who God is and what God is doing, to remember who we are in the light of God's being and action, and to understand our deliberations as a response to God's being and action, to God's covenant history with humanity, never forgetting that we are "God's creatures, forgiven sinners, adopted children, and responsible and joyful partners" (Migliore, 2010: 25).

According to Biggar, it is the act of prayer that helps us to do this, to place all our ethical deliberations within the context of who we are before God. That is why prayer is so fundamental to Christian ethics, since Christian ethics is not ethics in abstract, but it is ethics as a personal response to God the Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer of humanity. Prayer, Biggar says, takes God seriously. Prayer takes into account that all ethical deliberations must proceed from a prior understanding of who we are before God, and where we are within the salvation history of God (Biggar, 2010: 28).

Haddorff is in agreement with Gerald McKenny's distinction between "ethical instruction" and "ethical reflection" in his book *The Analogy of Grace*. Whereas Barth rejected a fixed casuistry which could instruct us what to do in certain situations, Barth did quite a bit of casuistic illustrations, not as ethical *instructions*, but rather as experiments in ethical *reflection*. Because we are liberated to respond to God's action in covenant-history as God's covenant-partners, established by God's gracious judgment in Jesus Christ, we can test our actions. With the freedom granted by God's gracious forgiveness, we can act and reflect, act and reflect, thus testing our actions and discerning whether they are a faithful response and witness to the action of God, knowing always that we are allowed to ask for forgiveness and to give thanks for God's grace. This continuous cycle of acting, reflecting, learning and acting again, does not happen in individual isolation or in a historical vacuum, but it happens together with the community of faith, who are responding to the action of God within covenant-history (Haddorff, 2010: 251-252).

Horns and cloven feet

Lovin is in agreement with the criticism of Reinhold Niebuhr against Barth, that Barth's ethics is perhaps best suited to times of crises, helping the church to make crucial decisions, but that it does not really help the regular Christian with the regular, and often very ambiguous,

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decisions of everyday life. It is only when the devil shows “both horns and both cloven feet,” as Niebuhr famously said, that Barth’s ethics of critical decision-making is helpful, but it gives no guidance to the ordinary situations of daily living. Barth’s ethics gives moral courage in history’s most pressing moments, but not concrete guidance for regular situations, with the help of general rules or principles, enabling the church to give moral guidance in the public sphere (Lovin, 1984: 23-24).

The interview that Barth had in a British Methodist Journal in 1937, suggests that for Barth, the ethical task of the church is not limited to times of crises, when the devil shows both horns and cloven feet, as Niebuhr suggested. Here Barth suggested that the threat against the freedom of the church is perhaps greater in Great Britain than the threat in Germany, precisely because in Germany the devil has shown his horns and feet. In Great Britain, it was a much more difficult task for the church to guard against those dangers that threaten the gospel of Jesus Christ, dangers that are hidden, even hidden in good and beautiful things, like humanism. It is much harder to swim against the stream and to refute humanism as a revelation of God next to Jesus Christ, than to join the choir and point fingers at the tyranny of Hitler. It would seem that for Barth, it is precisely the ambiguity of “regular” situations that prevented him from giving rules or laws or principles of ethics, which can be generalised and applied to every time and place. Barth’s emphasis that the Word of God must always be heard anew, always asking a new response of obedient faithfulness in each new situation, is perhaps even more of a critical matter in the “regular” ethics of everyday situations, than in the times of crises when the devil is easier to spot (Barth, 1937: KB: 3).

Willis contends that Barth’s ethics of responsibility, i.e., that we must respond with immediate acts of obedience to God’s action as revealed by God’s Word, in different circumstances, brings Barth closer to Niebuhr’s ethics than Niebuhr’s criticism admits (Willis, 1971: 163-164).

Doing theology “as if nothing had happened”

The view that Barth’s ethics was only concerned with times of crises can perhaps be affirmed by Barth’s apparent “retreat” from social issues after the Barmen declaration of 1934 and his banning from Germany in 1935, when he went back to Basel and engrossed himself in his dogmatic work, doing theology “as if nothing had happened.”

It must, however, be remembered that when Barth used this phrase in June of 1933, he was still in Germany and was counting the days before being banned from Germany by the Nazi state, as it did to all its openly political opponents like Barth. At this time, Barth made an urgent call upon the church to do theology “as if nothing had happened,” which according to Eberhard Busch, was easily understood by the church that it should not let the rise to power of the Nazi state influence and alter the way it is doing its theology. Doing theology “as if nothing had happened,” meant that the church should in no way compromise its witness to the Word of God as the only source of revelation and Jesus Christ as the only absolute authority over heaven and earth, and thus implied a fierce resistance to claims of absolute authority by the Nazi state. The great dilemma in the German church, which Barth discovered in 1933, was that the church did theology *as if everything had changed*, as if now suddenly there was a secondary revelation next to the Word of God in the form of German nationalism, as well as another *Führer* with absolute power, who had to be obeyed next to Jesus Christ (Busch, 2004a: 32).

With this phrase, Barth was not advocating passivity on the part of the church, but rather for actively confronting the underlying false theologies which supported the politics of the day. Only if theology remained truly *theological*, bounded to and giving witness to the Word of

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God as the only revelation of God, could it guard against, and critically and prophetically expose “the false theology of race, nation, blood, and soil.” It is not incidental that only a year after Barth said that the church must do theology “as if nothing had happened,” he almost single-handedly drafted the Barmen Declaration, which did exactly what Barth was pleading for: actively confronting the false theology of the day by remaining faithful to the Word of God. With this Theological Declaration of Barmen, the church confessed that there are no secondary revelations of God next to Jesus Christ. This implied, without stating it explicitly, that nothing that had happened in Germany – not the victory of the National Socialist Party, not the appointment of Hitler as Chancellor, not the actions of the *Führer* and his Nazi government, nor any other political event – could alter the fact that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God which the church must hear and obey in life and death. Moreover, with this declaration the church confessed that Jesus Christ is not only the Head and Lord, the *Führer* of the church, but also of the *state* (Haddorff, 2010: 99).

The Barmen Declaration said that the church must not replace the state, nor withdraw from politics. The church’s role is to remind the state that Jesus Christ, the Lord, and the kingdom of God, reigns over both the church and the state, and that the state should fulfil its responsibility to work for justice and peace in the world (Haddorff, 2010: 100).

Barth himself said that theology can never retreat behind a Chinese wall and must always “be engaged in conversation with the contemporary world, whatever the means of the dialogue.” This, Barth felt, was the strength of nineteenth century theology, namely that it opened itself up, it exposed itself to the world, it wrestled with the challenges of its times. The mistake of the nineteenth century theology was not its engagement with the world, but the fact that its primary concern was to be relevant and accessible to the contemporary world. In its “nervous” apologetic defence of the Christian faith to the cultured despisers of religion, it lost the boldness to speak its own unique message, which was in fact the best contribution it had to offer the world (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 17)

And this had implications for its engagement with the world. As the Christian faith was no longer understood to be based upon the Word and work of God, but upon humanity’s inner experience, it did not have firm enough ground under its feet to resist the movements of its time. It was vulnerable to the forces of the world, since humanity’s inner experience is not strong enough to hold back the tide of history. Without God as the source and content of its faith, the Christian was “condemned to uncritical and irresponsible subservience to the patterns, forces, and movements of human history and civilisation” (Barth, 1960: *HG*: 26).

Barth explained in an article about the development of his own thought, that what people perceived as a retreat behind a Chinese wall of theology, as the theology of a monk in a cloister, removed from the problems of the world, from 1928 to 1938, is very ironic, because it was precisely the time in which he frequently travelled abroad, read international books, and had interaction with different people and places, more so than ever before in his life. He even developed a love for horse riding during these years. The simple truth is that Barth was in this period even more involved in the world than before. But what people perceived as a retreat, was the new found freedom with which he did theology (especially after writing his book on Anselm), by finally letting go of all attempts to ground his theology on philosophy, for instance anthropology, and to speak of Jesus Christ, who is the only revelation of God, and of helping the church in its only task: proclaiming Jesus Christ. In order to do this, Barth embarked on a critical reflection of the traditional doctrines of the church, especially of the Reformers, and especially of Calvin. But for him, he did not retreat into confessional theology, but felt liberated to speak the gospel message of God’s grace in Jesus Christ more clearly, less ambiguously, simply and more accurately to the world. And of course, this is also the time that his theology became very political, but it was less a case of Barth becoming more political, than of his proclaiming of Jesus Christ becoming more problematic in the political arena. Barth claimed that what he was saying in those years did not really

change that much, but the space in which his voice resounded changed rather dramatically, so that he found himself at the head of the Confessing Church, to his own great surprise. For this, Barth said, he could only thank one man, Adolf Hitler. For what Hitler did, was to make the implication of the same gospel message so much more critical. Barth simply proclaimed what the Bible clearly says: that we are to serve God alone and no other idol next to God, that the Holy Spirit will guide us in the whole truth, and that the grace in Jesus Christ is sufficient to forgive all our sins and to govern the whole of our lives. And suddenly this became a very problematic thing to say in Germany. Suddenly it had to be said as a call, as a battle cry, as a confession. And most surprisingly, suddenly all the liberal, pietistic, confessional and Biblicist theologians who accused Barth of so many things, of doing theology without ethics, of not emphasising sanctification and the Christian life, of not speaking enough about existential decisions or practical choices, suddenly they were either part of the German Christians, or maintained a neutral, tolerant silence about Hitler (Barth, 1948: KB: 272-274).

Refusing to be silent

Busch shows that although many have commented on Barth's apparent silence on the Jewish question, especially in the years of 1935-1945, when he was no longer in Germany, but working on his dogmatics in Basel in Switzerland, these criticisms are unfounded. Barth opposed the Nazi state's handling of the Jews before 1935, which was a contributing factor in his dismissal at the University of Bonn, which caused the parting of ways between him and the church in Germany, as well as his expulsion from Germany. And in the years 1935-1945, Barth was not completely silent on the issue of the Jewish question. After the *Kristallnacht* of 1938, Barth gave a lecture to the Swiss Protestant Relief Agency, which had the slogan of John 4:22, "Salvation is from the Jews," and which helped racially persecuted people with the assistance of Barth. Barth said that the German state is not only persecuting Jews, but also persecuting the God of the Jews, and thus the God of the church. Barth, the pacifist, who was directly opposed to Germany's war policy in 1914, now urged the church to support military resistance against the German state, "even if no one else does." In fact, Barth was so outspoken during those years that the German Foreign Ministry and the Swiss Government joined forces in trying to mute Barth. Furthermore, in 1944, after Rabbi Taubes informed Barth about the extermination of Jews in Hungary, Barth urged the Swiss government to do something. With a "quavering" voice, Barth said that the existence of God is proved by the fact that every nation who murders Jews, will come to a horrible fall, like Pharaoh's Egypt did. Although commentators have interpreted Barth's extremely complex discussion of Israel and the church in the *Church Dogmatics II,2*, written more or less in 1940, in different ways, Busch is convinced by the clear remarks above, that this passage regarding Israel and the church in the *Church Dogmatics* can in no way be interpreted as a silence or implicit support of the Nazi state's persecution of the Jews. To the contrary, Busch believes it served as the theological foundation, together with his critique against the two-kingdom doctrine, for Barth's continued opposition to Nazi Germany's persecution of the Jews (Busch, 2004b: 58-59; Busch, 2004a: 34-35).

Jehle shows that even though most people in Switzerland did not agree with Hitler, many felt that Barth's openly critical stance against Hitler was too dangerous and provocative. Barth was attacked in a lead article of the *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, for the danger that he brought to Switzerland. Barth responded with a letter entitled "Necessary dangers" on 3 May 1939, wherein he said that avoiding these necessary dangers now, will lead to a greater danger in the future. Barth touched on a sensitive nerve of the Swiss mentality, which, with the benefit of hindsight that we have now, is obvious, but which was a very sharp insight at the time. Barth said that Switzerland should be wary of not isolating itself from the rest of the world and being concerned only with its own affairs. The greater danger of neutrality, was that one

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could fail to see that everything was at stake. For Barth, neutrality was not an option, especially not regarding Hitler. Barth, the pacifist, called for armed resistance against National Socialism and in 1939, at the age of 55, voluntarily joined the Swiss military service. Barth was so vocal in his attacks upon Hitler's regime and clear in his public displays of support for armed resistance, that in 1941 Barth was banned from speaking on political matters anywhere in Switzerland, his telephone was illegally tapped and it was considered whether Barth should or could be thrown in jail (Jehle, 2002: 61-65, 68-70).

At a youth conference in 1941, three lecturers were invited: George Thürer, a historian, Emil Brunner, and Barth. Barth's speech was banned, but not Brunner's nor Thürer's, and it is easy to see why. Brunner gave a lecture on the idea of Swiss democracy. Thürer called the young people to the Christian faith and loyalty to Switzerland. Barth, however, went straight for the politically sensitive issues of the day (Jehle, 2002: 72-73).

In another speech made in 1944, Barth said that if the church remains silent in the face of world events, it is no longer the Christian church. The church should rather err on the side of standing up for the weak too many times, than err on the side of refraining to stand up for the weak, even once. The church should rather be "unpleasantly loud" wherever justice and freedom are threatened, than allow itself to be "pleasantly silent!" (Jehle, 2002: 80-81).

Jehle says that it is also noteworthy that, many years later, not a single member of the Swiss government attended Barth's funeral, but three months after his funeral, at the funeral of Karl Jaspers, there were government officials. The tense relationship between Barth and the Swiss government, causing the government to spy on Barth's telephone conversations, goes to show that during the years in Basel, Barth was not regarded as an innocuous presence, as an academic sitting in his ivory tower, having no influence on the surrounding world, but rather as a dangerous and problematic presence for the Swiss government and people (Jehle, 2002: 1).

Some has interpreted Barth's confession of guilt towards the Jews, after the war, as a confirmation that Barth did not speak out on behalf of the Jews. But – apart from the fact that Barth was always aware of the incompetence, imperfection and incompleteness, the thoroughly sinfulness, of all our obedience, which would of course allow for a confession of guilt and repentance, since God's perfect righteousness always towers in judgment over our little acts of righteousness – it should be noted that neither Gogarten, Hirsch nor Althaus made any confession of guilt or any form of repentance (Busch, 2004b: 54-55).

Public theology

In the summer of 1946, Barth returned to Bonn, where he left in controversy in 1935. Barth spoke in the semi-ruins of Bonn, speaking almost as an alien, as the bad memory of old times (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 7). And rather remarkably, Barth spoke about faith as trust, faith as knowledge, but also of faith as *confession*. And the double meaning of "confession" must not be lost on us – implying that we confess our sinful action and inaction, but also that we publicly confess our faith in God with word and deed.

Barth said of faith as confession the following:

"Christian faith is the decision in which men have the freedom to be publicly responsible for their trust in God's Word and for their knowledge of the truth of Jesus Christ, in the language of the Church, but also in worldly attitudes and above all in their corresponding actions and conduct" (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 28).

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To confess our sin, was for Barth not only a matter of confessing this or that transgression. By confessing the all-embracing grace of God in Jesus Christ, we confess that all our action and inaction stand under God's judgment.

Later in the same lecture series, Barth made this confession:

"We can only see the infinite guilt in which we stand over against God; the God who became man. Where we are guilty towards man, we are automatically reminded of *this* man. For every man we have offended and tormented is one of those whom Jesus Christ has called His brethren" (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 105-106).

Once more Barth emphasised that faith is obedience. Although faith is a mystery in the encounter between God and humanity, the freedom which corresponds to God's freedom, entails a *decision*, made in *time*, and thus *historical action*, because God's free action is also historical action in time. A choice must be made, against unbelief and for faith, against distrust and for trust, against ignorance and for knowledge, against neutrality and for responsibility, against faith as a private matter, and for faith as public life. There Barth stood, in the city where he was rejected 10 years earlier by the Confessing Church for the radical political implications that he concluded from its Theological Declaration of Barmen, and said once more that faith that does not lead to public action, is unbelief. Faith is not only the freedom to trust, not only the freedom to know, but also the freedom to respond. These freedoms are inseparable within the one decision of faith (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 28-29)

More than politics

Dietrich Ritschl said that what Barth emphasised with his rejection of the Lutheran doctrine of two kingdoms, i.e., that there should be no separation between the church's ecclesial life and its political life, must also be extended to other spheres of life. For Barth, theology could never ignore politics, but according to Ritschl, neither can it ignore economics, the empirical, psychological and social sciences, as well as other scientific disciplines. Ritschl feels that although it was important to choose for Barth's theology in the first part of the 20th century, this would be a mistake today. He criticises Barthians severely for merely repeating Barth's terminology today, without translating it in the contemporary situation, without truly engaging with contemporary society in all its dynamic diversity. Ritschl feels that the time for great theological systems, such as Barth's, had come and gone, and that the time had come for a whole range of different discussions between theology and other disciplines, between Christians and people of other convictions. And furthermore, these discussions must truly be *discussions*, wherein Christians remain open to be informed, criticised and taught by other voices, instead of just proclaiming our own convictions (Ritschl, 1986: 86-93).

Ritschl pleads urgently and poetically for a theology that truly engages with the world in all its diversity:

"We will not only *say* that Israel is important for Christian theology, we will have to *do* theology with the Jews. Our task is not merely to *stress the importance* of ecumenical work, but to actually *do* this work. Nor will we *merely respect* the various sciences in the university, such as medicine, anthropology, philosophy, and law, for we will have to *engage* in interdisciplinary discourse, attempting not to teach the truth but to seek it and to make a meaningful Christian contribution to such discourse. And, although it was courageous and magnificent that the Barmen Declaration stated that there are no areas of life where Jesus Christ is not our Lord, ours is the task to *fill in positively* what it means for humans – for 'man,' as Barth and his contemporaries said – we will have to *spell out in detail* and test the theological assertions with reference to men

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and women, children and old people, the healthy and the sick. The concrete human existence must not get lost; economic, sociological, and psychological, even psycholinguistic insights belong right in theology. What Barth rightly attempted with regard to politics in his qualified rejection of two-realm doctrine must also be applied to all of these areas of inquiry" (Ritschl, 1986: 92).

Ritschl says that he has always been more interested in people than books, and more concerned for the life of the church than for the academic truth of theology. And although this might shock his Barthian colleagues, Ritschl feels that he found some affirmations in his stance from Barth in person (Ritschl, 1986: 89).

Bernard Ramm, who became a Christian, an evangelical Christian, amidst the fierce battles between fundamentalism and modernism, says that he was afraid, like other evangelicals, to listen to other voices in the world, for fear that his faith might be threatened. A passing remark in one of Barth's lectures helped Ramm to be liberated from this fear. In response to a question, Barth said that because we believe in the truth of God as attested to in Holy Scripture, and if we really believe in this truth, we should have no fear of opening any door or window in the world of knowledge, for the knowledge of God cannot be intimidated by the knowledge of humanity. Theology does not have to be defensive, does not have to retreat behind high walls, but can engage confidently and fearlessly with the world, because it does not have to guard the truth, but only witness to the Truth, which is sure in itself (Ramm, 1986: 121).

For Barth, the church has no need to be apologetic about its own language, the language of Canaan. But the proclamation of the church must also take on other forms, socio-political, contextual-historical forms, if it is the proclamation of God's grace for the sake of the world. The proclamation of God's grace in Jesus is the hopeful expectation of the new heaven and earth, of Christ's coming, whereby humanity and all things will be made new, and therefore it must embody and move towards this hope. The church does not exist for itself, but for the sake of the world. When the church preaches, prays, partakes in the sacraments, it can never be an attempt to escape from the world, but must always be done as a witness to, an intercession on the behalf, and an action for the sake of the world (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 44-45, 50).

The confession of faith happens mainly in the language of the church, but also in the language of the person on the street. The confession of faith means that the public implications of the gospel must be translated by the church, so that the surrounding world will hear and see the church's decision of faith. In 1933, many people spoke the language of the church in Germany, but were unable to translate it into public life (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 31-32).

Some theologians, like Rosato, feel that Barth would have made this point better if he had broadened his description of the work of the Holy Spirit, and not associated it so closely with Jesus Christ and the church. For Barth, the work of the Holy Spirit is to point to what has been done in Jesus Christ and to gather, equip and send the church out with the task of witnessing to Jesus Christ. Rosato feels that Barth is bordering on universalism in his Christology, while bordering on church-centrism in his anthropology. Barth could have, according to Rosato, have broadened the work of the Holy Spirit, as making effective the lordship of Jesus over the whole of creation and in bringing it to its eschatological fulfilment (Rosato, 1981: 164-165).

Rosato is not alone in his criticism. Others, like Berkhof, for instance, would probably agree. Whatever the case may be, it is worth investigating, although it is not within the scope of this study. A possible counter-argument, is that Barth's understanding of the church is very ambiguous and does not have clear boundaries. So when Barth is speaking about the

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church, he is in a sense not speaking of the church alone, but speaking of the church as a representation of the whole of humanity. And when he says the task of the church for which it is empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to witness to Jesus Christ, he understands it in the broadest possible sense, i.e., that we as human beings are to give witness with the whole of our lives to the lordship of Jesus over the whole of creation, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, whereas Rosato views the work of the Holy Spirit in Barth's theology as merely backward looking towards what has already been done in Jesus, and argues that it should be forward looking to the fulfilment of the coming kingdom of God (Rosato, 1981: 165), the refrain repeated throughout in Barth's theology, *Veni Creator Spiritus!*, "Come Creator Spirit!" was the prayer which to a large extent exemplified the truly forward looking nature of the whole of his theology.

Obst disagrees with Berkhof's assertion, which was also taken up by other scholars such as Gerber, Eicher, Link, Moltmann and Frey, that Barth underappreciated the work of the Holy Spirit by viewing it too narrowly in relation to the noetic function of the Holy Spirit, i.e., enabling knowledge of God, but not playing any further part in God's salvation of the world. Obst admits that the noetic function of the Holy Spirit is paramount in Barth's theology, but argues that Barth did not limit the work of the Spirit to knowledge of God. Also, it has not been sufficiently appreciated, says Obst, how foundational the work of the Holy Spirit is in Barth's whole theological endeavour, as the precondition of every truly theological statement, even if they are not statements about the work of the Holy Spirit as such (Obst, 1998: 12).

The sixth thesis of the Barmen declaration said that the church must remain free to do its one and only task, to proclaim the message of God's free grace to the world. This freedom does not mean that the church must stand in its own little corner and busy itself with its own concerns, in isolation from the rest of the world. The church can and must enter into conversations with the state, society, art, science and the surrounding world in all its aspects, not only to proclaim the message of God's grace to the whole world, but also to remain open to the possibility that the Lord of the church, who is also the Lord of the world, might speak to the church through the world (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 52).

Barth was not so much concerned with the "translation" of the gospel in the sense that liberal theology tried to make the content of the gospel more palatable for modern humanity, to fit the gospel into a modern worldview. After his lecture in the ruins of Bonn, Barth was asked why he spoke so candidly about the Christian faith, while many of the students coming from other faculties and listening to his lecture were not Christians. To which Barth replied that all people can and should hear the clear gospel message that God loves them, without translating it, without weakening, changing or reducing that message. But Barth was very much concerned with another kind of "translation," whereby the gospel message is confessed by the church in word and deed, with all the necessary political implications entailed within that confession. Public confession, for Barth, did not mean expressing the confession in the terms and principles that people outside the church are comfortable with, but in actively living the confession, and in making the difficult decisions when historical events necessitates action by the church.

When to speak and when to be silent

The same accusation of Barth being silent, is made with reference to the Cold War years. During those years Barth was fiercely criticised, especially by Niebuhr, for not speaking out against communism (Metzger, 2003: 190).

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Because the Word of God is always heard within a specific context, a specific time and place, making general conclusions impossible, Barth was cautious to make sweeping statements regarding communism. Barth explained in a TV interview in 1966 that the reason why he did not oppose communism in the same way as he did National Socialism, was because everybody in the West was already against communism, whereas in the case of National Socialism, everybody either agreed with it or they were too afraid to say anything against it. Furthermore, whereas communism is based upon the good intention of addressing the social question, National Socialism was only based on anti-Semitism. Barth did not support communism, but he warned against the fear of communism, which could serve as another cause for war. Jehle admits that it could be argued that Barth underestimated the cruelties of Stalin. But Barth spoke a very different language in his letters to his friends in the East, than he did in the West. In these letters Barth said that they should give a clear witness to the gospel in their context and give prophetic criticism to the communist state. Barth admonished bishop Albert Bereckzy in Hungary, that if Barth, as his friend, swam against the stream in the West, he also had to swim against the stream in the East. Barth also warned the Czech, Josef L. Hromadka, that he was guilty of the same natural theology as Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr, by arguing that communism is a divine manifestation, just as they are arguing that capitalist democracy is a divine manifestation, and thus the "cold war" is fuelled by the same natural theology on both sides. However, in the West, where everybody was so certain about the evils of atheistic communism and the goodness, even divine goodness, of Western democracy, Barth felt compelled to "swim against the stream" and not add his voice to the choir of accusations levelled by the West against the East, divinising the West and demonising the East (Jehle, 2002: 15, 88-92, 95-99).

For Barth, the West was too self-righteous and hypocritical in its absolute condemnation of communism, without acknowledging the weaknesses and failures of capitalism, and the truth in the quest for social justice. Furthermore, with so much at stake, with the possible annihilation of humanity and the earth, which had become a possibility since the dawn of nuclear weapons, the West was irresponsible in its aggression against the East. With its quest for world domination, the West was merely a mirror image of the East, according to Barth (Hunsinger, 2000a: 45-46).

In an afterword to a book of Josef Hromádka, *Gospel for Atheists*, Barth gave seven points of what the proclamation of the gospel entails, as the primary and only proper task of the church, both in the West and in the East. The gospel, firstly, is to be proclaimed by the church in the East and the West as the power of God, made knowable to faith, whereby all are saved, Jews and Greeks, pious and atheists, West and East. The church in the East and the West must serve God and all of humanity by calling them to faith in this good news. Secondly, the power of the gospel is the power of freedom. Because God gave God-self to all people in Jesus Christ, they are free for God and free for their neighbour, and in that way truly free. Thirdly, as the free gospel which liberates, it is to be proclaimed with the conviction that all people, in both the East and the West, are captive, whether they are "Marxists," "capitalists," "imperialists," "Fascists" or old-fashioned "church people." The free gospel of liberation, fourthly, breaks the bondage of the law, and calls upon humanity to discard their interpretations and evaluations of the situation of the world, which become enslaving dogmas. All the political and economic ideologies, worldviews, principles, moral systems, traditions, categories of "believers" and "unbelievers" or "us" and "them," whereby people try to make sense of their world, but which imprison them, must be set aside as human folly, in the fear and joy of the Lord. Fifthly, the church, in East and West, should expect that only a minority in the public sphere will understand them, and that they will be mocked, rejected, attacked and undermined by the majority. If the church's message finds too much agreement in the public arena, it should be taken as a dangerous sign. As a sixth point, Barth noted that the unity of the church, including the church in the East and the West, is threatened wherever the gospel is not proclaimed freely, wherever the convictions of the East or the West are forced onto the gospel, wherever the church feels obliged to proclaim those

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convictions as a continuation of the gospel. If this happens, fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, which find themselves on opposite ends of the Cold War, have the responsibility to correct each other, with patience, humour and hope. Lastly, the unity of the church is powerfully at work where it is concerned with God and only God, and for that reason, concerned with humanity and only humanity (Barth, 1958: KB: 81-83). By this last point, Barth meant that the church should proclaim the gospel of the God who is for the whole of humanity, and not add any human ideal, worldview or ideology, which would in fact nullify the church's whole message.

In 1952 Barth said that the church's role in creating peace in the world, is simply to be the church. Only then can the church be a third power within the world, and only the church can truly be a third power, given that it continues to be nothing more or other than the church. Simply being the church, means remaining free from nationality, culture, worldview and ideology, and being obedient to Jesus Christ alone. Without obedience to Jesus Christ alone, the church is not free, and if the church is not free, it cannot fulfil its calling in the world. The moment the church begins to serve any other idea, cause, movement or power, instead of serving Jesus as its only Master and Lord, the church is choosing sides and thus contributing to conflict and war, instead of bringing peace. It may be a cold war, it may be only a war of ideas, but it will still be a war, and not peace. Barth said that church in both the West and the East were guilty in this regard. The church plays its part in bringing peace by worshipping and obeying its God, who is the Lord of both West and East, the Lord of democrats and communists, of Christians and atheists. And most importantly, the church fulfils its task in the world by worshipping and obeying its Lord, who is the God of human beings, not the God of ideas or things, not the God of nations or cultures, not the God of institutions, causes or movements. The moment the church is seduced by the world's idolatry, whereby economics or ideals or anything else, no matter how good or noble it may look or sound, become more important than human beings, then it is no longer free to serve God alone, and thus to serve humanity alone. The Korean War was a prime example of this. In the name of "freedom" and "justice" millions of human beings were killed. The church's task is to call out with a loud and clear voice that human beings are more important than things or ideas. All the truths in the world, all the good in the world, cannot be traded for the life of even one human being. In both the East and West there is idolatry, which is the source of its materialism and propaganda. Against these words, the church must proclaim the one and only Word of God, the Logos. Both sides are filled with lies, and against these lies the church must proclaim the Word of Truth. And this Logos, this Word, this Truth, is simple. The world tries to justify its idolatry by making things very complicated. The world tries to hide its lies with long and intricate explanations. The church's task is speak once again clearly and simply the truth. Barth pleaded with the ecumenical movement to discard all diplomacy and to speak more plainly and honestly. To tell the world clearly and unambiguously that God is the God of all of humanity and that every human being is important to God. The church's role in bringing peace is not to join any peace movement, but to remain free from all movements and to speak honestly, plainly and simply about God's love for the whole of humanity (Barth, 1952: KB: 161-162).

Barth warned that the church should not only guard against an un-Christian silence, but also against an un-Christian word. Whereas it seemed to others like a change of direction in Barth's theology, or at least in his politics, Haddorff argues that Barth's theological and political direction remained steadfast in his opposition to any assimilation between Christian theology and ethics on the one hand and nationalistic or cultural ideologies on the other (Haddorff, 2010: 118).

Swimming against the stream

While we might be tempted to think of Karl Barth as the great theologian of the 20th century, it is important to understand that Barth was in many ways always the outsider. He was a Swiss, not a German. He was Reformed, not Lutheran. He was part of the Confessing Church, a small minority church against the German Evangelical Church. And even in the Confessing Church, he soon became an outsider, as his theology and politics became too problematic for its leaders. Even in Switzerland, he was too politically outspoken in his opposition to fascism, which labelled him a dangerous trouble maker. He was part of a small group arguing against German rearmament after the war. And, as has been stated, he was once again an outsider during the Cold War years, when he did not join the choir of condemnation targeted at the Communist East. Although few disputed his influence, Barth was never very popular or warmly welcomed. His presence caused too much of a disturbance and a nuisance for many (Heron, 2000: 299).

For Barth, whenever the church confesses, it must do so with the utmost “fear and trembling,” not comfortably floating along with the tide of popular opinion, historical movement, national optimism, cultural confidence or political pressure, but always “against the stream.” The reason for this, is not to be difficult or obscurantist, the church should not swim against the stream in order to draw attention to itself. But because God is “wholly other,” because God stands over against our human endeavours, the church should always guard against the misuse of God as an instrument to give divine legitimacy to our human agendas. And that is why Barth was so uncomfortable with a comfortable church, with a church that allows itself to conform to the popular sentiments in society (Jehle, 2002: 3).

The church must be very cautious in its confession, and not haste into a *status confessionis*. It is extremely important that the church’s confession should not be a mere *reaction* to events in the world which it *resents*. The church’s confession must be a free action, born out of its love, faith and hope. When the church confesses, we do not do so in order to change something within the world which we do not like, to convince institutions we do not agree with, or to be noticed by the people of the world. When the church confesses, we do not expect any productivity or results to come from that confession. Because in confession, the church does not give witness to human action, but to God’s action for the world, and to the proper place of human action within God’s action. The church does not confess *against* the world, but for the sake of, and in solidarity with the world (Haddorff, 2010: 380-381).

In his first commentary on Romans, Barth warned that the divine renewal that God brings about, is not to be equated with human progress. Not even our best human endeavours, not even democracy or social democracy, may be divinised. Under no circumstances does the Word of God allow us to politicise God’s divine action (Jehle, 2002: 41-42).

This, for Barth, did not mean that Christians should abstain from politics, but that they should strive towards political action which is free from ideology. In the first edition of his commentary on Romans, Barth interpreted Romans 13 (which seems to give divine sanction to the authorities and thus contradicts Barth’s interpretation of the revolutionary trajectory of Romans) to mean that Christians should fulfil their civic duties as citizens and party members, with a sober calmness and not be deluded by ideological claims. Politics, for Barth, was very practical and preliminary action. It was to take a position, which, at that moment in time, gave the best, though completely imperfect, possibility of a free response to God’s action, without any illusions of confusing that political party’s agenda with God’s free action, which always remains radically new. Barth’s joining of the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland in 1915, as well the Social Democratic Party in Germany in 1931, was not because their policies affirmed the Word of God, but merely because it represented, according to Barth, the best possibility for healthy politics. Politics was supposed to be practical, not ideological. It was said of Barth in 1928 that

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he would form an alliance with anybody in order to attack anti-Semitism, even with the “devil’s grandmother” (Jehle, 2002: 42, 44, 46-48).

Therefore, in 1914-1915, when his theological professors publicly supported the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II, Barth not only rejected their liberal theology, but also joined the Social Democratic Party to publicly and practically voice his opposition to them (Green, 1989: 16).

However, Barth did this very cautiously and hesitantly. And although he joined the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland in April of 1915, he withdrew from any active participation in it by September the same year. To Barth’s mind, the Social Democratic Party’s answers for the ethical dilemmas of modern humanity was not critical, radical enough. In line with liberal theology, it believed in humanity’s ability to improve itself and better the world by its own actions. The concerns that this political party had for humanity, for the value, rights and dignity of all human beings, always remained important for Barth, but to him, its social programs could not address the deep ethical dilemma of modern humanity’s attempts at moral autonomy and self-justification (Willis, 1971: 10-11).

Durand argues that although Barth said that members of the church can and should temporarily, anonymously work with or even join a political party which they deem to be the best analogy to their faith, Barth felt that Christians should not claim a visible stance within party politics *as Christians*. Barth also rejected the notion of forming a Christian political party. The church, according to Barth, is its own political “party,” who is always on the side of humanity, on the side of God’s justice in Jesus Christ whereby the captives are liberated, the poor and weak are lifted up, the lost are found, and never on the side of one party or one cause. Although Barth said that the individual Christian should remain anonymous within the political arena, the church as a whole does not remain anonymous, but addresses the state, indirectly through preaching, but also more directly through official statements. Durand asks critically whether an anonymous voice could truly be a prophetic voice. He asks whether Barth did not neglect the role of the individual Christian to hear and obey God’s Word in society, *as a Christian*, as emphasised in Kuyper’s understanding of the relation between the church and the state. However, Durand fully agrees with Barth that the church should do more than be individual Christians in society, as in the Kuyperian model, and must also collectively take in a critical, prophetic stance over against the state. The church should not dictate to the state how it should act, but because the church proclaims the coming kingdom of God and its divine justice, which cannot be realised by humanity, it should always take in a critical stance towards the state, and never give unconditional endorsement to any political, social or economic party, movement or cause. This the church should do at all times, and not only when the church itself is negatively impacted by the actions of the state. The church may also praise the state when its actions serve as analogous signs of the kingdom of God, and of course, the church itself, in its own actions, must be an example to the state by giving an analogous witness to the kingdom of God (Durand, 1980: 10-15).

For Barth, the church should be pure “humanists” in politics. The church must not get caught up in and give support to, and most definitely never ever give scriptural or divine legitimisation for any movement, any ideal, any institution, any principle, any economy, any nation or group. No cause, no system, no fixed morality, no way of life, no form of education, nor any manifestation of the church, can be endorsed unconditionally by the church. Nor can the church support any activist or revolutionary fixed negation of any of the above. In the public arena the church must speak on behalf of humanity, and nobody or nothing else. Humanity which is loved by God, and reconciled to God in Jesus Christ, and which is therefore to be valued, to be treated fairly and with dignity, is the church’s sole political message (Werpehowsky, 2000: 230).

Barth had learnt in 1914, with the war policy of Germany, as well as the 1930’s, with the rise of Nazism, that when everybody is in agreement, and the church seems very confident that God supports and mandates your country’s ideals, then one should be extremely wary and cautious

in your ethical discernment. The Word of God should always be heard, in the first instance, as God's Word for me, for us, in our context, and then as the Word of God for the world, as we are in solidarity with the rest of the world. The church should always be very cautious that the Bible is not abused to legitimise the divinisation of some (us) and the demonisation of others (them), for then the Bible would not be speaking as the living Word of God addressing us here and now, to which we must respond faithfully, in solidarity with the rest of the world.

It might be argued that, during the Cold War, Barth was not fully aware of the extent of the exploitation that Russia's occupation of Hungary entailed, but it cannot be argued that Barth was not always on the side of those who are exploited, outcast and oppressed. Even just his habit of preaching in prisons (to the point of rejecting invitations to preach in churches on his visit to the USA, and preaching in American prisons), goes to show where his concern lay. And that was part of Barth's problem with the capitalist West's absolute condemnation of the communist East, without even a hint of self-critique regarding the exploitative nature of capitalism, nor an inkling of comprehension for the concerns of socialism regarding the social ills of society. From early in his life, when confronted with the social concerns of his blue collar congregants in Safenwil as a young minister, Barth had an affinity for socialism, although he saw its limitations and understood that the human dilemma goes deeper than the economic system. Furthermore, Barth was very much aware of a threat greater than atheistic communism, namely nuclear war, which had the potential to wipe out humanity and God's creation³. Rather than to add his voice to the global tension which had the potential to spark nuclear war, Barth opted for silence. And still, it would be untrue that Barth was completely "silent," because apart from the ethics embedded in the dogmatics that Barth's was labouring so diligently on, Barth spoke very clearly in the public sphere, in newspaper articles, letters and interviews, regarding the immorality of nuclear armament. The same, however, cannot be said of the likes of Niebuhr and others who criticised Barth for his silence, but was rather silent in their criticism of their own country's transgressions, regarding participation in the Cold War, as well as the exploitation of the third world and the misbehaviour of multinational corporations, which accompanied unbridled capitalism (McLean, 1981: 3).

A free church

It is interesting that when Barth went on his one and only visit to America in 1962, he said to an audience in Chicago, that if he was an American, if that was the context in which he had to hear the Word of God and respond to it obediently, he would set himself the task of doing a theology of freedom. He would attempt to work and live for a freedom that is free from a groundless feeling of inferiority to Europe, as well as a groundless feeling of superiority over Africa and Asia. And then Barth added, that he would also attempt to do theology free from the fear of communism and Russia, even free from the fear of nuclear war! To live and work in freedom, freedom from all the "powers and principalities" – all the powers that pull us in different directions, filling us with fear for others, so that we will support its goals – would mean to live and work for *humanity*, in solidarity with the whole human race. Not the "liberty" of the Statue of liberty, which perhaps suggest that my liberty means separation from others, or protection against the threat of others. Rather, the freedom which Jesus Christ gives to all, true human freedom, freedom from all the powers that be, freedom to love my neighbour as myself, regardless of the threats of the powers of the world. Then Barth asked a very critical question: Will there ever be such an American theologian? Barth did not seem to think that there were such an American theologian of freedom, and therefore ended by saying that he hopes that one day such an American theologian will come to the fore (Barth, 1966b: KB: 79).

³ Interestingly, in South Africa, many of the inhumane cruelties of Apartheid were excused by church leaders as a necessary, and even divinely mandated, precaution against the "red danger" of communism.

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Barth was neither a supporter of capitalist democracy nor atheistic communism, but of social democracy, because it is both an expression of freedom and of solidarity with the poor and marginalized. However, even though that was his view as the best form of a state, he did not regard it as a rule or law which can be generalised and applied to every state in any part of the world, at all times. The role of the church is not to exegete a model for the perfect state, which can be applied to all countries at all times, but rather to hear the Word of God anew in its own context and to give a prophetic witness to the lordship of Jesus Christ, which will keep the state, in which ever form, in check.

The church's free proclamation of the gospel is, according to Barth, the best way to limit the state's power and guard against the state's authority becoming absolute. Barth was aware how miserably the church had failed to do this task in the past, and how it at times gave divine legitimacy to the state's power, instead of proclaiming God's authority over against the state. But still, this is the church's calling. Only the church can protect people against the state's misuse of power, by bearing witness to the absolute sovereignty of God. Although the state will find an obedient church to be a very uncomfortable presence, it should always allow for the church to do its task, in order to protect the state from becoming inhuman (Jehle, 2002: 66-67).

Barth was inspired by the way in which the early church refused to worship the emperor, since they confessed that Jesus Christ is Lord, but still prayed for the emperor. Even the best state, according to Barth, must never be viewed as absolute, and must therefore never be "worshipped" as a divinely sanctioned authority. The church can however serve the state well, by praying for it, even if, at times, that means praying for its demise. Prayer is political action. To pray for the affairs of someone or something is to participate in it, to commit yourself to it in the most active and responsible way (Jehle, 2002: 107-108).

It is not the role of the church, according to Barth, to give a stamp of approval, or a divine mandate, to a particular form of the state, but rather to give prophetic criticism to the state. Therefore Barth was always "swimming against the stream." One of the best examples of this, was the way in which Barth, one of the fiercest criticiser of Nazi-Germany, long before most others saw any harm or danger in it, at the end of World War II, when the whole world wanted to demonise and destroy Germany, changed direction and pleaded that the world should show mercy to Germany. Jehle explains: "Barth, who, at the end of the thirties and the beginning of the forties, had tirelessly called for resistance - even for armed resistance - against Germany, now interceded politically in a new direction: *even the German people now lying on the ground deserve to be treated humanely* and not with utter vindictiveness. In his lecture in Dürrenroth, Barth said that Jesus Christ, 'the reconciliation of our sins,' was also meant for Germans, '*even for that unhappy man in whose name all the horrors of these years have been summed up.*' Barth refers here to Adolf Hitler, against whom, three days earlier, on 20 July 1944, an unsuccessful assassination attempt had been made." Now, when everybody condemned the German nation, Barth called upon people to see the German nation as their brothers and sisters in Christ (Jehle, 2002: 82).

A praying church

For Barth, Christian prayer means standing in solidarity with all of humanity. In prayer, believers stand in the full knowledge of our own depravity, our own unbelief and disobedience, and we pray in the Name of Jesus Christ, together with the whole community of faith, on behalf of all humanity and the entire creation. Furthermore, Barth does not make any distinction between private and public prayer, individual or communal prayer. Whether it is the individual in private or the community in public praying, it is always the church at prayer and it is always prayer for the whole of humanity (Saliers, 2002: xiv-xv).

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It is a false dichotomy to ask whether it is the individual or the church that prays. When the Christian prays, the church is praying, and when the church prays, the Christian is praying. It is the symptom of a sick theology if these distinctions are made too clearly (Barth, 2002: *P*: 5-6). Even the seemingly most selfish prayers, when the individual believer is asking for herself, she is in fact praying on behalf of the community of faith for the sake of the world (Barth, 1960: *CD III*,3: 283).

Christian prayer is not about choosing sides, about praying for one side and against another, but about interceding for humanity, perpetrators and victims alike. Prayer knows that there are not good people and bad people, but that we are all sinners before God, that evil lurks even within the best of people and the greatest of ideals, and that God alone can justify and sanctify us by grace in Jesus Christ.

Barth gave seven reasons why invocation of God is the proper response of obedience to God's grace. 1) Since the believer is the partner of God in the covenant of grace, this action is done in fellowship and following the teaching of Jesus Christ, the only truly obedient covenant-partner of God. 2) It is an action which can only be done in the power of the free grace of God. Being unable to do it in his or her own power, this action obliges the believer to make use of God's grace. 3) It is an authentic and particular human action, wherein the believer who performs it, is present and at work. 4) This action is central to the whole life of the believer, preceding, accompanying, and following all other acts. Although being a particular action and not just a general attitude or disposition, it gives all other actions its proper "meaning, direction, and character." 5) It relies completely on the grace of God, trusting God as the only one who can help and acknowledging God as the one from whom all good gifts are received. 6) In this act the believer encounters God as a person who is in no way worthy to stand before God or able to respond to God, but who can only offer him- or herself to God as a partner who is in absolute need before God. 7) Despite the believer's unworthiness and inability, because of God's grace, in this act the believer will do what God allows and commands him or her to do, "with complete confidence, with no reservation, doubt, hesitation, or vacillation" (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 42-43).

If terms such as "the Christian life" and "freedom," "repentance," "conversion" and "decision," "faith," "gratitude" and "faithfulness," are not understood as empty concepts, as theological generalisations, as basic human attitudes or dispositions, but are understood with all their proper material and specific content as concrete actions, they describe the obedience of reconciled humanity perfectly. Nothing more or different is expected by God from humanity. However, "the humble and resolute, the frightened and joyful *invocation* of the gracious God in gratitude, praise, and above all petition," is the specific obedience wherein all these responses are concretely actualised (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43).

Barth affirmed that invocation is the obedience required of reconciled humanity, because it includes all of the above. Invocation means that we turn to God with the whole of our lives, in correspondence to God's turning to us. Barth said invocation is...

"...the normal action corresponding to the fulfilment of the covenant in Jesus Christ. Man is empowered for this, and obligated to it, by God's grace. In it man in his whole humanity takes his proper place over against God. In it he does the central thing that precedes, accompanies, and follows all else he does. In it he acts as the one who is referred wholly to God and has absolute need of him. In it he ventures the turning to God for which no worthiness qualifies him. He does it in fearless hope on the basis that God has turned to him and summoned him to this venture. We thus understand calling upon God – in all the richness of the action included in it – as the one thing in the many that the God who has reconciled the world to himself in Jesus Christ demands of man as he permits it to him" (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43).

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This is the freedom granted to humanity, this what we are allowed and enabled to do by God's grace, but it is also very concretely and specifically what we are commanded and obligated to do, not just in general, not just as a basic attitude or disposition, but in the form of specific action, in the form of specific prayers in specific words. Barth affirmed Calvin's assertion that we have no excuse not to pray, and if we do not pray, it is the exact opposite of faith and obedience, it is in fact unbelief and rebellion against God (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 43).

We do not have the option whether to pray or not to pray. It is commanded with the same strictness with which we are forbidden to worship any other gods, to trust any other lords, to serve any other masters. Our prayers will be heard and answered by God, no matter how feeble, deluded or sinful they may be, but if we do *not* pray, if we do not use the freedom granted to us, if we ignore this concrete demand of God, we are disobeying the direct command of God and thus fall under the judgment of God (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 44).

There is no use trying to escape the concrete obedience which God demands of us, with abstract, clever theological generalisations. God commands us: "Call upon me!" We can do this. We must do this.

Barth said:

"We thus understand the command, "Call upon me" (Ps. 50:15), to be the basic meaning of every divine command, and we regard invocation according to this command as the basic meaning of all human obedience" (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 44).

And although it must be actualised in specific actions and specific words, it cannot be limited to specific actions or words, for it encompasses the whole being and life, all the works, of the believer, it entails "a life of calling upon God" (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 44).

And if we ask: "What should we pray?" as did the disciples of Jesus, then we would be well advised to follow the teaching of Jesus regarding prayer, as it is recorded in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4, i.e., the Lord's Prayer. By praying this prayer and following the direction this prayer gives us in all our prayers, in all of our life, work and actions, we are praying with and after Jesus Christ, as part of the "we" of the Lord's Prayer, the community of faith, the body of Christ, and thus we are united with Christ, who is the representative of the whole of humanity before God, who is the true and faithful covenant-partner of God praying this prayer on our behalf (Barth, 1981: *CL*: 44).

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In Barth's understanding of the Christian life, faith, obedience and prayer are not separate elements that function independently from one another, nor chronological developments that follow on each other. In the one life lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ, participating in and witnessing to the life and reign of Jesus Christ, Christians look away from ourselves to our faithful Lord in faith, freely submitting ourselves and following the action of our Lord in obedience, while asking in prayer that our Lord will miraculously and graciously enable us by the power of the Holy Spirit to believe what we cannot believe and obey what we cannot obey by our own power.

Thus the words: "becoming" a Christian in faith, "being" a Christian in obedience and "acting" as a Christian in prayer, must not be taken too seriously, as if faith, obedience and prayer function in different ways or at different stages of the Christian life. Following the way in which Barth could circle the same divine reality, looking at it from different angles, these phrases merely serve as changes in perspective, allowing us to look at the very same divine reality, the Christian life lived under the living Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit, but through the lens of faith, obedience and prayer.

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Mere creatures

In the *Church Dogmatics, Volume III, The Doctrine of Creation, Part Three*, Barth addressed the life of the Christian, a living member of the Christian community, who is not only preserved (*conservatio*) and accompanied (*concursum*) and ruled (*gubernatio*) by God the Father who is the Lord over all creatures, but who also, from his or her creaturely side, positively acknowledges and participates in this lordship of God the Father over his or her life (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 239).

The creature which positively participates in the lordship of the Father over creation, which "perceives and acknowledges and affirms and approves it, which is in fact thankful for it and wills to cleave and conform to it" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 239), is in no way elevated above other creatures. In fact, his or her acknowledgment of the lordship of the Father over creation entails precisely the acknowledgment of the fact that he or she is a creature next to all other creatures. Where humanity has the illusion of being more than a creature; the illusion of being its own lord, there this acknowledgment is denied and rejected. The creature who acknowledges the lordship of the Father over creation, acknowledges "that as a creature he is in no sense superior to other men, or to the dust under his feet, but can only exist under the universal lordship of God" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 240).

Like a child in a forest

And yet there is a difference between humanity and other creatures. Not a difference that makes humanity superior to other creatures, but a difference nonetheless. And the difference is that this acknowledgment, this affirmation of the lordship of the Father over creation, and over him- or herself as a creature, is asked of humanity, while it, as far as it is discernible to humanity, is not asked of other creatures (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 240).

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Barth explained that while the Christian is in solidarity with all creatures, not being superior to them, the Christian, however sees and knows within the world-process a universal lordship, not “of natural law, or fate, or chance, or even the devil,” as many indeed see it, but of God the Father, who the Christian also sees and knows as his or her own Father (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 241).

Barth said of the Christian creature:

“...in virtue of what he (and only he) can see, the Christian is the one who has a true knowledge in this matter of the providence and universal lordship of God. This providence and lordship affect him as they do all other creatures, but he participates in them differently from all other creatures. He participates in them from within. Of all creatures he is the one who while he simply experiences the providence and lordship of God also consents to it, having a kind of ‘understanding’ – if we may put it in this way – with the overruling God and Creator” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 242).

This does not mean that the Christian has all the answers to the questions of life and history, or one hermeneutical key to unlock all of life’s mysteries and all world events. This is the useless quest of the person who tries to view the world as under the lordship of natural law, or fate, or some other principle. But to the Christian, nothing in this world is predictable. The Christian views the world under the lordship of the living, active God. Therefore the Christian “will not be like an ant which has foreseen everything in advance, but like a child in a forest, or on Christmas Eve; one who is always rightly astonished by events,” viewing the world as an adventure, always beginning anew, at every moment really confronted with the possibilities and impossibilities, with all the horror and the joy of the surrounding world. It is not because the Christian cannot make any sense of the world, but precisely because he or she knows what the world is all about, that the world confronts him or her, not as a monotonous, meaningless stream of events following on each other, but as a terrible and a terrific life and history lived actively under the lordship of the living and active Creator and Father (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 242-243).

The Christian is unable to view the world as a “sceptical spectator,” but will always allow the surrounding world and its events and history to concern him or her directly and positively, always living actively within the world. Freed from the responsibility to find new answers or solutions to every question that the world poses, the Christian does not stand over against the world, and cannot hide away in some corner, but freely and joyfully co-operates (although merely as a creature that affirms the lordship of God over creation and over him- or herself, not as his or her own lord, above other creatures) with the Father’s lordship over creation (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 243).

Witnesses

Living under the Lord, the life of the believer bears witness to God’s reign. The life of the believer bears witness to God’s action in the world, to God’s grace and God’s judgment. The church is a community of witnesses, a living testimony to the gracious action of God in the world (Haddorff, 2010: 103).

Living as witnesses means losing our autonomy, for witnesses are no longer self-referential. We are no longer our own masters. The lives of witnesses refer to the one to whom we are bearing witness. In order to be true witnesses, we must be faithfully, obediently and personally bound to our Lord. We will have certain ideas and convictions regarding the surrounding world, but the verity of our testimony is determined solely by our faithful subservience to our personal Lord and Master. It is not our religious and moral virtues which

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make us witnesses, but the fact that the Lord by grace has *called* us to be witnesses and that the Lord by grace *makes* our lives living testimonies (Haddorff, 2010: 104).

Barth explained this life of witness in a lecture in August of 1934, at an international summer conference for students, in La Châtaigneraie, Switzerland, entitled: "The Christian as a Witness." And after the lecture, he was flooded by a "torrent" of criticism by students and professors alike, that he focused too narrowly and one-sidedly on ecclesiastical issues and that he did not say enough about the ethical side of being a witness. Barth responded, fearing that he will be unable to "swim against the torrent" of criticism, by explaining how his own life and the social and political issues that he struggled with, had caused him to come to this theological conclusion. Barth explained that the church wrongfully thought that secularism – a world that lives without acknowledging God – threatens the church from the outside, while the very same threat was present within the church. In the church God was replaced by pious humanity, by good humanity, by moral humanity, but still God was replaced by humanity, as in the secular world. And thus, the moment the church stopped bearing witness to God's action in the world, and replaced God's action with its own actions, the church became a godless church in a godless world. Barth warned his Swiss audience that they might be horrified by the German Christians, but that they will end up precisely where they are, if they make "the Christian life" their starting point, rather than the action of God, to which the Christian life bears witness (Haddorff, 2010: 103, 105-106).

At the same lecture, a professor from Russia spoke about the suffering and death of an archbishop during the revolution in Russia, which became his testimony. The professor argued that Barth's understanding of witness is too narrow, since witness does not only consist of words, but of deeds of suffering. Barth replied that martyrdom as a form of witness is not a Biblical view, but comes from Ignatius. We read only of Stephen's martyr death, but it is by Stephen's sermon that he testifies, not by his martyr death. Barth said that whether we like it or not, the church is not washed and cleansed by the blood of martyrs, but by the blood of Jesus Christ alone. We do not give testimony to ourselves, but to Jesus, not to our own suffering, but to Christ's suffering, whereby we are saved (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 131-132).

After a whole stream of criticisms against Barth's "narrow" view of Christian witness, Barth said he felt like a wind blowing over a wheat field, which bends low for a moment, but then rises again (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 132). Barth assured them that although he sounded "theoretical" or "abstract" to them, although it sounded as if he had no interest in the world outside the church, nothing could be further from the truth. Barth assured them that he also has experiences, that he is also a modern man, that he is also engaged in the turmoil of the times. Barth assured them that they have no need of explaining to him how urgent the problems of the world are. Barth tried to explain that it was precisely due to his calling to live as a witness in the modern world, that he has taken the path that he has. And that the "theory" that he is purporting, is not something he conjured up in his head, but what he has found in Scripture. For ten years Barth was a pastor trying to proclaim the gospel, like these ministers, confronted by secularism in the modern world. But what troubled Barth the most was not the secularism of the world outside the church, of which so many pastors spoke, but rather that the church did not differ much from the secular world, in the sense that the church no longer expected its living Lord to act, to help and save the world. The church had subtly changed the gospel from the message of God's gracious, miraculous salvation of the world, into the message that the world must be helped and saved by love, by human words and deeds, by the church's involvement in the world (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 133-134).

Thus the church ceased to be the church, i.e., the church of *God*, the church which is a holy place within the world, the church which is the sphere of sacrament, the sphere of the presence and action of God. The church wanted rather to be the church of humanity, of good, moral and pious humanity. And in this way, this church of humanity, albeit very religious humanity, came very close to being a secular church, a godless church. Barth told

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the listeners that he also went down that path and that he tried everything on that path. But there came a day when Barth's suspicions and fears of the godlessness of the church were affirmed. And then Barth found a completely different message in the Bible, a message that contradicted the godlessness of the world and the church (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 134-135).

Barth told his audience that their comments reminded him of the theology which started 200 years ago. It started as a good thing. It started with a truth. It started in reaction to the dead orthodoxy of the 16th and 17th centuries, whereby the church no longer lived with its living Lord. The awakening of the pietism of the 18th century sought the living Lord. But instead of seeking the living Lord in the Bible, instead of allowing God to be God, of allowing Christ to be Christ, they sought to better themselves, to live better Christian lives, to cultivate better piety, and in that way turned away from the living Lord. They wanted not only teaching, but also life, not only the Word, but also works. And over time, this new found reverence for pious humanity turned into reverence for moral humanity, which over time turned into reverence for human reasoning. And finally God was completely replaced by humanity within the church. Instead of proclaiming the saving action of its living Lord, the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit, the church proposed ways in which humanity can better itself and improve the world by its own power (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 135-137).

Then Barth warned his listeners, especially the English and American listeners, with these prophetic words:

"My dear friends from England and America, I am from Germany. There we have reached the end of the road at whose beginning you are standing. If you begin to take the pious *man* serious, if you do not care to be one-sided, you will reach the same end before which the official German Church stands today" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 137).

Barth warned them that what was happening in Germany at that very moment, of a church worshipping the idol of nationalism, will be their future to, if the church does not begin worshipping the living Lord again. What starts beautifully as an emphasis on "The Christian life," will end in paganism, in a godless church of humanity, Barth cautioned. As soon as the church says: "Not only God, but we also," the door to paganism has been opened and the church will inevitably end there. This does not mean that people have ill intentions when they emphasise the Christian life. There are many wonderful German people with the most sincere intentions, who have fallen prey to this temptation. The devil does not tempt the church to say no to God. The devil tempts the church to say: "God *and*..." The root of all sin lies therein that humanity thinks too much of itself, and the power of this sin must never be underestimated. From Barth's experience in Germany, he has learned that the only way to guard against this temptation, is through the simple confession: "God is the only Helper!" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 137-139).

What is rather telling about this "torrent" of criticisms against Barth, which accused him that his theology is much too much concerned with matters of the church, rather than the matters of the world, was that it came in 1934, the very same year that Barth was instrumental in the drafting of the Barmen Declaration and very much at the head of the church's resistance against Hitler and the Nazi regime. This perhaps, can give us a clue regarding other "torrents" of criticism against Barth, whether they accused Barth of a "retreat" during the years of 1935-1945, or of being "silent" during the Cold War. Perhaps it can be said that Barth was never silent, that he never retreated from the issues of the world, but that in each changing circumstance Barth felt that the most important thing that must be said and done by the church in its present day circumstance, is to give witness to what God has done, is doing and will do for the world in Jesus Christ. Barth was convinced that the Christian life must first and foremost give witness to the living action of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world. And that is why there were people in every era who thought, and there are people

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who also think so today, that Barth's theology is not relevant enough in addressing the issues of the day, because they wanted to know from Barth what we should do, not what God is doing. For Barth, the most relevant question in every era was not: "What should we do?," but rather: "What is God doing?"

In response to the question if the witness of the church should not entail more than testifying to God's action, Barth said that he cannot be so optimistic about the actions of the church. Barth said that he reckons that the Christian life, even if it is the most devoted life, even if it entails suffering for Christ as a martyr, is more likely to speak *against* Christ than to speak *for* Christ. What the world truly needs, Barth asserted, is not our noble deeds, not our suffering, but the help of Jesus Christ (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 140-141).

Real help

At this same lecture, one person from China spoke with great emotion about the coming of God's kingdom on earth, and asked whether the church should not do more regarding the suffering of people in the world, than the task of witnessing which Barth ascribed to the church. Barth agreed that the church should be more involved in people's suffering. Barth told the audience that he was once also a religious socialist, but that religious socialism does not take the desperate situation of humanity seriously enough. Barth encouraged the questioner to hold onto the question of human suffering, but to take it even more seriously. The suffering need of humanity is so great, according to the Bible, that we cannot help ourselves, but that only God can help us. The kingdom of God cannot be established by the actions of the church, but only through the action of God whereby all things are made new. The church should abandon the debate whether it is better to preach or to be involved in social action, and rather pray together: "Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done!" (Barth, 1937: *GiA*: 124-127).

On Ascension day in 1928, Barth preached a sermon on Hebrews 4:14-16, entitled *Der Anfang von oben*, "The beginning from above." Barth proclaimed the good news that, although the Scripture speaks about our human suffering and weakness, it does not start there, but it starts with Jesus Christ who ascended into heaven and acts as our High Priest in heaven. This Scripture does not tell us what we lack in our suffering and need, but what we already *have*, namely a High Priest in heaven. Although Jesus was also tempted as we are tempted, according to this Scripture, we are not to ponder over our questions, doubts and fears, but go with confidence to Christ to receive grace and mercy and to be saved. The Scripture does give us a command, it does tell us to do something, but it commands what it has already given, it tells us to receive what is already ours. The Scripture commands us to hold onto the faith which we confess. As we confess and hold onto the faith that Jesus ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, we live in the comfort of God's grace and mercy, which does not start with our desperate weakness in suffering and temptation, but which starts from above, from the fact that we already have Jesus Christ, the Lord in heaven, who acts from heaven on our behalf. It is not we who must make a start from above. There is no way for us to climb out of our desperate situation here below. But *Another*, a High Priest in heaven, Jesus, makes a start from above, addressing and healing our desperate situation from above. This humbles us, but it also liberates us to trust and obey this Lord, and to love our neighbour. Because this High Priest in heaven intercedes for us, prays on our behalf to the Father, because Jesus is with the Father in heaven, we are with the Father in heaven, humanity is with the Father in heaven. Jesus carried the sins of the world on the cross, and in that way healed the root of our suffering. We have this High Priest, because this High Priest has us. Jesus has us, is near to us, is with us, in our humanity, in our suffering and need, but also in our temptation and sin. And because Jesus is so near to us, with us, in our weakness, because we already have Jesus as our High

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Priest in heaven, we can pray: "Lord, have mercy on us!" When we pray in this way, we live in the gratitude that God has opened our deaf ears to hear the answer to our need spoken from above by the Word of God (Barth, 1928: *KB*: 161-168).

Just after the Second World War, in 1947, Barth preached on Psalm 85:9 which says: "Surely his salvation is near those who fear him." In German, the text says that God's "help" is near to those who fear God. Barth said that in these desperate post war times, everybody longs for a little help, whether it be of a personal, social, economic, political, intellectual, theological or ecclesiastical nature. All kinds of help are most welcome, it does not matter if it comes from America, Switzerland, Sweden or even Russia! But the Psalm speaks of *God* helping us. If we are honest, Barth said, we will admit that most of us are a bit disappointed by this. We would rather receive a package or a book from abroad, or read about an upcoming conference in Moscow, Paris or Washington, than receiving help from *God*. But as helpful as all these little acts of help may be, they will all mean nothing if we are not helped by God (Barth, 1947: *KB*: 194).

And we *are* helped by God. God's help is near to us. In Jesus Christ God has drawn near to us, to be our God, and for us to be God's people. Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of the covenant which binds God and humanity to each other, so that they will never be without each other (Barth, 1947: *KB*: 194-195).

But the Psalm begins with an affirmation of the help of God (in German, the Psalm begins with the word *Ja*). The Psalm invites us to say *yes* to the help of God. Those who fear God, accepts God's help. And this is the critique of the Psalm: Are we content with God's help, or do we desire other help? (Barth, 1947: *KB*: 193, 195-197).

Jesus Christ is Immanuel, *God with us*. In Jesus, God's covenant of grace is fulfilled, and thus humanity is helped. The Name "Jesus" means "God helps," or "God saves." Jesus is the Servant of the Lord, born from Israel, through whom God truly helps the world (Steenberg, 1983: 25).

The fact that Jesus is Immanuel, is God with us, the fact that God helps the world in Jesus, is a present continuous fact. God was, is and will be with us. The election, justification and sanctification of humanity is always happening anew in Jesus Christ. The movement from God to humanity in Jesus Christ, as well as the movement from humanity to God in Jesus Christ, is continuing in the power of the Holy Spirit (Steenberg, 1983: 51, 54). God will always be God with humanity, and humanity will always be humanity with God. Never will God be God without humanity, nor humanity be humanity without God (Steenberg, 1983: 58, 69).

During the Second World War, in 1940, Barth wrote a letter to the soldiers fighting in the war with a Christmas message. In this letter, Barth called the soldiers "Comrades." Barth told them that he had also joined the Swiss military and that he therefore addresses them as a fellow soldier. Barth said that the message of Christmas is a message of peace on earth. This peace on earth was announced at Jesus' birth, but it is also announced today, amid this terrible war. Although the world does not seem peaceful at all, there is peace on earth, because Jesus came to the earth, and Jesus is our Peace (Barth, 1940: *KB*: 1).

Helping is difficult

Interestingly, as Barth looked back over the decade of 1938 to 1948, he admitted that in the years shortly after the Second World War, he discovered that it is not so easy to help Germany, or to help any human being for that matter. When Barth was allowed in the

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autumn of 1945 to travel in Germany for the first time in a decade, he was rather startled to find that not much had changed in the church since 1933, as far as the groupings, structures and major themes were concerned. Of course, now all of a sudden the German Christians had magically disappeared, as if there never were any German Christians (barring a few noteworthy exceptions who made public confessions). Barth found the same minority who opposed the German Christians and Nazi regime, like Niemöller, hard at work, but they were still pushed to the margins by the mainstream, as if all the horrors of the war and the Holocaust could not bring anyone to reflect upon the errors the church had made and the reasons for it. Barth wrote extensively to other nations, urging them to help the German nation, but his writings were not well received in Germany, since he refused to put all the blame of the atrocities on the evilness of Hitler and his regime, but he saw the root of the problem in nationalistic optimism, going back to the time of Frederick the Great (Barth, 1948: KB: 278-279).

People will perhaps accept help if they are seen as the victims of a crime. But if it becomes exposed that their pride was part of the problem, it becomes increasingly difficult for them to be helped. If you cannot swallow your pride, you cannot be helped.

George Hunsinger is appreciative of the emphasis of liberation in Barth's theology. Although Hunsinger feels that in all the detailed exegesis Barth did in his *Church Dogmatics*, there is very little exegesis of the multitude of texts regarding hunger, poverty and justice, he feels that liberation theology can learn a lot from Barth. What liberation theology got right in praxis, says Hunsinger, Barth got right in theology. Liberation theology will be more properly anchored if it grounds its praxis in the praxis of God, in God's grace toward all of humanity, in the sovereignty of God's Word, as Barth did. Liberation theology can be liberated from an unbearable burden, if it understands that only God can help and save the world, and we can only participate in God's action. The problem of liberation theology is that it divides the world into victims and perpetrators, into righteous and unrighteous people, just and unjust causes, whereas a theology of grace, a theology of the Word, says that all people stand equally under the righteousness of God as sinners in need of grace. Although a theology of grace can give due emphasis to the plight of the oppressed, of victims of injustice, of those who are exploited, of the poor and the hungry, it will place their plight within the proper frame of the primary plight of all of humanity, in its sin before God (Hunsinger, 2000a: 55-59).

As long as justice, even and especially divine justice, is seen to be on the side of some, then the root of injustice will never be addressed, for injustice always consists in some claiming right over others. That is why in the history of the world (especially in Africa) liberators so often become oppressors, because God's justice is equated with a certain cause, with a certain group or even with one individual. In the church's struggle against Apartheid in South Africa's, the Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who also chaired The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, helped South Africans to understand that both oppressors and victims have lost something of their humanity and are in need of liberation and restoration, in need of God's help.

In a different context from Germany, when Barth visited friends of his in Hungary in 1948, he also found that it is not so easy to help a friend. After Hungary's inclusion in the East Block, they asked Barth how they should respond to the Communist regime. As Barth was sharing with them what he had learned in the struggle in Germany, a discussion evolved and Barth became convinced that the particular problems that faced the people of Hungary were not comparable to the problems they were faced with in Germany in 1933. Whereas the church in Germany in 1933 found itself in a situation where Christians were blindly, enthusiastically following the lead of the authoritarian, idolatrous, anti-Semitic state, the church in Hungary found itself among people bewildered and despairing, in more urgent need of hearing the gospel message of hope, than of being mobilised to resist the obviously evil Communist regime. But when Barth returned home, his help and support of his friends in Hungary were

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treated with disdain, and he was vigorously attacked for not speaking out against the evils of Communism (Barth, 1948: *KB*: 280-281).

Helping others is not so easy. Very often, we do not really understand the need of others, especially when living across a big divide, like East and West, democratic and Communist. But furthermore, people do not always know their own need. Their greatest need might be to be liberated from their own sinful pride, but it is precisely that pride which makes it impossible for them to receive any help.

God helps anyway

God helps us, even when we do not want to be helped. God helps us, even if we do not feel that we need to be helped. God helps us, even though we cannot comprehend how desperately we need to be helped. God helps us, even while we think that we cannot be helped.

During the Second World War, in 1941, Barth gave a message with the title: "Today the Saviour is born for you." In this message Barth said that this Saviour is our Helper. Beyond our faith or unbelief, beyond our understanding or incomprehension, beyond our experience or lack of experience of it, the Saviour truly is born for us, as our Helper, today (Barth, 1941: *KB*: 14-15).

Barth preached a sermon in Basel in 1956 on Psalm 39:7, "And now, O Lord, for what do I wait? My hope is in you." Barth said that we cannot comfort ourselves in our suffering and need, nor can we look to be comforted by others. To comfort ourselves, is always a very limited comfort. And there are times when others cannot accompany us and comfort us in our suffering (Barth, 1956: *KB*: 49-54).

But the fact that we cannot be comforted by others or by ourselves, has a good origin. It's origin lies in the good news that God truly comforts us, thus making any other comforts inferior and inadequate. Yes, we can let others comfort us, and even comfort ourselves, but these small comforts can only serve as signs to our only true comfort and hope: God. God truly is present and active in the midst of our lives, never letting us go, even as we continually let go of God. God says to us, even when we do not want to hear it: "You can place your hope in Me. I am your Helper, your Saviour. I am your God." It is because God is alive and at work in our lives as our only true Comforter, that we are so restless and unsatisfied in all other comforts (Barth, 1956: *KB*: 54).

Barth said further that we should not break our heads in trying to figure out how we can possibly place our hope in God, but we should simply hope in God. To hope upon God is not a human achievement. It is simply to accept and receive God's comfort, God's help. It is simply asking God to comfort us. And as we do so, as we ask God to be our hope, to be our Helper and Saviour, to be our God, even if it is the most frail and whispering prayer, this prayer will be the loudest call, piercing heaven and resounding through it, invoking God's action. God has given us the permission, the freedom, to pray this prayer (Barth, 1956: *KB*: 56-57).

At the end of the sermon, Barth prayed this prayer (freely translated):

"Dear heavenly Father! Now, we ask You, that You give and always give again your Holy Spirit to us all, to awaken, enlighten, encourage and enable us to dare to take the small and yet so great step: to step out of the comfort with which we can comfort ourselves and to step into the hope in You. Turn us away from ourselves to You!

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Show us how lovely You are and how lovely it is to trust and obey You” (Barth, 1956: KB: 57-58).

In another sermon, the year before, Barth preached on Ephesians 2:5: “By grace you have been saved.” Barth said in his sermon that this is already true, even before we have done anything, even without our prayer. We do not need to pray, in order for it to be true that we are saved by grace. But we do indeed need to pray, in order to believe in it, in order to live by it, to receive and accept it as being true also for us. We do indeed need to pray, so that it will not only be true in our minds and words, but also in our hearts, in our life, in the whole of our existence. We do indeed need to pray, for other people to also get a glimpse of this truth and for the whole of creation to be filled with this truth. And our praying will never be in vain, for it is already true. As we pray this prayer, it has already been answered. As we pray this prayer, our faith in its truth has already been established. As we ask, seek and knock for this salvation by grace, we discover in faith that God has already answered our prayer, given us what we seek and opened the door (Barth, 1955: 35-36).

Barth ended the sermon with this prayer (freely translated):

“Thank You that You know us, love us, help us, although we do not deserve it ... That is why we praise and worship You ... We rejoice that we may believe in this ... Liberate us for this! Give us the right, sincere, active faith in You, in Your Truth! Give it to all peoples and governments, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, the prisoners and those who think they are free, the old and the young, the happy and the sad, the heavy-hearted and the light-hearted! There is no one that does not need to believe, and no one to whom it is not promised that he may also believe. Tell it to the people, tell it also to us, that You are their and our gracious God and Father! We pray this to You in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, according to whose teaching we now call upon You: Our Father who art in heaven...!” (Barth, 1955: 36-37).

Believe, obey, pray

The active life lived within the world, in affirmation and co-operation with the universal lordship of God over creation, is marked by three separate but inseparable characteristics: faith, obedience and prayer (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 245).

Barth said:

“[W]e can test our own attitude by the simple but sure standard whether it seeks to express itself in these three forms; whether any one of them is lacking; whether it is straining to express itself equally and fully in all three. If it does, but only if it does, it is the Christian attitude. And if it is the Christian attitude, none of the three must be omitted or stunted, none must obscure or absorb the others, none must try to replace or crowd out the others. If only one of the three is completely missing, our attitude is not a Christian one” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 245).

And although all three must be fully active and present, the three are not separate realities, which can be viewed and done in isolation from each other. They form part of the one reality of the encounter between God and creature through God’s Word; the one reality of hearing and doing God’s Word (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 245). They are part and parcel of the one Christian attitude wherein the Christian is awakened by the Word, for the Word, existing in the Word, wherein the Word simultaneously frees and claims the Christian, allowing and commanding the Christian life, demanding and also freely giving everything needed to fulfil the demand (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 246).

5. Faith and obedience and prayer

5.1 Living under the Lord

It is fitting that when Nimmo talks about the way in which our being in action conforms with the being in action of God, in the chapter entitled “The way of ethical action” in his book *Being in action*, he describes the *content* of this being in action of the ethical agent under three headings: 1) faith, 2) obedience, and 3) prayer. Nimmo says: “These three dynamic forms of the Christian attitude are, for Barth, both individually necessary and mutually interpreting” (Nimmo, 2007: 137).

Barth said:

“Therefore we cannot possibly understand the three forms as three parts of the Christian attitude which limit and complete each other, so that the Christian first believes, then has to obey, and finally must pray; or first believes, then has to pray and finally must obey; or first obeys, and then has to pray and finally must believe” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 245).

Each of these three forms of the Christian attitude can never be understood without the other two, but should never be confused with or absorbed into the other two. Isolating the one, without reference to the other two, or trying to absorb the three into one, will inevitably lead to speculative abstraction and will not give an accurate account of the concrete reality of the Christian life lived under the lordship of God the Father. It is in this context that Barth makes the bold comparison between these three forms of the Christian life and the trinitarian modes of God, saying that any separation of the three, or absorbing of the three into each other, or over-emphasising one at the expense of the others, will lead to a modalistic heresy (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 246).

We return once more to this quote by Barth:

“If faith is really the faith of the true Christian attitude, it is also obedience and prayer, and on the same presupposition obedience is faith and prayer, and prayer is faith and obedience” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 246).

The Christian life and its content

But faith, obedience and prayer are not only inseparably related to each other, but even more so, they are inseparably related to the content of the Christian faith, the content of Christian command, the content of Christian witness. In Barth’s threefold form of the doctrine of reconciliation, one could say that he was addressing Christian faith, Christian love (or obedience) and Christian hope (or prayer), but the real content of his doctrine of reconciliation was in truth NOT about faith, love and hope, but about the origin and object of faith, love and hope, Jesus Christ. The true content of that which Barth was discussing in the doctrine of reconciliation is Jesus Christ. It is Jesus Christ, who is God, who overcomes our pride, justifying us through the righteousness of the priestly office, gathering the community of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, and establishing faith in us. It is Jesus Christ, who is human, who overcomes our sloth, sanctifying us through the obedience of the kingly office, building up the community of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit and establishing love in us. It is Jesus Christ, who is God-human, who overcomes our falsehood, calling us through the truthful witness of the prophetic office, sending out the community of faith by the power of the Holy Spirit and establishing hope in us (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 79).

5. Faith and obedience and prayer

5.1 Living under the Lord

Jesus is:	Sin is:	Jesus' work:	Office:	Holy Spirit:	Christian:
Very God	pride	justification	priestly	gathers	faith
Very man	sloth	sanctification	kingly	builds up	love
God-man	falsehood	calling	prophetic	sends out	hope

Faith is faith *in*, love is love *through*, an hope is hope *in* that which the triune God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. It would be a dire mistake if the content of the Christian message depended on our faith, love and hope, rather than the inverse reality, namely that our faith, love and hope derive from the content of the Christian message. And that content can be summed up with one word: Immanuel – God with us (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 3-4, 6*).

And with this word, this obviously means also that we are with God, that our life, being and activities, that our faith, love and hope, or that our faith, obedience and prayer, take place in and with and for God. We are justified, sanctified and called, we are gathered, built up and sent out, we are liberated, equipped and empowered by “God with us,” in order to be “we with God” (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 14-15*).

The Christian life exists in the reality that a decision has befallen humanity in Jesus Christ, which determines a life of faith and obedience in accordance with this decision, and which destroys all other possible decisions on humanity’s part, as well as a neutral stance towards this decision. We can still listen to other voices regarding different aspects of our lives, but with regards to our origin, direction and destination, it has been decided for us. Faith and obedience are not optional in the light of this decision. It allows for no discussion or compromise. The Christian life, the life of faith and obedience, does not allow for any decision of our own, but is the complete surrender to this decision which has already been made for us (Barth, 1956: *KB: 207*).

Although “we with God” is enclosed within the “God with us,” our faith, love and hope can never be anything other or more than faith in Jesus, love by Jesus, hope upon Jesus, for Jesus Christ is Immanuel, God with us (Barth, 1956, *CD IV,1: 15*). It can only be real faith, love and hope, it can only be our own faith, love and hope, it can only be active faith, love and hope, if it is faith, love and hope which derive and depend completely upon Jesus Christ as the origin, object, content and goal of our faith, love and hope (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1: 20*).

5.2 Faith: becoming a Christian

(Jesus, overcoming our pride, justifying us, gathering us, establishing faith in us)

What are we to do?

When writing about the command of God, Barth said that the whole command of God can be summed up as the command that we must believe in Jesus Christ.

Barth said:

“We can sum it all up by saying that what God wants of us and all men is that we should believe in Jesus Christ. Not that we should believe *like* Jesus Christ – that aspect is better left on one side seeing that He is God and we are only men – but that

5. Faith and obedience and prayer

5.2 Faith: becoming a Christian

we should believe in Jesus Christ, in the gracious action of God actualised and revealed in Him. The essence of faith is simply to accept as right what God does, to do everything and all things on the presupposition that God's action is accepted as right. That is why it can and must be said of faith that in and by it we are righteous before God. In the last resort, the apostles had only one answer to the question: 'What are men to do?' This was simply that they should believe, believe in Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 583).

In November 1934, after a year of great struggle in the church in Germany, Barth said in a sermon that all great events in the history of the church always boils down to the simple question whether the church believes in Jesus Christ, or not. The failures of the church are always, according to Barth, a failure of their faith in Jesus. Where the church faltered, it always had a lot of faith, but faith in themselves, faith in human ideas and plans, faith in human institutions and movements, rather than faith in Jesus. The church does not need to have a lot of faith. If it only had the faith of a mustard seed, it could order the mountain to jump in the sea. But the church needs to believe in Jesus. In this sermon on Matthew 14:22-33, about Peter who walks on the sea towards Jesus, Barth preached that it was when looking toward the surrounding storm, instead of looking to Jesus, that Peter sank. In the same manner the church falters whenever our faith looks in other directions, towards the surrounding world, towards its own ideas and plans, whenever it looks towards its own faith. If only the faltering church believed in Jesus, then they wouldn't have had to believe as strongly and bravely as they did. The church only has to do this one simple thing: to believe in Jesus, to look to Jesus, never mind how tiny and weak that faith is. But this also implies that the church must refrain from looking in other directions, refrain from believing in itself or in human solutions. And furthermore, it means that the church should refrain from being concerned about the storm, but simply look to Jesus in faith, amid the storm (Barth, 1934: *KB*: 296).

With the celebration of the Reformation in Bern in 1928, Barth warned that the faith of the Reformation might be something completely different from the church's faith at that time. Faith, for the Reformers, was a risk with no other guarantees except the guarantee given by God-self in the Word of God. The faith of the Reformation looked to God and to God alone. The point, said Barth, is not necessarily to attack any external support to our faith. The point, rather, is that faith hinges completely on God, who alone guarantees God's promises through the Word. It is about the hierarchy of the lordship of God over the church. Other, external affirmations of our faith can be allowed, as long they are in total submission and obedience to the only Lord and Head of the church, Jesus. We do not have to attack any and all coincidental supports or confirmations of our faith, as long as our complete trust in Jesus does not rest on these other supports in the slightest. If any support to our faith is in fact a veiled avoidance of taking the total risk of trusting Jesus alone, then it has to be brutally rejected. Only by God's grace in Jesus Christ do we become Christians, are we Christians and do we remain Christians. Nothing in ourselves can guarantee that we are Christians. Faith is the great risk of life. Only in faith are we Christians and only in faith do we know ourselves to be Christians. There are no external guarantees. As Luther said in his Small Catechism (freely translated): "I believe that not by my reason or power do I believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or can I come to Him, but that the Holy Spirit called me through the gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the right faith, just as He calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the entire Christendom on earth and keeps them with Jesus Christ in a right faith." The quest of the Protestant church in the previous 200 years to find a feeling, an experience, an assurance, which can support our faith, ran away from the total risk of the Reformation's faith. It spoke of other risks. Rather than the risk of binding their conscience to God, they bound God to their conscience. Rather than the risk of trusting the free God, they trusted free humanity. Rather than the risk of living by the Holy Spirit, they lived by their own reason and power. In this way, they ran away from the totality of grace, which has no external supports. They parted ways with the Reformation's

proclamation of the risk of faith, its proclamation of the faith which is truly a risk in trusting God's grace completely (Barth, 1928: *KB*: 1-2).

For Barth, faith, true faith, the faith of the Reformers, the faith in which we speak only of God, wherein we acknowledge God alone, the faith wherein no mention is made of any achievement of humanity, the faith wherein there is no balance between the action of God and action of humanity, is no brave human risk, but simply obedience. This obedience, is obedience which understands itself as faith, as merely saying yes to the undeserved, free grace of God. In an article in 1929 entitled *Schicksal und Idee in der Theologie*, "Fate and Idea in Theology," Barth was distancing himself somewhat from what had become known as dialectical theology. If there was a dialectic in theology, Barth said, it was not in a tension between God and humanity, between God's action and our action, but simply in the obedient response of the theologian to the Word of God, which freely and graciously elects and addresses humanity. God's Word is not bound to humanity, but theology is bound in obedience to the free Word of God, if it wants to be theology. True theology, said Barth, is theology of the Word, theology of the gracious election, theology in obedient faith, theology which is nothing other than Christology (Barth, 1929: *KB*: 336-337, 345-346, 348).

Do not be afraid

To believe in Jesus Christ is the content of the divine claim upon our lives. To believe, is what we should do (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 583). What we are *not* to do, what we are forbidden to do, is to be afraid. In the New Testament the greatest source of fear is Jesus Christ. In the light of Jesus' miracles, and especially in the light of Jesus' resurrection, people are afraid, as their own weakness and sin are confronted by Jesus' righteousness and glory. But repeatedly Jesus commands the people who are anxious and afraid: "Be not anxious! Be not afraid!" In these two imperatives, said Barth, there can be no separation between gospel and law. Jesus commands them not to be kept captive by their fear, but to accept the freedom granted by God's gracious action. God's command is to "abide," to "stand" in the freedom granted by the gospel. To be afraid, is to be a slave. The command to let go of fear, is the command of grace, since it gives the freedom which it commands (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 597-600).

In a Christmas message in 1929, entitled *Fürchtet euch nicht!*, "Do not be afraid!" Barth said that what the shepherds in the field were afraid of when the angels appeared to them, was not the dark night, but the revelation of God. And even if they were a little bit afraid of the dark night, the fear would quickly have been swallowed up by the great fear of God's revelation. The Christmas message does not merely comfort us in our little fears, however big they may seem to us, but it comforts us in the great fear, namely that our little life stands under the judgment of God. The ultimate fear is that our short life is lived before the righteous God who has drawn near to us, to whom our life must answer. This fear is not revealed by the night, but by the angels in the night, who bring the message: Do not be afraid! In this ultimate fear, not revealed by the world, but by God, we are comforted by God (Barth, 1929: *KB*: 31-33).

But what God ultimately demands of humanity, positively, is that we should believe in Jesus Christ, since faith in Jesus Christ is the acceptance that God's gracious action towards humanity, the reconciliation of humanity with God in the divine human Jesus Christ, is good and right. Therefore faith in Jesus Christ, according to Barth, is the primary act of the Christian life, it is the basis of the Christian attitude from which the whole of the Christian life springs (Nimmo, 2007: 137-138).

Does faith activate salvation, or vice versa?

What God has done in Jesus Christ, justifying unrighteous humanity, God has truly and really done for humanity. All of humanity is justified in Jesus Christ. God's work of justification in Jesus Christ is not an offer placed before humanity or a possibility presented to humanity. It is real and effective. It is grace. It is done. Faith participates in this new reality. Unbelievers do not lack Christ, but they do not – yet – align themselves with humanity's new situation in Christ, by an obedient following of Christ, by a prayerful response to Christ, by the reorientation of the whole of their lives to correspond to the new creation and faithful covenant partners of God that they are in Christ. They lack nothing, but as of yet they do not use the freedom granted to them of confessing and witnessing to Christ's lordship, being part of Christ's community and fulfilling their function within the body of Christ, participating in Christ's calling and mission for the sake of the world. We, as believers, do confess and witness to this new situation of humanity in Jesus Christ, and we participate in it by surrendering the whole of our lives to our Lord Jesus Christ so that it will correspond to humanity's new situation in Christ. It is thus an act of "pure obedience," a work of the Holy Spirit, whereby we submit ourselves to what God has done for humanity in Jesus Christ. Justifying faith does not attempt to achieve anything by its own power, or even to express our own desire or willingness to be saved, but surrenders fully to God's justification of humanity by grace in Jesus Christ, whereby all honour and glory, all gratitude and praise is given to God and God alone (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 93, 95-96).

Faith is faith in Jesus Christ, never faith in ourselves or faith in our own faith. Rather, it will entail a certain lack of faith in ourselves and in our own faith. In ourselves we are covenant breakers, unrighteous sinners, but in Jesus Christ we are faithful covenant partners of God, justified before God (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 97-98).

God does not need our faith to activate or fulfil the justification accomplished for us in Jesus Christ, but we sorely need Jesus Christ to activate and fulfil our faith. It is not false to say that we need to believe, but the faith we truly have need of is the faith that does not place its trust in ourselves or in our faith, but in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, and our justification accomplished in Jesus Christ, is the source, the content and the goal, the origin and the object, the awakening, sustaining and fulfilling power, the beginning and the end of our faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 228).

Faith does not bring itself into being. We are not called to believe in our own faith. If our faith is brought about by our own efforts, it is utterly unbelievable. Also, we are not to have faith in others, not even in the one proclaiming the gospel. Faith can only be lived at your own peril. Faith can only be the complete and utter faith in Jesus, with all its risks and demands. There are no prerequisites or preparations for faith. No human situation, condition, ability or capacity can make us more ready for faith. Faith is its own new beginning. Faith is its own presupposition. Nobody is more worthy or capable of believing. Only in the reality of faith do we have the possibility of believing. And in faith, everyone can believe. Faith "is possible for all, only because for all it is equally impossible" (Barth, 1933: *R*: 99).

Barth preached to the prisoners in Basel, on 27 December 1959, that they should not believe in themselves, that they should not have faith in their faith, since only evil can come from that. We can only, and we should only believe that God is for us. The only thing we can and should have faith in, is in Jesus Christ's death and resurrection for us. The only thing we can and should hold onto in faith, is the promise of Isaiah 54:10, that God's grace for us will never waiver, regardless of the strength or weakness of our faith (Barth, 1979: *Pn*: 161).

The unbelief of pride

It is very significant that in light of the justification established for us in Jesus Christ, the nature of sin is revealed firstly as pride. The nature of sin can only be known in the light of the revelation of grace. Since sin estranges us not only from God, but also from ourselves, we cannot know our sin if God does not reveal it to us through grace (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 389, 406).

As Christ displaces us and takes our place as our only Judge, who is judged in our place, who takes the judgment that we deserve on our behalf, and thus acts righteously in our stead, the nature of sin is exposed as pride. Our sinful pride lies therein that we want to judge ourselves and others, that we want to affirm our own righteousness, instead of accepting Christ's judgment over us and Christ's righteousness on our behalf (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 231).

This is the original sin of Genesis 3, i.e., the desire to eat from the tree which contains the knowledge of good and evil, to be the judge of good and evil. Instead of obedience to Christ, who has done what is good for humanity, humanity wants to make its own judgments and decisions regarding what is good and evil (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 449).

Our pride, wanting to be our own judge, desiring to be God, is exposed by God's humility, whereby God becomes human, revealing God's glory (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 418-419).

The "God" that humanity desires to be, is in fact not God, because it is a self-affirming, self-centred being, not the true God who humbly becomes a servant. Whereas God does not need humanity, God desires to be for and with humanity. The humble Lord becomes a servant, in stark contrast to the proud servant who wants to be Lord (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 422, 432).

The word "pride," according to Barth, is even not strong enough to describe this foolishness of humanity. A better word would be a word like "megalomania" (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 437).

The sin of pride is exposed most severely in Jesus prayer of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?" Therein it is revealed that on the cross humanity's Lord and Judge has chosen to become helpless in order to help humanity, while humanity does not want to be helpless and neither does humanity want a helper, but humanity wants to be its own helper, it desires self-help, and through that self-help, wants to claim entitlement to God's help (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 458-459). On the cross, crying out: "My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?," Christ became helpless on behalf of, in the place of humanity, who resists and rejects and hates helplessness and who continues in sinful pride and foolishness to try and help itself (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 467).

In this little popular slogan, lies the very heart of the sin of pride: "God helps those who help themselves." The truth of grace is exactly the opposite: God became helpless in the place of those who refuse to be helped.

The theology of the Enlightenment did not start on its erroneous path by criticising the Reformers' Christology, doctrine of the trinity, Biblical worldview or their teaching regarding miracles or the resurrection, but by criticising the doctrine of *corruptionis totalis*, the complete sinfulness of humanity (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 479). For Calvin, this doctrine simply meant that humanity's faith in itself is futile (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 480).

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This did not entail any pessimism or low self-esteem on humanity's part, since humanity's total depravity is unknown to it, unless revealed by God's all-sufficient grace. The supposed humility of pessimism or scepticism, the defeatism with which one declares oneself unable to do any good, even unable to believe, is simply another form of pride, according to Barth (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 619).

Faith, said Barth, is humble enough to obey. Faith obeys freely and joyfully. The humility of faith is not a depressed or discouraged humility regarding its own insufficiency, but a glad and grateful acceptance of the sufficiency of Christ. The humility of faith despairs in itself, but with boundless hope and comfort in Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 620-621).

True humility, the humility of faith and obedience, whereby believers accept and affirm, trust and submit ourselves to God's all-sufficient grace in Christ, letting ourselves be helped by God, in the acknowledgment that we cannot help ourselves, stands in opposition to religion, which entails the attempt to add something to empty-handed faith and obedience. Religion is the pride of humanity, of not wanting to be helped in full by God's grace, not wanting to accept its complete sinfulness, desiring to help itself (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 483, 485).

Sin is, fundamentally, as Luther said, unbelief. Or said in a different way, sin is fundamentally faith in oneself. The sin of pride, of unbelief, is the sin of not allowing Jesus to be our Judge, not allowing Jesus to be judged in our place, not allowing Jesus to take our judgment on our behalf, not allowing Jesus to act righteously in our stead (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 414-415, 417).

But of course, this is entirely impossible, since Jesus Christ has already done so. Sin is living the illusion, living the impossible possibility, denying and rejecting the reality, acting in accordance with that which is unreal (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 410).

Humanity's fall, its total corruptness, its pride, is something of the past. It is not humanity's future. It is important to know humanity's total corruptness, but it is even more important to know that sinful humanity has been set aside and replaced by the faithful and obedient human, Jesus Christ. We have died and have been buried with Christ. Our sin, our sinful existence, our pride, is something of the past. We will be raised with Christ and will be a new creation in Christ. Faithful obedience in Christ is our real future. In the Old Testament we find a mirror of this old humanity that we were without Christ: totally and radically sinful, unbelieving and disobedient, proud and self-assured, completely guilty before God. But in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the New Testament, we know our sin only as the shadow of our real and future self, i.e., a new creation in Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 502).

Both our past, sinful self, and our future, justified self, are observable to believers in the present. Our existence is revealed to us as *simul justus et peccator*, i.e., we know that we are simultaneously sinners and justified. That is why the apostle Paul can wonder at his own existence in Romans 7, namely that what he wishes to do, he does not do, and what he does not wish to do, he does in fact do. The unbeliever does not know this paradox, since it is revealed by grace. We as believers know it well, since it is the reality of our future in Christ, which makes visible to us the shadow of our past without Christ, both of which are observable in the present. Only as we know this paradox of our present, can we in faith look away from our past selves towards our future selves, always anew, as Paul says in Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 583-584, 588, 594).

Faith is characterised by gratitude and repentance, but most of all by humility. In humility faith is a genuine *imitatio Christi*, since it corresponds to the humble obedience of Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 138-140).

Looking away from ourselves

It is this new humanity in Christ, which prays the prayer of Psalm 32 and Psalm 51: "Create in me a clean heart." This prayer is the prayer of faith. It is the prayer of justified sinners, wherein we affirm that God is always in the right relation to us, and that we are always in the wrong against God. Although this prayer of asking for forgiveness is a human action, it is a human action which is justified and sanctified by God. It is an action which corresponds to our future hope and vocation in Christ, since it is a cry for help, thus ending our sinful pride of wanting to help and justify ourselves, and asking for God's help and justification (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 576, 580).

Faith is not one option, the better option, the better way, open to humanity, as opposed to humanity's other wicked ways, or next to other paths of salvation or works of righteousness, which are not able to justify humanity, whereas faith supposedly is able to do so. Humanity does not stand like Hercules at the crossroads, with many options that cannot justify it, but one option that can, i.e., faith. Also in faith, the believer is unrighteous. The justification of believers is not due to our faith, but due to the one in whom we believe, Jesus Christ, who justifies us despite our total unrighteousness, even in faith. Believers can boast as little in our faith as in other works of righteousness. Faith can never be a means to justify ourselves. If it was so, it would be the epitome of sinful pride. True faith is precisely to cease all attempts at self-justification and receiving God's full justification by grace in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 616-617).

Over and over and over Barth repeats that there is not one human being, *not one*, for whom God has not done everything in Christ's death and resurrection, which was needed in order to be justified by grace (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 630).

This is what faith believes. In faith we look away from ourselves, refusing to place any trust in ourselves, and place all our trust in that which Christ has done for us. *Sola fide*, says Barth, is right and true, but it is just a whispering echo of *solus Christus*. Only as far as faith is not faith in ourselves, but complete and total faith in Christ, is it justifying faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 630, 632). With reference to *The Heidelberg Catechism's* answers to questions 60-64, Barth showed that this was indeed how the Reformers understood justifying faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 642).

Faith is a divine gift. It comes into existence by the action of the living resurrected Jesus Christ, through the Word of God, by the power of the Holy Spirit. And this also implies that faith is a divine gift which is not given once, and which then becomes the possession of the believer, but it is a divine gift which is always given anew. Faith exists continuously, not on the basis of itself, but on the basis of the vicarious faith of Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 138).

Faith is like breathing. It is always done anew. It is never complete or finished. The air is always given anew, and has to be taken in at every moment. Although we never have *security* of faith, faith as our own possession, we do have *certainty* of faith, the promise by the Word of God that God always gives what God commands. The act of faith is never over, but always continuing, and at every point given new life by God's gracious action. The miracle of the Holy Spirit, is that our knowing becomes faith, that our willing becomes obedience, by the living, active grace of God (McConnachie, 1931: 196-197).

The work of the Spirit and the work of the believer

A theologian like Philip Rosato, who appreciates Barth's pneumatological understanding of faith, would even go so far as to say that in Barth's theology faith is *not* a human work. The

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Word of God is spoken to humanity by the Father, the Word of God is incarnated in humanity by the Son, and the Word of God is heard within humanity by the Spirit (Rosato, 19881: 48).

Although Rosato is right in emphasising that at every point Barth insisted that God's revelation is Self-revelation, by the Father who is "for us," Jesus who is "with us" and the Holy Spirit who is "in us," Barth also insisted at every point that we are the agents of faith, as Rosato also admits (Rosato, 1981: 48-49).

The important point, Rosato correctly asserts, is that faith is not *produced* by the believer, but by God's Word (Rosato, 1981: 48). This does not, however, exclude the believers activity. God is not "for," "with" and "in" illusionary people, who are not really present and active in God's activity. God is for *us*, with *us*, and in *us*, and we are fully present and active within God's activity.

Barth could even say that we must believe in our faith as much as we believe in the Word of God. What he meant by this, is that externally we experience our faith in human thoughts, feelings and deeds, but internally, truly, our faith is a spiritual reality, which is made real and actual by the miracle and grace of the Holy Spirit. This spiritual reality of faith, which is hidden with Christ in God, is not our work, but the work of the Holy Spirit. We must believe in this hidden reality of our faith, so that we are not overcome with doubt when the external experience of our faith in thoughts, feelings and deeds fluctuates (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 182-183, 185).

Barth even went into a discussion of nine different ways in which faith is a human experience, refuting the accusation that he ignores the personal experience and conviction of faith (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 205-209). Barth affirmed that we who believe in the Word of God, believe within our own existence (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 212). The possibility of faith, however, does not lie within ourselves, but in the Word of God (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 222).

The Holy Spirit guarantees what we cannot guarantee, that we truly believe in God's Self-revelation. The act of the Holy Spirit is God's Yes, not only for us, but in us. The mystery whether our faith is really faith in the Word of God, the mystery whether our knowledge is really knowledge of God, the mystery whether our obedience is really obedience to the command of God, is the mystery and miracle of the Holy Spirit. Our real life of faith, our real knowledge of God and service of God, exist in the mysterious reality of the Holy Spirit. The only guarantee that we participate in the reconciliation between God and humanity, is found in the fact that we are *in Christ*, and just so the only guarantee that we participate in the revelation of God to humanity, is found in the fact the we are *in the Holy Spirit* (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 453).

Barth followed Luther's teaching that in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are enabled to cry "Abba, Father" as children of God. Externally, we merely sigh this with a weak voice, and it is ineffective and meaningless, but because the Holy Spirit prays in us and with us, with words that cannot be spoken by us, this cry pierces the heavens and is transformed into a prayer of true faith, which is heard and accepted by God (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 458-459).

The agents of faith

Despite the critique of theologians like Berkouwer, Barth always maintained that faith is a human action, that it is not God who believes but humanity who believes in God. Although faith is a divine gift of grace, although faith is participating in the vicarious faith of Jesus Christ, although faith is awakened always anew by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit, this does not take away the fact that faith is allowed and commanded by God as a free and

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self-determined human action, whereby we receive the divine gift of grace, whereby we believe in and with Jesus Christ, whereby we wake up, get up and live the life of faith which the awakening power of the Holy Spirit empowers us to do. Faith is the free self-determination of humanity to believe in Jesus Christ, corresponding to humanity's divine determination of grace in Jesus Christ. Faith is humanity's election of God grounded upon God's election of humanity (Nimmo, 2007: 138-140).

As we quoted Barth earlier:

“Man is the subject of faith. Man believes, not God. But the fact that man is this subject in faith is bracketed as a predicate of the subject God, bracketed in the way that the Creator encloses the creature and the merciful God sinful man, i.e., in such a way that man remains subject, and yet man's I as such derives only from the Thou of the subject God” (Barth, 1975: *CD I,1*: 245).

Although Barth maintained that faith is the act of humanity, he rejected any understanding of the act of faith which could be guilty of Feuerbach's accusation, namely that faith is merely a projection of humanity's own desires and ideals. Therefore, faith can never be a movement from us to God, but must always exist within the movement from God to us. We believe in the Word of God, not by our own power, but by the power of God which is present in the Word itself. And this also applies to our *obedience* in faith. As in faith, so also in obedience, it is not any capacity or ability in ourselves which enables to obey the Word of God, but it is the miracle, power and grace of the Holy Spirit which enable us to believe and obey the Word of God (Seils, 1996: 194-196).

In an article entitled “Revelation,” Barth asserted that faith is a free human decision and choice. He could acknowledge to pragmatists and psychologists that a person who believes is not a machine. But the free choice of faith, is a choice made by those who know themselves to be *chosen*. The free decision of faith is made by those who know that a decision has *descended* upon them. It is only because of the reconciliation between us and God established in Jesus Christ, that we are people with the freedom to stand and walk before God. It is only as the Word of God addresses and claims us, that we have the freedom to answer and obey it. It is only within the reality of the miraculous work of grace that the Word of God awakens us and liberates us, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to do our work of believing in freedom and gratitude (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 60-61).

Speaking in the summer of 1946 in the semi-ruins of the once Kurfürsten Schloss in Bonn, to a few theologians, but mainly to students from other faculties, students with grave faces, young people who had to learn to smile again after the Second World War, Barth spoke to them about faith (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 7). Faith, Barth said, is trust, not trust in ourselves, not trust in our faith, but trust in the content of our faith. Barth explained that the Apostles' Creed says nothing about our faith, it is completely silent upon the subjective reality of our faith. It merely says “I believe in...,” and everything depends on this “in,” on the Greek word *eis* which always follows the word faith in the New Testament. Faith is a “meeting” with Another, and our faith is completely determined and dependent upon this Other. Once again Barth emphasised that faith is our own action and experience, but an action and experience which lives by its object. Without God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit “in” whom we believe, there simply is no life of faith. We must let go of the subjective side of our faith and hold onto the objective content of our faith, in the knowledge that if we tried to hold onto our lives, we will lose it, but in losing it for Christ's sake, we gain life (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 15-16).

Barth said:

“I believe – of course! It is my, it is a human, experience and action, that is, a human form of existence.

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But this 'I believe' is consummated in a meeting with one who is not man, but God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and by my believing I see myself completely filled and determined by this object of my faith" (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 16).

For these disillusioned and disheartened young people, Barth explained that faith means simply not to trust in ourselves anymore, but to trust in God completely. Faith is to depend on the faithfulness of God. Faith means simply not to believe in myself, but to believe in God the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 18).

And yet, this letting go of ourselves and holding onto God does not imply passivity, but action. We do not only hold onto the promise of God, but also to the *guidance* of God. The gospel and the law are not separated in this trust. Since God is for us, we are allowed to be also for God. Since God has given us everything, because Jesus Christ has given us the perfect life of God's Son, we may, not "must," we *may* in gratitude give God our petty, sinful little lives. Losing our lives and holding completely onto God with the whole of our lives, thus means that we receive everything from God, and in this way we live *actively* for God. The fact that faith is active, does not mean that it is an obligation, but that it is the freedom, the permission, to live actively for God, in the trust that God is actively for us (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 19).

Of course faith as a human act is always plagued by sin, but because it is already judged, condemned and rejected by God's judgment in Jesus Christ, and also forgiven, justified and sanctified by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, it is a human act which can and must be performed despite all its sinfulness (Nimmo, 2007: 138).

The human act of faith is to be understood in the same actualistic way as the divine gift of faith. Not only is faith always given anew, never becoming a human possession, but so also is the human act of faith always enacted anew, never being a finished and completed action. Faith cannot be a once off human decision, but is an event which is always happening anew. It is not a once off acceptance of the Word of God as true, but hearing and believing, being led by the Word of God continuously, existing in and by the Word of God. It is not a once off acknowledgment of Jesus Christ as Lord, but a life of obedience lived actively under the lordship of Jesus Christ. It is not a prayer prayed once, asking for the grace of God in Jesus Christ, but a life of prayer, always asking anew for the grace of God in Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 139).

This does not mean, however, that faith is a fluctuating experience or a temporary opinion. Faith is either total, or it is not faith at all. Faith is a decision once and for all, a final relationship, since it holds onto God's action once and for all. Sure enough, our experience fluctuates, our opinions come and go, but the objective reality to which faith holds onto in total trust is God's unwavering grace once and for all. And therefore faith in this God cannot be faith in any other form than faith which is total, which is once and for all. Barth advised the despondent young people listening to him in the semi-ruins of Bonn in 1946, students from other faculties, many of whom were not Christians, that they should not take their unbelief too seriously. Only faith is to be taken very seriously, since even the smallest faith, even the faith of a mustard seed, if it is faith in God's action for humanity once and for all, is so utterly total, so final, so complete, that the battle against the devil has already been won (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 20-21).

Barth held onto the fact that we are the agents of faith, as well as the fact that our faith is never grounded in ourselves. Barth said:

"What an Icarus-flight faith would be if it were a venture undertaken by man in his own strength! But with God, and as God gives Himself to man by awakening faith,

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nothing is impossible. Awakened and moved by God, man can and does believe. But again, faith must also be the work of man if it is really to find him and affect him as the work of God on him, and not merely to hover above him as a kind of hypothesis” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 250).

It is only within the correct order of gospel-law, that faith can be correctly understood as a free human act, grounded upon the gracious action of God. In faith, the believer will never claim credit for her faith, although it is a free human act, but always, in true repentance and gratitude, give all the credit to Jesus Christ, without whom her faith would be utterly impossible (Nimmo, 2007: 140).

Free slaves

Barth said that because faith is an act in response to God’s action, it is simultaneously God’s work, totally, and humanity’s work, totally. Barth said:

“...faith is altogether the work of God and altogether the work of man; ... it is the complete enslavement of man and also the complete liberation of man” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 250).

Because faith acts in reaction to the grace of God, because faith responds in correspondence to the Word of God, faith is bound in obedience to its Lord, in whom it believes. Thus Barth once again emphasised the inseparable relationship between faith and obedience. He said:

“Faith must consist in a complete enslavement of man. If he believes, he necessarily acquires a Lord; he necessarily begins to exist in what is for him a new and strange light. He cannot remain in the world as he was before. He must be separated and consecrated to participate in Jesus Christ and the divine providence and lordship. He must accept the fact that the Word of God disposes concerning him, and demands obedience” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 251).

Barth said that to believe is to obey, that there is no faith which does not entail obedience. He said: “...faith as such contains within itself obedience...” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 252).

But this enslavement is liberation. By losing our lives, we gain it. By being completely challenged in our existence, we are established. By acquiring a Lord, our creaturely existence is not humiliated, but glorified and consecrated (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 251).

Barth said:

“The very essence of Christian obedience is subjection by emancipation, emancipation by subjection” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 252).

The difference between Christian obedience, and obedience as such, is that Christian obedience is obedience of faith, it is the obedience of trusting God, who is the good God, who reigns over humanity in order to liberate humanity. Freedom as such, and obedience to other lords or masters, entails being thrown to and fro between enslavement to oppressive powers and enslavement to our own capricious will.

Barth said:

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“.. does not all other obedience suffer because of its vacillation between subjection to tyranny and emancipation to anarchy?” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 252).

Only obedience to the Lord of life, can bring true liberation. Apart from obedience to this Lord and this Lord alone, we will either be slaves of tyranny or slaves of anarchy. Only as obedient slaves of the Lord of life, can we truly be free.

Not by our own power

Faith does not live by its own power, but by the power and authority of the Word of God. Only as faith is fully claimed and orientated by the Word of God, in obedience and prayer, does it have an active life.

Barth said that the life of faith is bound and determined by its complete obedience to the Word of God:

“Faith lives by the Word. The Christian lives by his faith in hearing the Word, but only in really hearing it, only in living by hearing it, only in being obedient to it. Trusting the Word means entrusting himself to it, surrendering himself to its keeping, and therefore to its direction” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 252).

And so also, the life of faith is directed and orientated by its prayer for the Word of God. In prayer, we as believers are a surprise to ourselves, since we are completely established by the Word of God. Faith is to give thanks in prayer for the gift of faith which we cannot give to ourselves. Faith is to repent in prayer of our own unfaithfulness, thus receiving the forgiveness and trusting in the faithfulness of God. Faith is to ask, for ourselves and others, that God will awaken, sustain and complete our faith, as we are permitted and commanded to do by God’s grace (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 252-253).

The Christian life, the life of faith, hope and love, is not lived by human abilities, not even regenerated or restored capacities. It is a life lived within the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. It is a lifelong conversion. It is continued awakening from death to life by the power of the Holy Spirit. Although this life is operative within humanity, its source is always located outside humanity, in the gracious and miraculous work of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in other Spirit-orientated theologies, the Holy Spirit is understood to bring certain experiences, attitudes or abilities into effect within humanity, Barth viewed the work of the Holy Spirit consistently as a work of grace, as miracle, as a reality based outside humanity and working inside humanity. The Holy Spirit, for Barth, is the miraculous power whereby we hear the Word of God addressed to us from the outside and participate in what God has said to us and done for us in Jesus Christ. No ability or capacity is ever transferred onto humanity by the Spirit. The Spirit attests to the reality of Jesus Christ, and enables us to participate in that reality. The mystery and miracle of the Holy Spirit means that within us, our very unfaithful nature is contradicted by God’s grace. This causes us to recognise our unfaithfulness, but not to cling to it, because by God’s grace our unfaithfulness is destroyed and made impossible. Our Christian existence is an existence whereby we, in the mysterious and miraculous power and grace of the Holy Spirit, are blind yet we see, are lame yet we walk, are dead yet we live (Hunsinger, 2000b: 181-185).

We believe

But before we think of the work of the Holy Spirit in a too mysterious or even mystical way, we must remember that for Barth, the work of the Holy Spirit, as discussed in Barth’s

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doctrine of reconciliation, consists in the *gathering* of the community of faith, *building* the community *up* in love, and *sending* the community out with hope (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 151-154).

Regarding our justification in faith, the work of the Holy Spirit very concretely and practically means the gathering of the community of faith. Barth said very frankly that to come to faith, and to become part of the community of faith, are not two separate events, but the very same event. This event is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit incorporates us into the community of faith of which Jesus is the Head, bringing us to faith in Jesus, our Lord (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 688).

Barth's section on faith has the title "The Holy Spirit and Christian Faith," and the summary paragraph at the top of this section, begins as follows:

"The Holy Spirit is the awakening power in which Jesus Christ summons a sinful man to His community and therefore as a Christian to believe in Him..." (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 740).

There is no faith of the isolated individual. There is only the faith which is based upon the Lord and Saviour of all of humanity, the Head of the community of faith (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 751).

Although Barth agreed that the event of faith contains an existential happening for the individual, as shown in the I-Psalms and sung in I-hymns, and which is not to be denied, true faith also entails a demythologisation of this "I" as Paul has done in Galatians 2:20: "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 757).

I live, yet not I, but Christ in me

Becoming a Christian, is never a complete event. The "royal man," the new humanity, we who live the life of faith, are always becoming people of faith. The subjects of faith, the agents of faith, are always becoming what they are not yet. Believers are not united with God in a static, fixed connection. It is an encounter happening always anew, it is an on-going event, of God making a connection with humanity, of God uniting God-self with humanity. The person of faith is always becoming. Becoming a Christian is an event always happening. The connection, the unity between God and humanity never stalls, but God is always encountering humanity. The life of faith can never depend on human possibilities, it can never rely on itself to make a connection with God, but must always become a life of faith in response to God's becoming. Becoming a believer forever depends upon God's becoming human (Jüngel, 1986: 129).

People of faith are in movement, not towards justification and sanctification, but from it. We are liberated from the anxiety whether our faith is true and our obedience sufficient. We are allowed to "work out" our salvation "in fear and trembling" before God, but free from the anxiety whether our faith and obedience will be enough. We are liberated from the effort of being something we are not, and put on a path of becoming what we already are in Christ (McConnachie, 1931: 207).

Faith is an eccentric reality. In faith, our centre lies outside ourselves. Faith is outside our control, but fully in control, since it is in the control of Jesus Christ. Faith lives from Jesus Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 743). Jesus Christ is not only the object of our faith, but also its origin, its life source. Faith is not something humanity can fabricate or an option it can

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choose. To fabricate faith, to produce our own faith, would be the pinnacle of unbelief. Faith depends fully on Jesus Christ (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 745).

Humanity has no possibility of faith. Sinful humanity, proud humanity, has no capacity for faith. But in Jesus Christ, sinful, proud humanity is displaced and destroyed and replaced by the faithful and just Jesus Christ. In Christ, faith is humanity's necessity. All other options has been destroyed in Christ. Humanity's only freedom is the necessity of obedient faith. The possibility of unbelief has been denied in Jesus Christ, rejected for every human being. The necessity of faith in Jesus Christ, on the basis of Christ's righteousness, is the true, and the only real condition of every human being (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 746-747).

The Holy Spirit is the power in which we as believers live according to this truth and reality. The Holy Spirit gives believers the freedom of believing and obeying in Jesus Christ, who is the source, content and orientation of our faith, and in whom our unbelief and disobedience, our sinful pride, has been destroyed. The Holy Spirit awakens us to our true and real situation and gives us the freedom to correspond to it with obedient faith. The Holy Spirit prays "Abba, Father" in us, thus letting us make the discovery of children that realise they are in their father's house, on their mother's lap (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 748).

Barth walked on very fine line regarding humanity's agency of faith. On the one hand, he was always guarding against the divinisation of humanity, by emphasising the impossibility of faith for humanity and the fact that humanity must not attempt to be anything more than creatures of the Creator. On the other hand, Barth was guarding against the secularisation of humanity, by emphasising that God is never without humanity, that humanity is reconciled to God, and that we forfeit our humanity when we attempt to live without God, when we try to depend on ourselves, when we have faith in humanity instead of believing in God.

Barth affirmed that faith is indeed a genuine, free, human work, and also our own work. But this work consists in a renunciation of control over our own lives and submitting ourselves fully to the lordship of the living Jesus Christ over our lives (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV, 1*: 744).

For some, like Berkouwer and Tillich, Barth did not succeed in walking on this tight rope, and he fell over to the side of God, by describing faith as a divine reality and a human impossibility, and thus making God the Subject of faith rather than humanity. For Berkouwer, although God was indeed at work in the writing of the Bible, it was now a historical product, apart from God, which had to be believed by humanity, not by God. But for Barth, the Bible could only become the Word of God, and humanity's faith could only become true faith, as God continues to reveal God-self through the Bible to faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

For others, especially some of his Lutheran colleagues, Barth fell over to the side of humanity, by uniting faith and obedience, gospel and law, the kingdom of God and the kingdom of this world, by relentlessly speaking of the "act of faith," "obedient faith," and the "faith of obedience." Although Barth's Lutheran colleagues also described faith in terms of human agency, in psychological or historical terms, which Barth criticised severely, they were frustrated and angered by Barth's continual insistence regarding the political, social and economic implications of the life of faith. It suited them better to locate faith within the inner experience of the individual, but Barth always pressed them that the life of faith is lived in the social, public, political and economic spheres.

It was precisely Barth's disillusionment regarding the church's claim to being an agent of faith, but not understanding the implications of its faith in the moral sphere, which made him speak so paradoxically about faith. Only if faith and obedience are understood as human impossibilities, and as divine realities, which confront humanity in our utter unbelief and disobedience, can we live a life of faith and obedience in response and reaction to the gracious Word and work of God. Our human agency can only come to its right if it

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corresponds to God's divine agency. Otherwise we will fall into the trap of either divinising humanity, as seeing ourselves capable of faith and obedience independent from God, or secularising humanity, separating our political and economic decisions from the Word and work of God. In both cases, humanity attempts to be autonomous and self-sufficient, to believe in its own faith and to obey its own laws, instead of believing and obeying God.

Barth viewed the humiliation and exaltation of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5-11) not as different events which followed upon each other in history, but as concurrent movements. By virtue of God's humiliation in Jesus Christ, humanity is exalted in Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ, humanity is given the honour, dignity and majesty of God. But this does not mean that humanity becomes divine, because in Jesus Christ, God was stripped of all God's glory and honour (*kenosis* - Philippians 2:7) and became human. As in John's gospel, the crucifixion *is* the exaltation of Christ. On the cross, Christ is the King. The death of Christ is the fulfilment of all God's work in and through Christ. The resurrection is the revelation of the reconciliation established in Christ's crucifixion (Jüngel, 1986: 134-135).

No human being has fallen lower than God's humiliation in Jesus Christ, and therefore no human being is without God. They might think they are without God, they might live as if they are without God, but God is not without them. Thus Barth's anthropology leads to the recognition of the human dignity of every human being and the affirmation of all human life, whether inside or outside the church, whether believer or unbeliever. The acknowledgment of human rights and human dignity are fundamental to the Christian faith, not due to any inherent merit in human beings, but in light of God's humanity in Jesus Christ (Krötke, 2000: 166).

Faith is not faith in humanity, but faith in Jesus Christ, who is Immanuel, God with humanity. To believe is not to believe in ourselves, but to believe in God who is with us in Jesus Christ. To act in faith, is not to act in ourselves, in our own power, but to act *in Christ*, in the prayer for Christ's action, and thereby to act obediently.

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(Jesus, overcoming our sloth, sanctifying us, building us up, establishing love in us)

The invisible Lord

The faith God demands of humanity, faith in Jesus Christ, takes the form of obedience, since it is faith in Jesus Christ as Lord, and thus necessarily also obedience to this Lord. Faith cannot be in any way abstracted from a life of obedience lived under the lordship of Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 140).

In 1937 in Darmstadt a church meeting was interrupted by the secret police of the government and told to stop its proceedings, as it happened in many places during those years. A heated discussion took place between the commanding officer of the Gestapo, and the leader of the church gathering. At the height of their debate, the Gestapo official told the minister (freely translated): "Dear Sir, it must now be decided, to whom must one be obedient: to me, the visible representative of the State or your imaginary Lord, of whom you speak continually." This statement by the Gestapo officer, Barth said three weeks later in Switzerland, sums up the whole struggle of the church in Germany in the 1930's, about which Barth was invited to speak. This was the church's struggle in Germany: whether it regards its Lord as an imaginary, unreal Lord, and thus rather obeys the visible powers that

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be, or whether it obeys its invisible Lord as the real and true Lord, not only over the church, but also over the State, who, although it is visible, is in fact an imaginary lord, a false lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 3).

But this is not only the struggle of the church in Germany, but also the struggle of the church in Switzerland and all over the world, Barth said. All Christians would prefer to think that our Lord is imaginary, for if our Lord is not imaginary, if our Lord is really the true Lord, then we are no longer allowed to be our own lord. We all long to be our own lord. If we are no longer allowed to be our own lord, that means that all our ideas, all our beautiful and good ideas, ideas of democracy or socialism, ideas of natural science or history, of human reason or freedom of conscience, are also limited and threatened by the true Lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 5).

The modern world is the world wherein people desire to be their own lord. The modern world, in which the national socialism of Germany arose, is the world wherein people see themselves as skilled and equipped to be in charge of their own lives and to determine their own destiny. The modern world is the world wherein the slogan: "Help yourself, then God will help you!" rings true. The modern world is the world wherein people regard themselves as good people, and think that their ideas are true. The modern world is not new, but as old as humanity. Barth said that one would have expected the World War (by which he meant the First World War, since it was 1937, two years before the Second World War) to disturb humanity's faith in itself and its own goodness, but it persisted happily after the war and actually gained new momentum. We all belong to this modern world. It is not only National Socialism and Communism which have this bloated confidence in itself, but all of us are modern people who think of ourselves in this way (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 6).

The modern world, according to Barth, has two faces: a liberal face and an authoritarian face. These two are two sides of the same modern world, because both seek to be its own lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 7). Authoritarianism is born out of liberalism, when one form of human lordship is made absolute for all people (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 8).

The Bible, however, has a completely different message. The Bible says that humanity is not its own lord. The Bible says that human beings are not as good as they think they are. The Bible says that humanity has a different Lord, a Lord who really is good, a Lord who is really good to humanity. This is the "imaginary Lord" of whom the Gestapo official spoke. This is Jesus Christ, according to the Bible. The church is the community of people who obey this "imaginary Lord" alone, and who thus surrender all efforts to be our own lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 9).

The authoritarianism of the German government flowed from the liberalism of the preceding 200 years, according to Barth. Even in the church the Bible had not been read anymore as a strange book with a strange message regarding a strange Lord, but it was read as if it underlines and affirms good human thoughts and deeds, as if it praises the goodness of good people (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 10). And then, when Hitler had success, it was easy for people to think that his success was a sign of his goodness, that it was a secondary revelation of God (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 11).

The resistance against Hitler and his regime did not come from political activists. Nor did it come from the religious conservative and orthodox. Resistance, lasting resistance, came from those who did not incidentally oppose the unhappy results of National Socialism, but who saw and understood and attacked its modern, liberal roots. Resistance came from those who were willing to confess the strange message of the Bible, that we are not our own lord, but that Jesus Christ is our only Lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 13-14).

Barth noted that despite the fact that this small minority confessed obedience to an "imaginary" Lord, it is rather remarkable what a fierce battle this stirred up with the majority

and their visible lord. The resulting conflict was anything but imaginary (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 15). It appeared that the “imaginary” Lord is not so imaginary after all, and the Word of this Lord, even when spoken by a small, stumbling, often faltering minority, caused a great storm (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 16).

But it was always a minority within the church who were willing to obey this Lord alone. Those who obeyed the visible lord were far greater, and greater still were the masses who maintained a lazy neutrality in the battle between the “imaginary,” real Lord and the visible, false lord. And, Barth added, even within the ranks of those who confessed Jesus Christ as their only Lord, there were many who did this half-heartedly, many who retracted their confession by their actions, many mistakes and instances of disobedience. It would be easy, Barth admitted, especially from the comfort of Switzerland, to make a list of all the sins of the Confessing Church. But Barth dared anyone to try and do it better (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 16).

Barth said that if there is any hope for Germany in this time (1937), it is in the church, but not due to the good people of church, but because of the good Lord of the church (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 16-17). But Barth feared that in the church, not only in Germany, but also in Switzerland and the rest of the world, Christians still had too much faith in the good of people and too little faith in the good Lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 19). The true church, Barth said, is not to be found in ministers or pious people, but the true church is to be found wherever people hear and obey Jesus Christ as their only true Lord (Barth, 1937: *KB*: 19).

In a report in preparation for the Barmen declaration in January 1934, Barth told the Free Reformed Synod that if the church with its confession at this juncture, does not take the bold step of renouncing all forms of natural theology, and of obeying Jesus Christ alone as its only Lord, then the church will hit back today, but tomorrow it will be attacked by the same enemy, just in another manifestation. Barth said that they all have natural theology within them, since it has been handed over to them by the church fathers of the past 200 years. But according to Barth, this was the Trojan horse which carried the enemy in its belly. If the church did not rid itself from all other good, noble, impressive and worthy voices which it also wants to hear and obey next to Jesus Christ, then the Barmen declaration will only be a superficial resistance, and will not attack the root of the problem (Barth, 1934: *KB*: 25).

A dark summer, perhaps the darkest days in the history of the Confessing Church, according to Barth, was July 1938 (Barth, 1938: *KB*: 13). During this summer ministers of the German Evangelical Church, including most of the ministers who saw themselves as being part of the Confessing Church, made the following vow before the state appointed authorities over the church (freely translated): “I swear: I will remain faithful and obedient to the *Führer* of the German empire and people, Adolf Hitler. I will uphold the law and faithfully fulfil the duties of my office. So help me God” (Barth, 1938: *KB*: 5).

This summer was a great defeat and the failure of a critical test for the Confessing Church. For Barth, it was as good as if there never were a declaration at Barmen or a Confessing Church (Barth, 1938: *KB*: 14).

Barth said that any claims of this being a victory, of moving beyond the inner battles of the church, of a third way, a new and better alternative, is easily refuted by the lack of enthusiasm with which this vow was made and justified. In the vow-sermons to educate congregations about this decision, there was no joy of faith, but only handwringing, only a unconvincing fluctuation between yes and no, yes ... but. Barth said that it was very clear that they were trying to convince themselves and others, but that their heart and faith were not rejoicing in it. Despite all the claims that this was done for the evagelic freedom of the church, their very demeanour betrayed their imprisonment, as captives unable to speak freely (Barth, 1938: *KB*: 23-24).

No neutral ground

In the light of God's grace, and of the claim it makes on our lives, there is no room for neutrality towards the relation between God and humanity. The one who claims to remain neutral to it, is not neutral in the least, according to Barth. The claim that God's grace makes on us, demands an answer, demands obedience. There is no option of saying Yes and No, of answering Maybe, or of refusing to give an answer (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 610).

By God's grace we belong to Jesus Christ, we are bound to Jesus Christ, and thus Jesus Christ fills the whole of our existence, the totality of our lives, claiming us ever anew, demanding obedience at every moment, in every aspect of our lives. We are never finished with God's command. We are never done with obedience. God's claim on our lives is always being reaffirmed, commanding our obedience always afresh (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 612).

With reference to the rich young ruler in Luke 18, Barth said it is not our obedience, our action that is claimed, but we ourselves. The rich young ruler was ready to do an act of obedience, but not to be a man of obedience, to be a man claimed by God. Obedience means allowing ourselves to be claimed by God in the totality of our lives. We are claimed for God alone. Even in the second table of the ten commandments, regarding our love for our neighbour, we are claimed for God. The second table sends us to our neighbour, Barth said, in order to send us to God. God does not command us to *do* something, but the *be* someone, to *be* God's covenant partner, to *be* a neighbour (in Luke 10:36, after telling the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus asks the expert in the law: "Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?"), to *be* a disciple who follows Jesus, to *be* a servant who belongs to Jesus (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 617).

Barth said in a sermon in 1932 that even if we sell all our possessions and give it to the poor, or sacrifice our bodies to be burned, these acts would not necessarily be works of faith. Faith is a human work, indeed, but it is not just any work. The work of faith, the obedience of faith, is to serve our Lord, to follow our Lord, to work in the Lord's vineyard. In this sermon on Matthew 19:27 – 20:16, about the disciples who ask what reward they will get for leaving their families behind, and the parable of the workers in the vineyard, Barth explained that the disciples were not rewarded for leaving their families, but for leaving their families *to follow Christ*; that the workers were not rewarded for working in any vineyard, but for working *in the landowner's* vineyard. Barth said that faith is a work, but it is not a work which we can make up by ourselves, or give to ourselves. Faith is the work of being obedient to the direct and personal calling to follow Jesus and to serve Jesus as the Lord. Faith is not a feeling or a thought, not even a very passionate feeling or a very serious thought, but personal obedience to Jesus Christ. The gospel confronts our life, with all our feelings and thoughts, with the question: "Does your life have anything to do with Jesus?" Jesus, the Lord, does not only claim our thoughts and feelings, but our life, our complete existence. And this obedience of faith *does* have a reward, despite all the objections to this in the church in Germany. And not only a reward in faith, but a physical reward. And this is the reward: We are allowed *to be* in obedience, who we are destined *to become* in faith. But the parable reminds us that everyone in the vineyard gets paid equally, that the first will be last and the last first. Therefore, we must remember that the reward is given in grace, not because of our toils. The workers are not rewarded according to merit, but as a gift of grace. The disciples are rewarded, not because of their sacrifice, but because of the gracious calling on their lives, whereby they have received a new destiny. The work is grace, because it is work for the Lord, it is service of the Lord. And the reward is grace, because it grants a life lived as the human beings we are destined to become in faith. Both the work and the reward is a gift of grace given by the Lord, which we receive in gratitude (Barth, 1932: *KB*: 2-7, 9).

We are not commanded by God's commandments, but by God-self. In God's grace and command, in the gospel and the law, God gives God-self to us. Thus at every moment of our lives and in every aspect of our existence we are not confronted by this or that commandment, law, principle, ideal or aim, but by God-self, in the fullness of God's total grace and God's total claim upon us. God's command cannot be reduced to one general command or a universally valid rule, because in every situation we are confronted by God-self; in every moment we are commanded to hear and obey God-self (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 669-670, 673).

We cannot create the freedom needed to obey. It is impossible for us to free ourselves from our captivity in disobedience. But as and when Jesus liberates us, we are allowed and commanded to make use of that freedom. Even if we are still prisoners, we are not helpless prisoners, said Barth, since Jesus has swung open the gate of our prison. Even if we are still prisoners, we are to act as free people (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 625-626).

Humiliation and exaltation

The editors of the English translation of Barth's doctrine of reconciliation explain that the threefold form of Barth's doctrine do not imply three consecutive events or movements in God's reconciliatory work, but they are three viewpoints of the very same reconciliatory action of God. Sanctification does not follow justification, just as love does not follow faith, just as the building up of the church does not follow the gathering of the community of faith. Justification and sanctification, faith and obedience, the gathering and building up of the community of faith, form part of the very same event of reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: vii).

Barth makes it clear that God's humiliation in becoming human in Jesus Christ, and humanity's exaltation in being placed next God and being brought into fellowship with God, also in Jesus Christ, are two sides of the same event, since both took place in Jesus Christ. God went to the far country and humanity returned home, in the one Person of Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 6, 21).

The sanctification of humanity, is not an additional or optional extra, which could perhaps be added to God's justification of humanity, but is a necessary part of it. So too, the gathering *and edification* of the community of faith necessarily go hand-in-hand, as do Christian faith *and Christian love*. The one is not a by-product or possible consequence of the other. They are related to each other as a matter of necessity, as different aspects of the very same event. The reconciliation of humanity to God is not something made *possible* by God's reconciliatory action, but something made *real* by it. Not only the reconciling God, but also reconciled humanity, is real and present in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 35).

And when we get to the third part of the doctrine of reconciliation, namely that of vocation, of the sending out of the community of faith, of Christian hope, the same is true. In the doctrine of reconciliation, as in his church dogmatics as a whole, Barth is circling around the one event of reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, viewing the same event from different viewpoints. Even when addressing the doctrine of the Word of God, the doctrine of knowledge of God (including God's election of humanity), and the doctrine of creation, Barth is looking from these differing viewpoints, but his gaze is fixed on the same event, namely at the reconciliation established in Jesus Christ, or perhaps inversely, Barth is looking from the reconciliation established in Jesus Christ, at these different realities. And we can be certain that in the doctrine of redemption, which Barth never started, he would not have moved on to some other event, but would have circled the very same event of the

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reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, but in a new way, looking towards the redemptive work of the Holy Spirit bringing to eschatological fulfilment what God has done for humanity and the world in Jesus Christ.

The second element in the one event of reconciliation, the exaltation of humanity, must be rightly understood, not as a divinisation of humanity, but as a reconciliation of humanity with God, fellowship with God, being placed next to God. The fact that God became human, does not mean that humanity became divine, but that humanity has been reconciled with God. The fact that God became human, means that God is never without humanity, and importantly also, that humanity is never without God. This is the humanity of God, not the divinity of humanity (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 44, 72, 106).

God became human, not for humanity to become divine, but for humanity to be united with God, to be the Creator's image and representative as intended at the creation, to be God's faithful covenant partner as elected by God, to be in communion with God as reconciled humanity. God became human, in order for humanity to become fully human.

Words and wonders

In Barth's discussion of Jesus Christ in the kingly office, as "The Royal Man," Barth spoke at length about Jesus' earthly ministry, Jesus' words, but more especially Jesus' miracles. Once again Barth is indirectly attacking Bultmann's demythologisation of the miracle narratives, but also Bultmann's and his followers' affinity for the words of Jesus. Barth asserted that what made the words of Jesus so wonderful, was the fact that they were spoken by Jesus, the Christ, the King, the Son of Man. Perhaps, Barth said, we should demythologise our understanding of Jesus' words, as mere good philosophy or valuable ethics, and see it as part of the ministry of power of the Son of God. For the people heard the words of Jesus, which sounded much like the words of their scribes, but was filled with awe and wonder, because Jesus did not speak as their scribes, but as one with authority. Jesus words and miracles are inseparable, as seen especially in the gospel of John, since they form part of one and the same miraculous ministry of the Servant who is Lord (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 194, 211). Jesus is the gospel, not the words or works of Jesus. The gospels are not gospels of the words of Jesus, but the gospels of Jesus, the Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 196).

The miracles of Jesus were not done for self-preservation, and when tempted to do so, as in the desert or on the cross, Jesus refrained from performing them. And neither were they done as a form of activism, as an economic, political or social program to better the current world, or to begin a new welfare institution (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 216-217). The miracles of Jesus were done in the power of the world to come, of the kingdom of God, revealing Jesus as the King (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 219).

For Barth, we are not called to believe in the miracles of Jesus, or to obey the words of Jesus, but to believe in Jesus and to obey Jesus. We are not asked to have faith in Jesus' miracles and to obey Jesus' words, since they are the authoritative, powerful, miraculous words and works of the Jesus, the Christ, the King, which miraculously brings our faith and obedience into existence. It is not faith which validates the miracle, but the miracle which brings about faith. It is not obedience which makes the words good, but the words which bring about obedience. Or said more precisely, it is the Speaker of the words and the Doer of the miracles, who brings about faith and obedience (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 236, 238, 240).

Faith then, Barth said, is freedom. It is the freedom created by the miraculous ministry of Jesus. Faith does not believe in miracles. Miracles create faith. Believers do not have faith in

Jesus, but Jesus creates believers. We do not decide to obey the words of Jesus, but Jesus calls us to follow and obey (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 242-243).

The first and the second act

Obedience is not our second act, in response to Jesus' first act. Obedience is Jesus' act. It is Jesus who fulfils the covenant, from God's side, but also from humanity's side. It is Jesus who establishes not only God's justification and sanctification of humanity, but also humanity's faith and obedience. And Jesus does this for every human being. Jesus is not only the justification for all and the sanctification for some, but the justification and sanctification for all. Jesus is the faithful and obedient covenant partner of God on the behalf of the whole of humanity. Jesus is the faithful and obedient human being on behalf of every human being, even for those who do not know it, who do not correspond to it or who reject it. However, although Jesus *is* this for every human being, and although every human being participates in it, ontologically, there is no knowledge or correspondence to this reality outside the knowledge of Christ and the participation in the body of Christ. It is only as we say: "Christ lives," that we can also say: "...and I with Christ." Not for one second are we as believers able to look at our own being and existence and claim that we are obedient keepers of the covenant. It is only as we look onto Christ as the obedient One, as the human being who turns to God, as the One who represents humanity before God, as the One in whom the whole of humanity turns to God, is restored before God, is elevated and exalted before God, acts obediently as the covenant partner of God, that we know and confess that we are part of Christ's obedience. But as we do so, as we look to Christ, as we know and confess Christ's obedience, we *do* actually correspond to Christ's obedience, and in doing so we *are* obedient, we *keep* the covenant, we *act* as the true humanity that we are in Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 271).

Calvin's doctrine of predestination departed from the gospel message that Jesus Christ is the justification, sanctification and vocation of humanity, by isolating this ontological reality as being true only for the predestined – those who know it in faith and live according to it in obedience, not for the reprobate – those who are ignorant or unbelieving, those who are disobedient or reject God's grace. In this way, Calvin's doctrine threw a sinister shadow of uncertainty over Christ's justification, sanctification and vocation of humanity, not only for unbelievers, but also for believers, for we are now to look at our own faith and obedience for certainty of salvation, rather than to Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 520).

Jesus is our justification as well as our sanctification. Jesus does not only displace unfaithful humanity in order to be faithful on our behalf, but Jesus also displaces disobedient humanity in order to be obedient on our behalf (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 273). The fulfilment of the promise "I shall be your God," is God's justification of humanity in Jesus Christ, while that which follows, "and you shall be my people," is God's sanctification of humanity, which also takes place in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 499).

Justification and sanctification are inseparably linked to each other as two aspects of the one event of reconciliation between God and humanity in Jesus Christ. This once again emphasises the inseparable link between faith and obedience. Just as justification without sanctification, is not justification, and sanctification without justification is not sanctification, so too faith without obedience, is not faith, just as obedience without faith is not obedience (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 503, 505).

In Jesus Christ we are saints: SAINTS! Yet we most definitely are not saints. In Jesus Christ, we are already what we are not yet. In Jesus Christ we are the future humanity, the true humanity, not only justified but also sanctified before God. We are this, not in any way due to

our obedience or holiness, but due to the obedience and holiness of Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 513-514).

Jesus came to seek and to save sinners. Jesus died for the godless. Thus, even if we think of unfaithful, disobedient, sinful humanity, we cannot think that it is without God, or lost, since Jesus sought and found unfaithful, disobedient, sinful humanity, and was faithful and obedient in its place, thus restoring its true humanity and making it once again God's covenant partner (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 281).

The disobedience of sloth

It is not only true humanity, which can only be known and confessed in the light of who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus has done on humanity's behalf, but also humanity's sin and misery. Humanity's disobedience cannot be known by looking at this or that act which we regard as wrong, loathsome or inhuman, nor even by looking at God's judgment over certain human acts of disobedience in different parts of the Bible. It is only as we look toward God's full revelation of grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that the fullness of true humanity, as well as the total misery and corruptness of sinful humanity, are revealed (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 381).

Jesus Christ, God who became a human being, reveals our sinfulness in our mediocrity, our triviality, our ordinariness. Jesus confronts humanity and reveals its fundamental sinfulness. Jesus not only confronts the best disciple, Peter, in his denials of Jesus, and the worst traitor, Judas, in his betrayal of Jesus, but also the "innocent" passers-by, in their indifference, reluctance, laziness, scepticism, boredom and inaction. Not only those who reject Jesus, but those who follow Jesus, those who are saved by Jesus, are healed and fed by Jesus, are taught and guided by Jesus, are exposed as ungrateful and unresponsive onlookers of Jesus' suffering and death, as involuntary accomplices in Jesus' murder. We as believers, know ourselves to be among these people, these ordinary people, people for whom the shackles has been broken and the prison gate has been bashed open, but who are too ungrateful and too lazy to walk out in freedom (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 386-387, 390-393).

Following Barth's discussion of Jesus Christ, the servant as Lord, and preceding his discussion regarding the work of love which the Holy Spirit establishes in the life of the Christian, Barth deals with the sloth of the sinner. For Barth, the epistle of James also gives a clear and proper testimony to the Word of God, since faith that is not active, faith that is not embodied in works of love, faith that is not simultaneously obedience, is not faith at all. The sloth of inaction, the sloth of disobedience, the sloth of apathy, is the same as unbelief (Nimmo, 2007: 140-141).

Humanity is not only in need of humiliation out of its pride, but also of exaltation out of its sloth. Sloth, disobedience, inaction, is the other side of pride, unbelief, self-justification. The proud person, the Promethean human being, desires to be God, whereas the ordinary person, the indifferent, ungrateful, slothful human being, desires to be without God, desires to be left alone in its prison (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 404-405).

The irony is that in humanity's desire to be without God, to be left alone, to be itself, it loses itself, it rejects its true humanity (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 408). Pride and sloth are two sides of the same sin of asserting oneself over against God and thus losing oneself (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 405, 408).

Slothful humanity says self-defiantly: "I have done nothing wrong," while the truth is actually that it has done *nothing*, and thereby has done everything wrong.

In Jesus Christ the new day of God's new world has dawned on humanity. This reality cannot be altered. But slothful humanity closes its eyes, tries to deny the light, refuses to open its eyes and walk in the light and freedom given by grace in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 410).

This is not only true of unbelievers, but even more so of believers. The greatest fool, perhaps, is not the atheist, but the practical atheist, not the human being that denies the light, but the one who knows and confesses the light, the one whose eyes are open and who sees the light, and yet still refrains from walking in it (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 415).

Lying down and rising up

For Barth, there is no separation between being called to faith in Jesus and being called to obedient following as a disciple of Jesus (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 536). Although faith and obedience can be distinguished, they cannot exist without each other. When Jesus called the disciples, the faith and obedience with which they responded to that call, were inseparable from each other (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 538).

Barth agreed with Bonhoeffer's description in *Nachfolge*, translated as *The cost of discipleship*, that when Christ calls you, Christ calls you to come and die. The call to discipleship, the call to follow Jesus, the call to believe and obey Jesus, is a call to surrender. Barth likened this call to a father who instructs his son to go to bed. The obedient son happily surrenders and falls asleep, while the disobedient son thinks that he will show his father that he is not tired and goes to play outside (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 541). Barth saw in Bonhoeffer's description of discipleship no legalism or moralism, but a calling to surrender to God's grace (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 542).

But shortly after using this metaphor, Barth used a metaphor which is precisely opposed to this one, namely of a son being awakened by a father and commanded to not remain lying in his sloth but rise in obedience (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 554-555).

Perhaps one could argue that faith can be likened to the trust which a son places in his father when he goes to bed, and that obedience can be likened to being awakened by the father and commanded to rise. The point, however, is that not one metaphor will be able to describe the multifaceted reality of the reconciliation between God and humanity, of the humiliation and exaltation of humanity, of God's No and God's Yes to humanity, of justification and sanctification, of faith and obedience.

Barth himself asserted that the metaphor of rising from sleep breaks at the point where one has to acknowledge that it is in actual fact not rising from sleep, but being risen from the dead. Thus it is truly an action of God, of resurrecting humanity from death, of victoriously liberating humanity from the powers of sin, sickness and death (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 555).

And yet, Barth said, this divine miracle does not only take place outside humanity, but it is a divine miracle which happens to and in humanity. We are resurrected with Christ. We are risen from the dead. And thus in awaking and rising, in believing and obeying, we make use of the freedom to which we are liberated (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 556-557).

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Obedience means that the Christian hears the Word of God, really hears the Word of God, “not merely by accepting it as the imparting of information, but by surrendering to and satisfying its claim” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 253-254). Barth said:

“In believing, a man becomes a Christian; in obeying, he is a Christian” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 254).

In obedience the Christian does not merely contemplate God’s Word and work from without, but co-operates with it from within (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 254). The same is of course true of faith and prayer. That is why these three form an inseparable unity within the one encounter between God and the Christian community. However, the unique element that obedience brings to this encounter, is that of active co-operation (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 254).

Active participation

We would be greatly mistaken, however, if we think that now we are leaving the sphere of God’s Word and work and entering the sphere of pure human action. As with faith, obedience is a free self-determined human act grounded upon the divine determination of humanity. Obedience is to freely be who you already are in Jesus Christ. In Nimmo’s words: “...for Barth, precisely as obedience is genuine human action, so too it is also the divine action of grace. It is this divine action which liberates the ethical agent for free, spontaneous, and responsible co-operation in the history of the covenant.” Although to receive God’s grace in Jesus Christ demands action, this action is always a reception of God’s grace (Nimmo, 2007: 145).

In a discussion in 1960 with representatives of the *Brüdergemeinde*, about their church father, Zinzendorf, whom Barth criticised early in his career, but to whom he moved closer later in his life, Barth said that he agrees with Zinzendorf that both our justification and our sanctification have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And Zinzendorf’s emphasis on the fact that it has already been accomplished, is correct. Like Kohlbrügge, Barth could also say that his conversion took place on Golgotha. The Christian life, ethical agency, begins at its end destination. We do not have to strive towards our sanctification. And neither do we need to repeat Jesus’ sanctification. Jesus accomplished our sanctification. We only need to accept it, to receive it, to live it. The mistake of the old Orthodoxy, was that it merely stared at their sanctification, instead of living it. It was to this spectatorship that Wesley and his Pietistic movement reacted. But Zinzendorf gave an important correction to Wesley, by reminding us that both our justification and our sanctification have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. This does not mean that we are spectators of our sanctification in Jesus. We are called and drawn in to participate in Christ’s obedience. We are made active recipients and partakers in our sanctification accomplished in Jesus. But our sanctification begins and ends in Jesus. Even though this emphasis of Zinzendorf led to anti-nominism in the *Brüdergemeinde*, Barth implored them to hold onto this truth. Even though the temptation of anti-nominism will always be a hair breadth away, we must not let that danger scare us into the error of taking sanctification into our own hands. The gospel must always precede the law. The Christian life must always have its fulfilment in Jesus Christ as its starting point. The ethical agent must always become who she already is in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1960: *KB*: 3, 9-11).

But after agreeing with Zinzendorf’s view that both our justification and our sanctification have been accomplished in Jesus Christ, Barth asked whether Zinzendorf’s concern could not have been overcome by understanding the Christian life as invocation of the Father? As we obey the command to call upon God in our need, are we not actively participating in the sanctification accomplished for us in Jesus Christ? Does this view of the Christian life as invocation not hold onto both sides of the relationship, of our sanctification in Jesus and our

obedience in the freedom that Jesus gives? Barth suggested that if the Christian life is understood as a life of prayer, Zinzendorf's emphasis on Christ's vicarious obedience can be maintained, as well as our active participation in Christ's obedience (Barth, 1960: *KB*: 19).

Barth walked on an equally fine line when it came to the ethical agent, as he did with reference to the agent of faith. This is understandable, since Barth saw an inseparable unity between justification and sanctification, between faith and obedience. Barth always moved extremely close to the point where faith and obedience would no longer be a human act and responsibility, and to some, he fell prey to that danger. Barth often repeated the fact that faith and obedience are human acts. However, for Barth, these acts would not be correctly understood if we think that they begin and end with humanity, that they are merely human possibilities, i.e., possible paths which we can freely choose to take or to ignore. Such a view of human agency would not take the fullness of God's grace and the complete sinfulness of humanity, as revealed in Jesus Christ, truly seriously. Barth maintained that it is indeed we who believe and obey, that we indeed are the agents of faith and obedience, but we are only free to be agents of faith and obedience as we partake in the complete justification and sanctification accomplished for us in Jesus Christ. It is only Jesus Christ who can create the agent of faith, the ethical agent, in order to freely believe and obey.

According to Mangina, this is what made Barth's term of choice in his special ethics of reconciliation, namely invocation, such a brilliant choice. Here Barth affirmed that whether we cry, sigh, sing, rejoice, whether we give thanks, praise, worship or intercede, on all accounts invocation means that we *speak* to God. By describing the Christian life as a real conversation between God and believers, says Mangina, Barth ensured that the personal agency of both God and believers were maintained. Barth affirmed that God not only speaks, but also listens, and thus our obedience in invoking God in prayer, is not futile or irrelevant. Whether we pray or not makes a difference to God! Our lives are determined by God, but God also allows to be co-determined by our lives of prayer. Although God alone can honour God's Name, establish God's kingdom and fulfil God's will on earth as in heaven, the church is called to invoke God to do so. In the tension between the already and the not yet, the reconciliation which already occurred in Jesus Christ and eschatological fulfilment of that reconciliation which has not yet been completed, the church is called to act by being a sign, by giving witness to what God is doing, through our invocation (Mangina, 2001: 174-175).

The life of the church

We as believers are constantly in need of resurrection and reawakening. We are always being awakened, every morning anew, by God's grace, and called to rise once again with Christ. The downward pull of sloth is relentless and unceasing, draining our endurance in obedience, and thus necessitating the renewing power of Christ's resurrection which continually reawakens us through the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 555).

Interestingly, when Barth spoke about the building up of the community of faith by the quickening power of the Holy Spirit, Barth asserted that Jesus Christ is not only the Head of the body of Christ, but also the body (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 653).

The church is not the extension of Jesus in the world. Jesus is the church in the world. The life of Jesus is not extended by the life of the church, but the life of the church is awakened and renewed by the resurrected life of Jesus. We do not only believe in Jesus, the Head of the community of faith, but we also obey, we live in and by and through Jesus, who is the life of the community of faith (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 655).

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The church does not further the kingdom of God, but the kingdom of God establishes, sustains and renews the church, as we are pulled towards its fulfilment in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 656).

When Barth used the word “co-operation,” it must be understood in this way. For Barth “co-operation” with God’s grace in Jesus Christ never meant that humanity contributes anything to its salvation, but rather that it corresponds, in a relational analogy, to God’s covenant history with humanity. Humanity cannot create or contribute to who we are in Jesus Christ, but we can act as the people that we already are in Jesus Christ.

In the section on Christian love, Barth once again made it clear that we do not love God and our neighbour because God commands us to do so. We love with *eros* love, with love of ourselves, with love that loves for its own sake, with love that wants to love without the help of God. Not only unbelievers, but believers also, are incapable of true self-giving love, of *agape* love. But in and by the self-giving, *agape* love of God, we are enabled to correspond to God’s love for us, by loving God and others with self-giving, *agape* love (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 744, 748, 788, 800).

God’s love, God’s self-giving *agape* love, is not an example for humanity, nor a command. God’s love is creative, liberating, gracious, sanctifying, purifying. God’s love causes us to love in a manner corresponding to God’s self-giving, *agape* love (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 773, 776).

Wherever God’s love is actual, is where Jesus Christ is present and at work, loving the world, sanctifying humanity, building up the community of faith in love, giving the body of Christ for the sake of the world (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 779).

Our love, Christian love, is actual in the surprising, mysterious and miraculous power of the Holy Spirit, for whose work in our lives we can only continually ask in prayer. Although to love is a free human act, it will only correspond to God’s love, it will only be self-giving, *agape* love, where and when it takes place in the power of the Holy Spirit, thus giving witness to the real and active presence and work, the love, not of Christians, nor of the church, but of Jesus Christ (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 785).

The most our love can do, in the miracle and power of the Holy Spirit, is to give witness to the presence and work, the love of Jesus Christ, who is the true Israelite, the true Christian, the fulfiller of the covenant, the Head and life of the church, the truly good Samaritan, the one who obeys God’s commandments. In truth and actuality, it is Jesus Christ who loves God and who loves humanity. Christian love is the freedom of obedience with which we give witness to Jesus’ love by corresponding to it (Barth, 1958: *CD IV,2*: 823).

Being a neighbour

The free determination of obedience, is not only to be for God, corresponding to God who is for me, but also to be for humanity, corresponding to God who is for humanity. The co-humanity of obedience means that obedience is always characterised by love. The dual command to love God with the whole of our being and our neighbour as ourselves, is the essence of obedience. This correlates with Barth’s understanding of freedom, which is never aimless but always directed at something. The freedom of the Christian life is the freedom to love God and the freedom to love our neighbour. In this way, obedience as love is a witness to the being of God, God’s love in action, God’s covenant history with humanity (Nimmo, 2007: 145).

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True freedom is to be liberated from solitude and isolation, to be liberated from a life apart from God and apart from the rest of humanity, and to be drawn into a life with God and for God, to be drawn into a life with and for the rest of humanity. Barth rejects the notions of freedom espoused by most ethical theories, which stresses humanity's autonomy, individualism and self-sufficiency. A life lived without God and without fellow humanity, invariably leads to an apathetic life that rationalises the injustice and violence in the world to suit its own selfish interests. The covenant-partnership that God makes with humanity by grace in Jesus Christ, which establishes God as our Father and fellow humanity as our brothers and sisters, liberates humanity from this life of loveless and unjust isolation and draws us into a life of responding to God's action and taking responsibility for our fellow humanity (Haddorff, 2010: 238).

As Barth explored an anthropology grounded upon Christology in his doctrine of creation, the co-humanity of his theology came strongly to the fore. Firstly, being human means living for God. This means to be elected and called by God, in Jesus Christ, to hear and answer God's Word, to call upon God in free gratitude, acknowledgment and obedience. But secondly, it also means living with our neighbour. We cannot be "for" humanity in the same way that Jesus is "for us," but we can be "with" our fellow humanity. Because in Jesus Christ God became a human being for and with fellow humanity, our true humanity is found correspondingly in being with our fellow humanity. We are not fully human by ourselves, but find our humanity in our co-humanity, in analogy to Jesus Christ who did not become a human being in isolation, but a human being for and with fellow humanity. This co-humanity has four reciprocal characteristics for Barth: (1) to see others and to be seen by others, (2) to hear others and to be heard by others, (3) to help others and to be helped by others and (4) to do all of this gladly. That our humanity is to be found in our co-humanity, that we are human beings through our fellowship with other human beings, that the image of God is not to be found in the individual but in co-existence, is reflected best, according to Barth, in marriage (Barth, 1960: *CD III,2*: 243-274; König, 1986: 31).

In the book, *God Hear and Now*, in the chapter on Christian ethics, Barth tried to give an answer to the question: How do we respond to the Word of God? Or alternatively, how do we hear and obey Jesus' call of discipleship? Or, how do we correspond to God's command in obedience? Barth gave seven points in his answer. (1) We are neighbours. We regard human beings not as instruments to attain our goals, ideals or ideologies, but as human beings to whom God has become a Neighbour. (2) We are patient with others, we forgive them and never forsake our hope for them, because God is patient and forgiving. (3) We are not pessimistic about others, but trust that they can be good, because they have been allowed by God's grace to be good. (4) Christian ethics is not collective ethics, but demand personal responsibility and obedience to God. It does not act in accordance with a universal law, but according to personal election and calling. (5) But neither is it individualistic. Because Jesus has become our Brother, we are called to participation in the community of faith, as well as in the civil community. (6) Because Jesus became a slave, we are called to serve. (7) Christian ethics is holistic, not dualistic. We are commanded to love God with our whole being. Our prayer is not separated from our work, and our work is not separated from our prayer. It encompasses body and soul, private and public life. We are claimed in our totality by God (Barth, 1964, 2003: *GHN*: 111-114).

Price puts it eloquently, when he says that true humanity, in Barth's theology, "can only be understood as a being in encounter: a being in covenant relation with God and fellow humans" (Price, 2002: 97).

The freedom for

Christian obedience is not something we can choose to do or to ignore, nor an achievement for which we can claim any merit or reward. We have no choice in the matter. And we have nothing to boast about. Obedience is walking in the singular path stretching out before the person of faith. It is to freely live the life given by grace (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 254).

Barth said that obedience has nothing to do with human achievements:

“He thanks God for the fact that he is a Christian, but he cannot expect any thanks for it. He obeys as God has made Himself meritorious on his behalf – what further merit is to be expected? He has his reward in the fact that he is a Christian, and that as such he can obey” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 261).

This free obedience is not the freedom of choice. No other life is possible. There are no other options. Anything else would not be life, but would be death. In light of the action of God in Jesus Christ, all other human action, is living the impossible possibility, living the inhuman life. But still it has to be *free* obedience, not forced or reluctant obedience, to truly correspond to God’s free self-determination for humanity. Christian obedience is the Christian’s life of gratitude, the Christian’s grateful living of the life which she is gracefully given to live. Living this life can in no way create the illusion that the Christian is achieving something wherefore she must be thanked or rewarded, but will glorify the Father who has made this life possible. Matthew 5:16: “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.” And at the same time, obedience is not only free gratitude, but also repentance. It is done in the knowledge of God’s judgment, and is therefore always accompanied by prayer for God’s grace, asking for forgiveness for the unrighteousness of our most righteous actions. But, then again, in the final analysis, obedience can never remain in the attitude of a repentant sinner, but will always return to thanksgiving and joy. Not as a shallow cheerfulness, but as true joy over the abyss, as the eschatological hope which is given in Jesus Christ in the midst of the wickedness of humanity (Nimmo, 2007:146).

The liberation of the Christian does not only entail the liberation from being isolated from God and fellow humanity, but it also entails the liberation from autonomous decision-making, the liberation from the power of personal desires and compulsions, the liberation from indecision and inaction, and the liberation from moralism and legalism. Taken together this means that the Christian is liberated from the ethical quagmire of choosing between right and wrong, and liberated for confidently making decisions and taking action with and for fellow humanity, while asking for God’s forgiveness and giving thanks for God’s grace. God alone is good, and thus it is not humanity’s place to determine good and evil, but to obey, to act, to decide, with repentance and gratitude, in the freedom granted by God’s grace and forgiveness (Haddorff, 2010: 241).

In fact, in light of the reconciliation between God and humanity established in Jesus Christ, sin, disobedience, becomes the impossible possibility. For Barth, sin does not have its own substance. It only serves to deny and destroy what is real and actual. Disobedience is not to enact the choice of living a different life than the life God has given to and demanded of humanity, but merely annihilation of life. Sin is a parasite that, once it has sucked all the life out of humanity, it ceases to exist. It has no life of its own. It has no reality of its own. It feeds on the real life established by God for humanity in Jesus Christ. Sin is unreal, it is meaningless nothingness, and its possibility is denied by the reality of God’s election, reconciliation and redemption of humanity. It is the darkness which is driven out by God’s light (Krötke, 2000: 165).

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In Jesus Christ, God elects humanity. And in Jesus Christ, humanity elects God. Jesus Christ is both God's free election of humanity and humanity's corresponding faith and obedience whereby it elects God. Jesus Christ elects God on our behalf. Being in Christ, we have the freedom to participate in Christ's election of God through faith and obedience (Bromiley, 1979: 90).

Here and now

Christian obedience is not the fulfilment of a law, meeting certain standards or furthering a way of life (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 254). The Holy Spirit is the Christian's only Master, enabling him or her to freely live this life of obedience. But, because the Holy Spirit is the Christian's *Master*, making the Christian's spirit surrender to its authority, binding the Christian to the Word of God, leading the Christian in fellowship with the whole community of faith, connecting the Christian with the faith community's mission and service, it is in no manner a life which is open to arbitrary preferences, opinions or decisions. And yet, the Holy Spirit is not only the Spirit of the corporate community of faith, but is the free Spirit that moves and guides each individual Christian within the community, enabling each to fulfil his or her own individual obedience, always anew, also giving new tasks within new situations (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 255).

Thus obedience is a being in action, corresponding to God's being in action. It is the free self-determination corresponding to the divine determination of humanity. Christian obedience cannot be achieved by accepting certain general laws, or rules, or morals, or values, or principles as authoritative, and to try and abide by them to the best of your ability. It is only as the Christian actively follows the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, hears and obeys the living Word of God through the power of the Holy Spirit, that Christian obedience becomes a reality and finds concrete form. But that form can never be frozen, cast in stone, or made into a model for other obedience. It is always happening anew, finding ever new forms in the concrete action of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 147).

Nimmo believes that one of the great contributions of Barth's ethics to the moral theology of the church, is his actualistic ontology. From start to finish, Barth's ethics is embedded within the encounter which is always an event happening at this moment, the living relationship between the God whose being is found in its action towards humanity, and the human being whose identity is found in its active response to God's being-in-action for her. This eventful encounter, this living relationship is always happening in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, while Scripture is the irreplaceable witness to this covenant history taking place between God and humanity, theological ethics cannot be based on the authority of proof-texts or church tradition, since this would entail an abstraction from the relational encounter wherein theological ethics is embedded. Barth is well aware of the horrible sins of ethical agents, but maintains that a fixed morality abstracted from Scripture and endorsed by the church, is not the solution to humanity's wickedness. Only God's saving action can help humanity, and therefore Barth continues to view sinful ethical agents within the covenant of grace, which is justifying and sanctifying humanity, liberating and claiming humanity, enabling human beings to give a free obedient response to God within the living encounter and relationship with God (Nimmo, 2007:187-188).

The grace given to the Christian is not finally meant for his or her own salvation, but by this grace he or she is drawn into the kingdom of God, in service of the King, with a commission, for the sake of the world (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 255).

God is alive and at work here and now, and freely chooses to utilise our sinful obedience in the on-going history of salvation:

“In the midst of world-events, in all the necessity and obligatoriness, the constraint and freedom of their obedience, in all the poverty of its execution, in all the shame which they heap upon themselves and their Lord, Christians are the children of God, and as such they are the true and proper servants of God, not hired servants, employees, but natural servants, by whose activity God wills at a specific time and place to accomplish something specific in the context of His own activity; something which will attest His kingdom, or recall the revelation which He has already given, or declare this revelation as it has still to be completed” (Barth, 1960: *CD III*,3: 259-260).

The Christian has no need to comprehend how God governs the world from creation to recreation, or even for a single week. The Christian can and must trust God with the governance of the whole of creation. The Christian is no strategic partner with God in the lordship over the universe, but a servant and a soldier. The Christian has no need to trouble him- or herself with questions of why or how, but only with the duty assigned to him or her within the community of faith, within this time and place, and with the firm assurance that, no matter how poorly he or she performs this duty, his or her work will not be in vain (Barth, 1960: *CD III*,3: 260).

Freedom from powers and principalities

Real obedience, true obligation, can only be to the true Lord of the universe. All other obedience to other lords, all other obligations within the world, can only be relative. Yes, the Christian will obey worldly lords and abide by worldly obligations, but only for the sake of the true Lord. And surely, at times, we will be forced to disobey these lords or disregard the world's obligations, also the for the sake of the one and only true Lord of the universe. Only the true Lord can demand this complete obedience, this absolute obligation, which entails the liberation of humanity, not to do as we please, but to serve this Lord who is the Creator and Liberator of the whole of creation (Barth, 1960: *CD III*,3: 261-262).

Obedience to the only true Lord, brings true freedom from the destructive powers in the world that try to usurp Christ's lordship. In the unfinished ethics of reconciliation, printed in *The Christian Life*, Barth addressed some of the powers that try to rule over us and bind us in captivity. Addressing political absolutism under the title “Leviathan,” the idol of economic resources and wealth under the title “Mammon,” and the tyranny of ideas which are presented in propaganda and slogans as absolute ideas and which demand complete obedience, under the title “Ideology,” Barth made it clear how obedience to the true Lord of heaven and earth means the liberation from any earthly power which claims to be absolute or permanent. The answer to these powers, is not to demonise them and to try and replace them by some other power. The solution to political oppression is not to replace one dictator with another ruler, or one political system with another. The solution to economic oppression is not reject one economic system and exalt another. The solution to ideological oppression is not elevate some ideas above others. These powers form part of the God's creation, and they can be good, as long all claims to absolutism and permanence are rejected and they are subordinated to the one and only true Lord of heaven and earth. We cannot overcome these powers, only God can. Only Jesus Christ can rule over them. Obedience to Christ, means the freedom to witness to Christ's lordship over all the powers of the earth, and the freedom to resist all powers that claim absolute and permanent authority and thus seek to enslave humanity. We cannot defeat the powers, but Christ has defeated them, which gives us the freedom, in obedience to Christ as our only true Lord, to witness in word and deed to Christ's liberation of humanity, and to resist in word and deed all powers that imprison and oppress humanity (Haddorff, 2010: 280-289; Barth, 1981: *CL*: 215, 218, 219, 222, 224).

Even free expression, work, interaction or creativity, can become a power unto itself, as Barth explained under the title “Chthonic powers.” The very same life-giving freedoms which are enabled by rejecting all absolute claims to power, allowing individuals, communities, societies and nations to discover, create, interact and express themselves, can become a form of power. While they are freely created by humanity, they can come to rule illegitimately over humanity. While they initially served humanity to fulfil our needs and desires, they eventually dictate our needs and desires and enslave us under the illusion of absolute freedom. Whereas it seems that we control them, and they serve to ease and enrich our lives, they have a life and a power of their own and gain control over our lives, burdening and limiting our lives in a totalitarian fashion. They have the power to alter our thinking, to change what we deem to be useful, valuable, desirable, needed or even possible. The most obvious example of such a power is technology, but it can also be fashion and taste, sport, entertainment and pleasure, transportation and speed. In this wonderful section Barth asked critical and prophetic questions, which have become increasingly relevant since his death, with the dawn of the personal computer, internet and cellular phones. Importantly, Barth did not argue for the rejection of these powers, but for their subordination under the rule of Christ, and for the church to give witness to the dangers we face if we allow these powers to usurp Christ’s lordship and to rule over our lives (Haddorff, 2010: 289-293; Barth, 1981: *CL*: 227, 229, 232-233).

Barth said in 1947, in the confusion, disillusionment and trauma following the Second World War, that Christians are allowed to have a standpoint. Christians can have all kinds of standpoints relating to politics, history, economy, natural science, psychology or pedagogy. We are not forbidden to have standpoints. As long we never make the mistake of thinking of these standpoints as *Christian* standpoints, and as long as we remain free to obey our Lord Jesus alone, whom we must follow in, through and always again out of all our standpoints. A Christian can never hold onto these standpoints as fixed truths, and a Christian can never be a serious representative of such standpoints. We cannot even stand within the world as *Christians*, as if we have arrived at a *stand-point*. The Christian exists within the world always as a beginner, a beginner in faith, as one who is always made new. Every evening we are rather ashamed at our Christian existence, and every morning we are allowed to once again dare to live the Christian message within the world. The only *Christian* standpoint, if one could speak of such a standpoint, is to be found in the following: (1) to confess with gratitude, together with the rest of the church, that Jesus Christ is our only comfort in living and dying and also the Lord over the world, (2) not to be ashamed to make this confession publicly, and (3) grounded upon the confession of Jesus Christ, to freely seek more justice for our neighbour than for ourselves, and to give witness to our hope amid the horrors of the world, which is always sure and always being renewed in Jesus Christ. The Christian exists in becoming, in being liberating every morning anew, by God’s miraculous grace, from all standpoints, in order to confess freely and obediently the Christian message of hope, in which there is no standing point, but from which and to which we are moving in hope and joy (Barth, 1947: *KB*: 1).

The necessity of faith

Just as faith necessarily contains obedience within it, so too obedience necessarily contains faith within it. The Christian needs a particular confidence and courage to give him- or herself completely for this obedience, a sure and certain trust, the faith, that Jesus Christ is Lord of all (Barth, 1960: *CD III*, 3: 262).

Christians need a confidence which is renewed each morning, which enables us to start always again at the beginning. Christians are faced constantly with new situations necessitating new insights and new decisions, which can make us grow weary, discouraged,

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without the strength to start always again at the beginning. That is why faith is needed for Christian obedience, the faith that God will give today what is needed for today's obedience (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 263).

But it is not only the constantly changing world which demands faith. Even more dangerous than the danger of despairing of a world that is always in flux, there is the danger that Christians might despair of ourselves (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 263).

The Christian is always:

..surrounded by so much of his own weakness and folly and even wickedness, by so much shame, that he has good reason constantly to grow weary of himself, to despair of himself, to abandon himself as utterly unworthy and unfitted to execute his commission, and even to relinquish this commission. In all this he would be utterly lost if it were not for the fact that he is upheld by the assurance that for him, too, there is divine mercy, that he, too, will be forgiven, and that because of this he cannot be weary. He needs Jesus Christ to forbid him to despair of self" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 263).

The act of prayer

Obedience, according to Barth, not only contains faith, but also contains prayer (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 264). In prayer, we act obediently. Barth said:

..prayer is the most intimate and effective form of Christian action" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 264).

It is not as if we act, and then pray. To pray is to act obediently, and to act obediently, is to act in prayer, in invocation of God's action. Barth said:

"When the Christian wishes to act obediently, what else can he do but that which he does in prayer: render to God praise and thanksgiving; spread himself before God in his weakness and sin; reach out to Him with all that impels him; commend himself to Him who is his only help; and again, and this time truly, render to Him praise and thanksgiving. This is Christian obedience *in nuce* (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

The relationship between obedience and prayer, becomes very clear if one understands obedience as an all-encompassing encounter between God and humanity, wherein the Word of God claims the whole of the believer's life. Although Christian obedience definitely also entails doing this and that thing, performing this and that particular act, Christian obedience is in essence not an accumulation of obedient acts, but an offering of a person's whole life to God. It is a life lived in correspondence to humanity's election in Jesus Christ, in correspondence to God's all-embracing grace in Jesus Christ. What God commands, is not an act of obedience. God claims a person, and the whole of that person's life (Nimmo, 2007: 141). Thus obedience entails not primarily the doing of an act, but the giving of yourself to God, in prayerful obedience, in obedient prayer.

Barth conceded that it is true, if understood correctly, that prayer renews and empowers the Christian inwardly, but "...it must not be forgotten" Barth added, "...that prayer is also the true and proper work of the Christian" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

Without prayer, the Christian does not have the necessary light and power for obedience. And it is also not the case that Christians can, by our own power, renew our faith each

morning, giving us the much needed confidence to fulfil our obedience. It is possible to avoid God with all our activity, and thus to remain truly passive. In prayer, this cannot happen. In prayer we as Christians presents ourselves before God, placing ourselves at God's disposal, in complete trust and service, in faith and obedience. In prayer, we are directly responding to God's Word, which is addressing us, utilising the freedom given by it, fulfilling the obligation made by it, and thus answering faithfully and obediently (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

This direct answer, this personal response to the Word of God which addresses humanity, is what makes the Christian a Christian (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

Barth concluded:

“As this primitive movement, prayer, which is the basis of all other activity, is included in obedience. It is in itself the act of obedience *par excellence*, the act of obedience from which all other acts must spring” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

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(Jesus, overcoming our falsehood, calling us, sending us out, establishing hope in us)

Believing what we cannot believe; obeying what we cannot obey

In prayer we ask God to grant us the impossible gift of believing what we cannot believe and obeying the command that we cannot obey, not by our own capacity and power, but by the power and capacity of the resurrected and living Jesus Christ, who is actively working, not only for us, but also in us through the Holy Spirit.

“Prayer means that we address ourselves to God, who has already spoken to us in the gospel and in the law. We find ourselves face to face with him when we are tormented by the imperfection of our obedience and the discontinuity of our faith. Because of God we are in distress. God alone is able to heal us of it. In order to ask him to do so, we pray” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 11).

How are we to act, when we are confronted with the gospel and the law, when we are confronted by God's Word, when we encounter the living God, who claims our whole existence? What are we to do when we encounter God in God's complete grace and judgment, revealing our complete sinfulness and insufficiency? Barth said that the Reformers battled with this question, and gave the following answer: The very first thing we must do, the only thing we can do, is to pray (Barth, 2002: *P*: 12).

In prayer we ask of God: “Help me to believe in You, which I cannot believe in my own power.” In prayer we ask of God: “Help me to do Your will, which I cannot do in my own power.” In prayer we ask for God's complete justification and sanctification by grace in Jesus Christ, despite all our unbelief and disobedience.

This is our prayer:

“Lord Jesus Christ, as we go about our day, we pray that you would recognize not only your word on our lips but also your actions in our deeds. Amen” (Claiborne & Wilson-Hartgrove & Okoro, 2010: 99).

The third element in reconciliation

Whereas Luther, Calvin and the Reformers saw justification and sanctification as a full description of the atonement which takes place between God and humanity in Jesus Christ, Barth felt that a third element, that of vocation, had to be added. Whereas faith looks back at the justification achieved for humanity, and whereas love exists in the present sanctification being fulfilled in humanity, hope looks forward to the future redemption of humanity, the *telos* of humanity, which God has promised and guaranteed in Christ and to which God is calling humanity (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 108, 110).

On some level Barth's threefold form of the doctrine of reconciliation almost seems too neat, too clever, too perfect. One should always be wary of a theology in which everything fits together too neatly and perfectly, lest it becomes abstract mental frameworks, rather than reflection and response to the concrete reality of God's action and work. When one attempts to force the reality of the covenantal history between God and humanity into logical structures, the truth and the power, the fullness and the depth of it can very easily be lost.

Barth was very much aware of these dangers, and would warn us not to cast the threefold form of his doctrine of reconciliation into stone. Barth conceded that there is a certain arbitrariness of method in the way that one decides to relate and integrate the different aspects of the reality of reconciliation between God and humanity in our theological reflection. The method, the structure, the mental framework which we employ to reflect upon the covenantal history between God and humanity is not all important. As mentioned before, Barth did not view the three parts of doctrine of reconciliation as three separate events, but he was circling the very same event of reconciliation and reflecting upon it from different viewpoints. But still, it is of importance that the fullness, the extent, the depth and the scope of the reconciliation between God and humanity come to their right in our reflection, regardless of which method, structure or mental framework we employ. Therefore, Barth felt he had the freedom to bring in a third element in the doctrine of reconciliation, and did not feel obliged to keep within the time honoured framework of the Reformers, of justification and sanctification. No framework is cast in stone, not even that of the Reformers. All our methods, structures and frameworks must surrender and respond and give witness to the reality of Jesus Christ, to the event of Jesus Christ, to the history of Jesus Christ. And although our reflection will never be able to contain the breadth, the depth, the width and the height of the work and action of God in Jesus Christ, it is to this reality that our theology must respond and give witness. And if that means that our frameworks must be amended, altered or completely discarded, then so be it. If, however, our method or framework cannot give witness to the different aspects and movements of the history of reconciliation, if our framework or method cannot reflect upon the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the humiliation of God and the exaltation of humanity in Jesus Christ, upon justification and sanctification, upon faith and obedience, then, Barth said plainly, it is "incomplete, one-sided and erroneous." Not because of the sanctity of the Reformers' theological framework, but because of the reality of the history of Jesus Christ. Freedom from methods, structures and mental frameworks, does not mean that we can arbitrarily conjure up our own methods, structures and frameworks. True freedom in theological reflection comes from being bound in absolute obedience and submission to Jesus Christ. It is to the work and action of Jesus Christ that we respond and give witness in our theological reflection (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 5).

For Barth, the first two parts of the doctrine of reconciliation, the deity and humanity of Jesus Christ, the priestly and kingly office, the humiliation of God and exaltation of humanity, God's justification and sanctification of humanity, Christian faith and love, already describe the full and complete event of reconciliation between God and humanity which takes place in Jesus Christ. The third part which Barth added, the witness of Jesus Christ, the prophetic office,

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the vocation of humanity, Christian hope, is God's mediation, God's proclamation, God's revelation, God's eschatological fulfilment of this same event. The reconciliation between God and humanity, which can be summarised in the words: "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people," is described in fullness in the first two parts. But this event also announces itself, it reveals itself, it mediates itself, it makes itself known, it calls forth active participation in it, through the prophetic office of the True Witness, Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 6-8).

The third part of the doctrine of reconciliation does not contain a new, separate event, but the movement of the same event through history towards its eschatological fulfilment (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 8). The justification and sanctification of humanity, necessarily also means its vocation. The pride and sloth of sinful humanity, necessarily also means its falsehood. The gathering and building up of the community of faith, necessarily also means it sending out. Christian faith and Christian love, necessarily also means Christian hope (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 10).

As said at the beginning of this study, it could perhaps suffice to refrain from adding a third element, to be content with justification and sanctification, with faith and obedience, as a full description of the Christian reality. It could serve as the framework for a completely sufficient reflection upon the Christian life. But in the thorough working out of these two elements in the Christian life, it will become abundantly clear, if it is a thorough description of the Christian life, that these are not static elements, frozen in history, but that they are in motion, that they did not happen, but that they are happening and that they will happen; that they do not merely describe what Jesus did, or even what Jesus is doing, but also what Jesus will do. And thus, even if the Christian reality is described within a twofold structure of justification and sanctification, the reality of vocation will become clear. Even if we only speak of Christian faith and love, Christian hope will of necessity form part of it. Even if we only speak of faith and obedience, active prayer will necessarily be at the heart of it. Because Jesus Christ is the living, resurrected Lord, attesting, giving witness, making known, bringing to fulfilment, making us actively part of the history of reconciliation between God and humanity, empowering us by the Holy Spirit to actively ask in prayer and hope for the eschatological fulfilment of God's reconciliatory action, this third element is essentially part of the Christian reality and life.

For Barth, God's revelation in the salvation history of Jesus, which is known in the total conversion of the whole of our existence, in faith and obedience, in personal, relational knowledge of God, is teleological in nature, i.e., it moves towards its fulfilment, where the victory of Jesus shall be complete and where we will know God as God knows us (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 198).

Jesus Christ is the living Word of God moving through history, taking history to its fulfilment, making people part of the history of salvation. Jesus Christ is the living Word of God, conquering unbelief, disobedience and ignorance, bringing people to faith, obedience and knowledge of God, liberating people to active participation in the on-going event of salvation, in the promise of the Spirit, in the hope for the world (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 364).

In the "act of Christian hope," as Barth calls this third element, we act in the present in accordance with what is promised in the future. All of humanity lives under the promise of the future redemption of humanity, but the community of faith does not merely live under the promise, but we also live by it, with it, from it. We orientate ourselves towards this future, we act in accordance with it, we conform ourselves to it. We do not resist the promise, but we act and work and move towards it, with it, by it, from it. The future which is coming towards us, is Jesus Christ, the very same Jesus Christ who is present with us, the very same Jesus Christ who has died for us and has risen to guarantee our future. Trusting in faith what Jesus has done in the past, obeying Jesus our Lord in the present, we work and move and act

towards Jesus who is coming in the future to redeem the world (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 119-120).

And what else could this “act of Christian hope” be, this movement, this work towards the future redemption promised and guaranteed in Jesus Christ, if it is not to pray, “Thy Name be hallowed, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”?

My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?

Rather remarkably, Barth asserted that the way in which Jesus is presently among us and moving towards the fulfilment of salvation history, is still as the One crucified by humanity and forsaken by God. Although Jesus’ suffering is something of the past, it is also in the present, as Jesus is moving towards the final victory in the end. Jesus is among us today, still as the Friend of sinners, as the One who eats with prostitutes and publicans, still as the One who touches lepers and walks among the demented. Furthermore, Jesus is still today the One at whom family members shake their heads, who is scorned and accused by religious people. Jesus’ own disciples still have trouble believing and obeying, and we still deny and betray Jesus. Jesus is still the One who is convicted together with rebels. The risen Lord still lives among us as the Crucified One, rejected by humanity and forsaken by God. Jesus is still among us as the One who, in the words of Hebrews 5:7, offers up prayers and supplications with crying and tears for our sake. Jesus is still among us as the One who prays: “Forgive them, Father, for they do not know what they are doing” (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 393, 395-396).

In 1960 Barth preached to the prisoners of Basel a sermon entitled *Rufe Mich an! / Call me!*, based on Psalm 50:15. Barth asked who are the people that are saved in the Psalm? The pious? The brave? The just? The heroes? No, it could not be so, for those people will never cry out God, they will never scream (German word: *schreien*) to God. But the Lord is close to those who call upon God, according to Psalm 145:18. God saves those, who call upon the Lord: the utterly poor, the utterly ill, those have no other option but to hold onto God and to scream to God for help. Those who do that, are already saved. Those who do that, have already been delivered. They are still sinners, but already justified, still heartbroken, but already filled with joy, still dead, but already resurrected with Christ, still on earth, but already in heaven. God is already with them, since Jesus Christ has made the final scream on the cross: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?” Screaming this scream with Jesus, they are already new creations, citizens of a new world, wherein all tears will be wiped away (Barth, 1979: *Pn*: 176-177).

In a sermon to the same prisoners, on Easter Sunday 1961, Barth also preached about Jesus’ prayer of dereliction. Barth said that we find this prayer of Jesus strange, in the light of the fact that Jesus came to the cross with the obedient prayer: “Not My will, but Your will be done.” But we should know that Jesus did not leave God. God left Jesus, and precisely because of Jesus’ obedience. God did this terrible thing, to abandon Jesus for a very brief moment, as the prophecy of Isaiah 54:7-8 says, in order to be with humanity forever. God abandoned Jesus, who never abandoned God, in order to be with humanity, who abandoned God. Jesus entered our God forsakenness, so that we will never be forsaken by God. Jesus prayed this prayer of dereliction, so that we will never have to pray it again in the real and true manner that Jesus did. Perhaps a bit different from his message the previous year, Barth said on this occasion that this prayer has become redundant and even forbidden for us, because Jesus has prayed it in our place for all time. Good Friday was the brief moment, the most awful and terrible moment, but simultaneously the most wonderful and glorious moment, since it was the moment of our salvation, as it was revealed on Easter Sunday. Of course, when we listen to the radio or read the newspaper, we are still reminded

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of humanity's God forsakenness. And we as Christians feel God forsaken at times. Even Barth as a minister for 12 years and a theological professor for 40 years, has hours, days and weeks wherein he feels forsaken by God. But we make a mistake when we think this feeling reflects our true situation. It is just a horrible memory, an awful dream. Easter is the true situation (Barth, 1979: *Pn*: 189-192).

The following year, again in Basel prison, on 23 December 1962, Barth once again preached about this prayer of dereliction. Preaching on Luke 1:53, about the hungry who are filled and the rich are who sent away empty handed, Barth affirmed that Jesus has become the Brother of the utterly poor and hungry. Becoming poor, becoming hungry, Jesus screamed with them: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?" Jesus has gone to stand on their side, to let them stand on God's side. All their sin and weakness, all their desperation and wickedness, were put onto Jesus, so that they could be liberated from every evil and threatening power which made their lives miserable. In this way, Jesus made the poorest of all human beings into the richest of all human beings, not giving them bread crumbs falling from the table, but making them the guests of honour at the banquet of God's kingdom (Barth, 1979: *Pn*: 211-214).

In his discussion of Jesus as the True Witness, the prophetic office wherein Jesus, the resurrected, living Lord, gives testimony to the justification and sanctification of humanity, Barth does a lengthy exegesis of Job, as an analogy to Jesus, the True Witness. Not in Jesus' resurrection, but in Jesus' suffering and death, we hear the testimony of what God has done, is doing and will do for the sake of the world, bearing our suffering on our behalf. The resurrected, living Jesus is not among us triumphantly, as One beyond suffering, but as the crucified Lord, who gains the victory by suffering in our place (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3a*: 383-388, 398-408, 421-434, 453-461).

In the section on "The Judge judged in our place" in the doctrine of reconciliation, Barth explained that *Deus pro nobis*, "God for us," means that God knows our desperate need far better than we know it. It means precisely the opposite of what Jesus is crying out in the prayer of dereliction. It means that God has not forsaken humanity, because in Jesus Christ God has come to stand with humanity in our desperate need, in our sin and suffering, in our separation and isolation from God. In Jesus Christ God has taken this desperate need upon God-self, so that we no longer have to bear it (Barth, 1956b, *CD IV,1*: 215).

Confessing our guilt

The command of God does not firstly address humanity as a whole, but Christ. It is not primarily humanity's disobedience which is judged by God, but our disobedience as compared to the obedience of Christ. It is only in Jesus Christ that God's true command, the genuine extent of God's will and the complete wrath of God is revealed. God's command does not ask a little obedience of humanity, requiring a little punishment if not fulfilled, but it primarily addresses Jesus Christ, commanding complete obedience, electing Christ to be God's faithful covenant partner, the One who fulfils the whole of God's will, thus exposing the true extent of humanity's disobedience, and accepting the punishment for that total disobedience. It is only as our complete disobedience and total punishment is revealed in the complete obedience of Jesus Christ, it is only as we are put to death in Jesus Christ, that we are risen and made free for our own little obedience, for our own little doing of God's will. It is only as Jesus Christ is judged in our place, it is only as Jesus Christ is rejected by God, alienated from God, rendered useless for the doing of God's will, and it is only as we are in Jesus Christ, that we are elected by God, reconciled to God, justified and sanctified, made usable in the doing of God's will (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 738-739).

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The first word we utter when we are in Jesus Christ, when we act in obedience, is that we are completely in the wrong, and the second word we utter is that God has put us in the right in Jesus Christ. This first word of obedience, this confession of our complete disobedience as revealed in Jesus Christ, can only be uttered in prayer, according to Barth. It is only in prayer that all our self-justifications are silenced and all our self-righteousness destroyed. In prayer, true prayer, the prayer of faith and obedience, all attempts to justify ourselves finally cease. It is only in prayer that we can accept our total disobedience deserving total condemnation in Jesus Christ, and thus also our complete justification and sanctification in Jesus Christ. Only in prayer can we participate in our death in Christ, and thus also our resurrected life in Christ. In prayer we affirm the totality of our unbelief and disobedience as revealed in Jesus Christ, and the fact that all our unbelief and disobedience has been set aside in Jesus Christ, thus putting a final end to all excuses for faith and obedience (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 752).

In the months leading up to the Barmen declaration, Barth said that whenever the church confesses, that confession of faith necessarily also entails a confession of guilt. The church confesses with joy and confidence in the Lord, but because this Lord is also its own Lord, it also confesses its own lack of faith and limited obedience. Confession means conversion. It entails turning to God, admitting that God is our Lord, praying for mercy, pleading with God to make a new beginning with us. When the church confesses, it does not firstly confess against others, but it confesses against itself, for the guilt it has in allowing the present situation to come about. The church confesses in order to battle against confusion in the church, but it must first acknowledge its own complicit guilt in this confusion. When the church confesses, its confession is embedded in the prayer: "Forgive us our debt, as we forgive our debtors!" (Barth, 1934: *KB*: 21).

If we are not willing to do the very small act of forgiving others, we have no understanding of who we are, that we are completely sinful people, whose sins have all been placed upon Jesus. If we are not willing to forgive others, then we do not know how to pray and receive forgiveness. Forgiving others is not a prerequisite for being forgiven. We are already forgiven in Christ. But when we live in this forgiveness, when we act in this grace, when we pray and ask for God's forgiveness, we do so as people who also forgive others (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 53-54).

As long as we fear that our faith will not be enough, as long as we fear that our obedience will not be sufficient, as long as we wonder whether our actions will be righteous and good, as long as we are captive in self-doubt, which is the flip side of self-justification, we are not acting in Jesus Christ, we are not acting in prayer. Because in prayer, in Jesus Christ, we confess the totality of our unbelief and disobedience, but we confess also that all our unbelief and disobedience have been set aside in Jesus Christ, whereby we are liberated to sin boldly, to act freely, despite the weakness, limitation and corruptness of our faith and obedience. In prayer we act freely, confidently and boldly, for we know and confess that not only our total unbelief and disobedience is hidden in Jesus Christ, judged, put to death and buried with Christ, but also our little faith and obedience is hidden in Jesus Christ, resurrected, completed and fulfilled with the resurrected life of Christ.

Barth said:

"In prayer the work of the Holy Spirit, who is the secret of Easter Day, is done in those who pray. In prayer this secret is disclosed to them. In prayer they live as those who are risen with Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 753).

Barth argued that in prayer we are not caught in the contradiction that we are simultaneously sinners and justified, but liberated from any contradiction in order to freely be God's children, despite our unbelief and disobedience (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 763).

Asking for God's forgiveness, crying for God's mercy in prayer, is only possible in the knowledge of grace, in the knowledge of faith, knowing that we have been reconciled to God in Jesus Christ. We would not know how to pray or what to ask, we would not even know to whom we are crying, if we were not already God's children in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 769).

Not my will, but Your will be done

Jesus is the elected human being, the one who does the will of God, as summed up in the prayer in Gethsemane: "Not My will, but Your will be done." This prayer, is the prayer of faith and obedience. This prayer, according to Barth, is Jesus' intercession on behalf of humanity, but also the prayer that Jesus places on the lips of the community of faith. In this prayer Jesus assents to be God's rejected, in humanity's place, thus becoming the elected of God, on humanity's behalf. In this prayer, Jesus becomes not only the priest, but also the lamb slaughtered for humanity's sake. In this prayer, Jesus acts as the King of humanity, the Head of the church, the Lord of the world. In this prayer, Jesus is the kingdom of God, the fulfilment of the "Our Father" prayer (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 126).

Praying this prayer with Jesus, we act as the elected in Jesus Christ. Jesus prays this prayer as the elected human being on behalf of the whole of humanity. As we pray this prayer with Jesus, not only for our own sake, but for the sake of the world, we act in faith and obedience, we act as those who are "in" Jesus Christ, the elected human being. As we pray this prayer with and in Jesus Christ, we act as God's people, elected by grace in Jesus Christ, for the sake of the world (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 127).

Our action always follows the action of Jesus. As Jesus prays: "Not My will, but Your will be done," so we follow, obey and pray. Jesus is the One praying this prayer, thus taking our place as God's rejected, and thus doing God's will on our behalf as God's elected. As Jesus does this, as Jesus makes us God's elected, we are awakened to faith, claimed to obedience, called to our own little decision for God, our own meagre election of God, by praying with Jesus: "Not My will, but Your will be done" (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 177-178).

Jesus, the elected human being, is the human who lives the life of prayer. In the life of prayer, in the life of willing the will of the Father, Jesus fulfilled the eternal will of God. God's eternal will, God's eternal decree, God's election of grace, is to be the God of humanity, and for humanity to be God's people. God elects humanity with the aim of awakening and summoning humanity for its election of God, for its life of prayer, for the free obedience of willing the will of God. God's election brings about the active life of prayer (Barth, 1956: *CD I,2*: 180).

Barth said:

"The act of elected man corresponding to the true Messiah can consist only in the confession which becomes event in the invocation necessarily arising out of faith. In this act and this alone will elected man be saved" (Barth, 1957: *CD II,2*: 250).

Eklektoi and Klêtoi

The announcement, the proclamation, the revelation by Jesus, the True Witness, of humanity's justification and sanctification, is not merely the impartation of information. It is

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the mediation of the reconciliation. It is the living Word of God which awakens us to believe, obey and know, to participate, confess and give witness to God's action in Jesus Christ. Our election in Jesus Christ forms the basis of our vocation. Our vocation is the historical fulfilment of our eternal election. We are the elected, *eklektoi*, and therefore we are also those who are called, *klétoi*. The Greek word for "election" means literally to be called out. Jesus Christ, the True Witness, the living Word of God, who announces our justification and sanctification, calls us out, calls us forth, to active participation in this reality (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 484).

Calvin also understood the election to be the basis of vocation, but for him those who are elected and called were only the church. Barth asserted that the whole of humanity is elected and called. He conceded that there are many people in whose history the justification, sanctification and vocation in Jesus Christ have not yet taken place, but still their justification, sanctification and vocation have already taken place in the history of *Jesus Christ*. Humanity's hearing does not precede and activate the call of Jesus, but the call of Jesus precedes and activates humanity's hearing and obedience. Deaf and disobedient humanity is called again and again by Jesus, the resurrected, living Word of God. Even when humanity's history denies and rejects the history of Jesus Christ, we are continually called by God's Word of reconciliation, announcing that the history of Jesus is in reality our own history, calling us forth to participate in it. The Word of reconciliation proclaims that the history of Jesus Christ is the past and future of every human being. And regardless of whether we want to hear this call or not, it never ceases to call us out, allowing us to act in the assurance that the history of Jesus Christ is also our history and our destiny (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 484, 486-487).

For Barth, vocation does not entail some extraordinary Christian calling, but it is the basis of the Christian life as such. There is no Christian life which is not based upon the calling of Jesus Christ. This calling, this vocation, which forms the basis of every Christian's life, entails the free determination to orientate the whole of our lives in accordance with and in response to the action of Jesus Christ. Acting as a Christian means responding to Jesus' call to act now in accordance with our future reality, to act now as people who will be justified and sanctified in Jesus Christ, as all of humanity will ultimately be (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 524, 526).

Although vocation forms the basis of our whole Christian existence as such, still our vocation does mean that we are given a task and we fulfil our vocation in the active doing of that task. This task, however, is not a temporary project, but it is a commission which reshapes and re-orientates the whole of our lives. Furthermore, it is not a task for which we are capable. It is not due to our talents or skills that we are given a certain task. Our vocation means being commissioned *by God* for a task, which can only be done by the grace in Jesus Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. The task is not something that we must do in one part or period of our lives, but it is what we live for, it claims the whole of our lives. And this is the task: to give witness to God's action and work (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 573-575).

Barth used an image to illustrate this task, this service, this ministry, for which we are called. Barth said that if we think of a Roman Catholic worship service, then the Christian is not like the priest, nor the one reading the mass or giving out the communion, but the Christian is like the alter-boy, who carries the prayer book, who swings the incense and rings the bell (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 602).

The Christian does not minister humanity's reconciliation with God to the world. The ministry of reconciliation is done by Jesus Christ alone. But the Christian co-operates with the ministry of Jesus Christ by giving witness to it. This is our task. This is our vocation. And it is real co-operation with the ministry of Jesus Christ. But it is not we who minister the

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reconciliation in Jesus Christ to the world, it is Jesus who does so (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 597-598, 609).

The liberation of Christians for our vocation, means (1) being drawn into fellowship with God and fellow humanity, (2) being given a definite path by our Lord, as the opening in the Red Sea, (3) being liberated from all ideas, institutions or instruments, so that none of these are more important than human beings, (4) being liberated from our own desires and demands, enabling us to receive God's action, (5) being liberated from indecision and inaction, (6) being liberated from the law, from the questions of right and wrong, in order to live by the gospel, in forgiveness and gratitude, and finally (7) being liberated from anxiety to prayer, in order to move in prayer towards our Lord and towards the fulfilment of the history of Jesus Christ which is the destiny of the whole world (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 664-671).

This liberation is always in motion, it is not a complete event. We are pilgrims, moving from our reconciliation in Jesus Christ towards the fulfilment of that reconciliation (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 673-674). Our vocation is *vocatio continua* (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 536).

It is important to note, however, that our liberation is not the content of our witness. We are liberated for our vocation of witness. But we give witness not to our liberation, but to our Liberator, to our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the Liberator and Lord of the whole of humanity (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 676).

Called to the church and sent into the world

Our vocation, our calling, is simultaneously a calling to the church and a calling to be a Christian. The one cannot exist without the other, and neither is an addition to the other. To be a Christian and to be part of the community of faith, is one and the same vocation (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 681).

As Christians we are called to hope in Jesus Christ and consequently to hope for the world. We are called to wait, expect, stretch out and move towards the fulfilment of the history of Jesus Christ in the history of the world. We are called to anticipate that the reign of Jesus Christ, who is already the Lord of the world, comes in its fulness, so that every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 720).

As Jesus is sent into the world by the Father, so too the community of faith is sent by Jesus into the world. Our sending follows the sending of Jesus. It does not extend, further or repeat the sending of Jesus. Jesus' sending into the world is still happening. Our sending into the world follows Jesus' sending (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 768).

The sending of the community of faith into the world to fulfil its vocation, its task in the world, is not optional. The church only exists where and when and in so far as it freely obeys this sending, this vocation, this task. If this sending, this vocation, this task is denied, the church denies its own being and existence (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 795).

The community of faith is sent into the world with the vocation of giving witness to Jesus Christ, to the reconciliation of the world to God in Jesus Christ, which means that the community of faith is sent into the world with the task of saying an unambiguous Yes to the world. Our word to the world cannot be No, nor can it be Yes and No, but it can and must simply be Yes (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 798).

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Interestingly, Barth also noted that the world will always hear this Yes as a No. The world will always firstly be disturbed and offended by the No which forms part of God's Yes (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 623).

This is because the inner circle of the gospel is God's Yes to the world, God's election, justification and sanctification of humanity, while the outer circle of that message entails God's No to humanity's sin and self-destruction, to humanity's desire to be its own God. However, God only says No in order to say Yes. And therefore our witness must also be Yes and Amen. Our witness cannot be Maybe. We cannot give witness to a possibility which might or might not happen. This is not the proclamation of hope, but of anxiety and despair. We can only give witness to God's victorious Yes to the world, which includes God's No, but which will end with God's Yes.

The community of faith is called to give witness to true and certain hope, the reconciliation of the world to God in Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 835). And despite all evidence to the contrary, we have the promise that our witness will not be in vain (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 838). We cannot tell this promise to ourselves. We do not have that promise in our possession, not even in our faith and obedience, not even in our prayer. But the promise that our witness will not be futile, the promise that the hope which we proclaim for all of humanity in Jesus Christ will be fulfilled, is always given anew to us by the living Word of God, Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and it is to be received always anew in faith, obedience and prayer (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 840).

Flett is quite correct in the assertion that for Barth the existence of the church as a witness in the world, is not one possible action which the church can choose to perform or to ignore, but the very nature of its existence. The moment the church ceases to witness to the world that Jesus Christ is Lord, it ceases to be the church. Because Jesus Christ is continually performing the prophetic action of giving Self-testimony to the world, the church has no other option but to act correspondingly as a missionary community, as a community whose very existence is characterised by witnessing Jesus Christ to the world (Flett, 2000: 284-285).

Barth named twelve different speech acts whereby the community of faith gives witness to Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 844-901). The very first speech act that Barth mentioned, was to praise God in song. Barth said plainly that a community that does not sing praises to God, is not a community of faith. And it must really sing, with joy. As long as it mumbles and sighs, it does not give witness to the hope that the world has in Jesus Christ, and thus it does not know its own vocation (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 865, 867). And furthermore, the community of faith gives witness by praying. Prayer is the basic act of witness which the community of faith performs, individually and collectively, according to Barth (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 882-883).

Hope for the world

In Hebrews 11, as well as in Calvin's *Institution of Christian Religion* (III, 2, 42), Barth found an inseparable relationship between faith and hope. Hope believes that God not only is our God, but that God will also be our God, not only that the Word of God is true, but that God will fulfil all the promises of the Word in the future (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 913).

Although Calvin said that hope, just like faith, is a gift of the Holy Spirit, Barth wondered whether Calvin did not suggest that hope is too much of a human skill, a human endurance in faith. Hope, for Barth, is not only given, but also renewed, sustained and guaranteed by Jesus Christ. Hope lives by faith in Jesus Christ, not meaning it lives by faith, but that it lives by Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is our hope (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 914).

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Hope is not idle. Hope, genuine hope, is action. It takes a step forward, it moves toward the fulfilment of the history in Jesus Christ, in the confidence that Jesus Christ promised and guaranteed the fulfilment of that history. It acts, in the sure and certain hope that Jesus Christ will act. In hope, we are not allowed to be spectators of world events. We expect the ultimate fulfilment of the reconciliation of the world, and therefore we also expect to see signs which point to that ultimate hope. We move towards that ultimate future and set up sign posts of that final hope (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 938-939). Christians hope firstly in and with the community of faith, in and for the world, and only lastly do we hope for ourselves (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 939).

For Barth, there is a difference between Christian hope and the hope of the world. The hope of the world fluctuates between optimistic and pessimistic answers to the question whether humanity will be able to better our own situation. The hope of the world is thrown hither and thither between doubt and secular messianic hope, between utopian dreams and disappointment and disillusionment. Christian hope is the comforting, encouraging and orientating vision (German word: *Ausblick*) upon the future coming of Jesus Christ as the universal revelation of the reconciliation of the world with God, which has already taken place in Jesus Christ, and which entails a trustworthy promise that the present situation will take a turn for the better. Without this Christian hope, there is no Christian life, no Christian faith and no Christian love. The Christian life means of necessity a movement towards this future which is coming from God to us. This movement of hope towards the ultimate future of the world promised by God, does not exclude, however, smaller, penultimate hopes. Barth asserted that the church “may, must and can” also include more specific, temporary, little hopes in its message of the ultimate hope. The smaller hopes may or may not coincide with the hopes of the world. But the church is to live by, proclaim and move towards its ultimate hope. And the church is to understand its own existence as a sign to the world of that ultimate hope. Barth gave a telling example of how the church’s ultimate hope must go beyond the penultimate hopes of the world, within the world context of 1951. If, Barth said, the church’s message of hope cannot proclaim a vision beyond the conflicting hopeful visions of the East and the West, whereby the Cold War is sustained, if the church cannot say anything more or different to the world in situations like the Korean War, then it is not living by, witnessing to and moving towards its true hope, then it is no longer a sign of the ultimate hope of the world, and thus it ceases to be the church of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate hope of the world (Barth, 1951: *KB*: 1-2).

Barth said that it is impossible to pray “Thy kingdom come!” without having any hope for our own time and situation. God’s ultimate Future with a capital F, includes our little future, with a small f. However, our ultimate hope in God’s future puts our little hopes for here and now in proper perspective, exposing how short-sighted, limited, frivolous and often unnecessary they are, especially, said Barth, our private, psychological conflicts. We can only gain this perspective in light of the coming kingdom of God, which is our ultimate hope. Psychology cannot help us to gain this perspective (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 39). Barth noted that it was rather telling how occupied the Swiss are with psychology, while all psychological problems have disappeared in the conflicts in Germany during the Second World War. When life happens, Barth said, psychological problems disappear (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 40). However, the point is this: we can pray with hope even for our private, psychological problems, but when we do so, we pray in the perspective of our ultimate hope, of God’s coming kingdom.

The last three petitions of the Lord’s Prayer are remarkably bold and presumptuous. On what ground do we dare to demand these selfish things from God?, Barth asked. The answer: God allows and commands us to do so. In the first three petitions we are taken up in God’s cause. In the last three we are allowed and commanded to ask for ourselves, so that we might be able to serve God’s cause as God’s fellow-workers. By God’s free decision of grace, God chooses to make us active participants in God’s cause, and allows and

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commands us to pray for all we need to serve God's glory. And thus our little hopes come to serve the great hope in God (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 44-45).

Furthermore, as the Reformers Luther and Calvin repeatedly said, we can ask for our own little, selfish needs and desires, grounded upon the knowledge of faith that we have already received everything we need to live and to serve God by God's grace. We do not ask because of our need, but because God has graciously allowed and commanded us to ask (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 46).

Luther even said in his Shorter Catechism that "our daily bread" for which are allowed and commanded to ask, consists of things as wide ranging as food, drink, clothing, shoes, houses, farms, fields, land, money, property, a good marriage, good children, good and trustworthy authorities, a just government, favourable weather (neither too hot nor too cold), health, honours, good friends and trusty neighbours (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 46).

Barth agreed with this broad definition, but he felt that we should not stray too far from the simplicity of the request for bread, meaning that we should ask for that which is necessary in order to live today. Barth noted that bread, in the Old and New Testament, was the symbol of daily sustenance, of the Israelites who receive just enough manna in the dessert for every day. This means that while we receive all that we need to live today, we must ask for it again tomorrow. But bread in the Bible is also the symbol of the promise of the Lord's banquet which is to come, where everyone will have more than enough (Barth, 1964: *P&P*: 47-48).

The church is to live by the confession and witness that God is our only hope and indeed the world's only hope, not the state, not wealth, not technology, not science, not culture, not morality, not religion, and most definitely not the church. Neither the church, nor any other human effort, will be able to turn an evil world into a good world. God's reign over the world continues, God's reconciliation of the world has taken place in Jesus Christ, and the future revelation and fulfilment of God's reign and reconciliation, is also in God's hands. These things are not handed over to the church as our task. What we are called to do, is to be witnesses to God's action amid the chaos of the world in which we find ourselves. Just doing this, will give the church plenty of work to do, more than enough to occupy ourselves with (Barth, 1948: *KB*: 150).

Living on a prayer

Like faith, hope is our own work. Regardless of how weak or small our hope is, we are to hope boldly, in the confidence that our hope will be renewed, sustained and fulfilled by Jesus Christ (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 940).

Hope lives by the continual prayer, the sigh and the cry, afresh every day and hour, that the Holy Spirit will come and renew our faith and our hope, that the Holy Spirit will sustain our hope, that the Holy Spirit will guarantee the fulfilment of the promise, which is the very source of our hope (Barth, 1961: *CD IV,3b*: 942).

Prayer is a gift from God. And this is the gift: the fact that God answers our prayers. This assurance, the certain knowledge that God answers our prayers, is the foundation, the starting point, the very reason why we embark upon the life of prayer. The reason why we perform the act of prayer, is because God performs the act of answering our prayers (Barth, 2002: *P*: 13).

Barth made the very startling point:

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“God is not deaf, but listens; more than that, he acts. God does not act in the same way whether we pray or not. Prayer exerts an influence upon God’s action, even upon his existence. This is what the word ‘answer’ means” (Barth, 2002: P: 13).

These sentences hurt our modern ears. It exposes the degree in which we have (perhaps unwittingly) adopted the modern theology stemming from Schleiermacher wherein the God that is able to act, the God that answers our prayers, the living, speaking and acting triune God, is not truly on the scene. How we pray exposes our true theology, i.e., what we truly believe about God. For modern people it is not a problem to say that through our prayers we express our dependence upon God, our gratitude towards God, or our awe before God. But then the word “God” does not have to refer to the living, speaking and acting triune God of salvation history. It can refer to the “ground of our being” or to the “source of all life” or to the “universe” or perhaps just “life” as such. God does not really have to be present. And therein lies the allure of the current day spirituality: it offers a faith without God, it offers a faith in faith. And it can always be tested in the way it prays, because that is where its true faith is exposed. It will always be marked by its inability to ask anything from God.

Barth referred to Question 129 of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, which says that God’s answer to our prayers is even more certain than the requests that we make in prayer. We might think that our longings and desires are totally clear to us, that we are so certain of them, that we can barely think of anything else. But the *Heidelberg Catechism* asserts that God’s answer to our prayers is eternally more certain and sure than our requests. Even when we do not know how or what to ask, God’s answer is still sure and certain (Barth, 2002: P: 13).

Barth said:

“Perhaps we doubt the sincerity of our prayer and the worth of our request. But one thing is beyond doubt: it is the answer that God gives. Our prayers are weak and poor. Nevertheless, what matters is not that our prayers be forceful, but that God listens to them. That is why we pray” (Barth, 2002: P: 13).

At the end of the *Heidelberg Catechism*, when the meaning of “Amen” is discussed, the same point is reiterated. “Amen,” according to the *Heidelberg Catechism*, means that God’s answer to our prayers is more certain than the petitions we have made in prayer (Barth, 2002: P: 66).

In 1942, amidst the Second World War, Barth wrote about Daniel 9, where we read the prayer in verse 19: “Lord, listen! Lord, forgive! Lord, hear and act!” Barth argued on the basis of this Scripture, that true prayer does in fact accomplish something. True prayer brings about real change for the better in ourselves and in the world as a whole. But true prayer begins in the knowledge that we do not how or what to pray, but that the Holy Spirit intercedes on our behalf. The Holy Spirit comes to our aid in our weakness, placing on our lips the prayer of the prophet Daniel, which we simply repeat, and in doing so, causes us to pray truly and rightly. The Holy Spirit closes all other paths, all other possible clever words or actions of our own, and gives us the freedom to take this one and only path, of repeating this very simple prayer. The Holy Spirit allows us to walk down this path, to pray in this way, with *trust*. Despite the fact that our faith is plagued by complete lack of trust, despite the fact that our obedience is plagued by total uncertainty of conscience, despite the fact that our hope is plagued by overwhelming anxiety and fear, the Holy Spirit allows us to set all that aside and to walk down the path of trust, to pray the prayer of trust. Not trust in ourselves or in our prayer, but trust in the One to whom our prayer is made, trust in the God who is trustworthy, the God who can be trusted (Barth, 1942: KB: 297-298, 303).

From 1947 to 1949, when Barth gave his lectures on prayer in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, the world was lying in rubble after World War II, nations were traumatised by the millions of lives

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lost and crippled by the disastrous economic effect of the war, and tensions were building very quickly between East and West, forecasting a nuclear war on the horizon. One would think that in times like those, it would be foolish to think that God answers our prayers. Ironically, however, it seems as if it is in times of relative prosperity and peace, in the “sunny age” of the 19th century and perhaps, God-willing, in the sunny age of the 21st century, that the church no longer expects an answer from God on our prayers. When our situation does not seem that desperate, when the world we live in does not seem utterly lost, we can be fooled to think we do not really need, nor even *want* God to answer our prayers. We can become so foolish as to think that we will answer our own prayers, that our prayers are merely an expression of our own ambitions and ideals, which we are striving towards and that we can achieve by our own efforts. When we lose our eschatological longing and yearning that God will redeem all of humanity and the whole of creation, which only God can do through the reconciliatory work of Jesus Christ and by the redeeming power of the Holy Spirit, then we no longer expect an answer on our prayers. But when confronted with the truly desperate situation of humanity and creation, we no longer pray in order to express our desires, but we pray in order for God to act. Then we pray, because only God can answer our prayers, as God has already done in Jesus Christ.

Berkhof asks the poignant question if Barth’s theology can be heard in relatively peaceful, prosperous, optimistic, *bourgeois* societies? In Berkhof’s experience, in the USA, when it was not engaged in a war, people preferred listening to Tillich rather than listening to Barth. The apologetic theology of Tillich, attempting to make theology relevant to a secular society, as was Schleiermacher’s objective in the 19th century, resonated more with people than the kerygmatic theology of Barth did. Barth’s theology did not speak to people’s lives as it did in Europe during the war. The question is, does the gospel of God’s gracious action in Jesus Christ become redundant in prosperous, peaceful societies (Berkhof, 1989: 208-228)?

Having the answer before asking

Although it might be the case that prayer, asking for God’s active help, seems redundant in contexts of prosperity and peace, Barth however argued that it is not our desperate situation that teaches us to pray, because we do not know how desperate our situation truly is. It is God’s grace, it is the answer already given, that reveals how desperate our situation is, and that teaches us to pray. Therefore Barth could even say to the prisoners in the Basel prison that their desperate situation will not teach them to pray. Only the fact that God allows us and commands us to pray, to cry out God in our day of trouble, the fact that God already gives the answer to that cry, the fact that we have already received the promise of deliverance when we cry out in prayer, only this gift from God can teach us to pray (Barth, 1967: *CfG*: 34-35).

And this is the answer to all our prayers, the answer already given, the assurance that all our prayers will be answered, the reason why we pray:

“Jesus Christ is our brother, we belong to him; he is the head of the body of which we are the members; and at the same time he is the Son of God, of God himself. It is he who has been given to us as mediator and advocate before God. We are not separated from God, and more important still, God is not separated from us. We may be without God, but God is not without humankind. This we must know, and this is what matters. Facing the godless, there is God, who is never without us, because humanity – all of us – is in the presence of God” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 13-14).

Or to summarise, this is the answer to all our prayers:

“By Jesus Christ, humanity is in the presence of God” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 14).

God yields to our prayers, by becoming human in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, God becoming human, God being for and with humanity, God with us, is the answer to all our prayers. This, the fact that God yields to our desperate prayer, is not a sign of weakness in God, but the revelation of God’s majestic mercy. The fact that God has freely chosen to be the God of, for and with humanity, is the revelation of God’s glory (Barth, 2002: *P*: 14-15).

Who prays?

Faith, obedience and prayer, are grounded upon Jesus Christ. They are actual and possible only because of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is their origin and goal. They happen in our participation in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the human being who truly believes, obeys and prays, the faithful covenant partner of God. Faith, obedience and prayer is the Christian life being lived within the Word and work, the life and lordship, the being and action of Jesus Christ (Nimmo, 2007: 147).

Jesus Christ is the one who truly prays. We pray to “our Father,” because Jesus is praying to the Father, and our prayers are taken up in Jesus’ prayer. Our prayers will be answered, because we are praying as part of the body of Christ. In truth, it is Christ who is praying (Barth, 2002: *P*: 14).

And yet, we must pray. We cannot escape the permission and the command given to us to pray. Since we belong to Jesus Christ, since we are the body of Jesus Christ, we must do what Jesus Christ is doing, we must follow the action of Jesus Christ, we must pray. We have no choice in the matter. Prayer is not optional (Barth, 2002: *P*: 15).

Barth said that it is impossible for Christians not to act in the way which we have been allowed and commanded to act by God’s grace:

“We have found the right road, and now it behooves us to walk in it. On this path, the gospel and the law, the promise and the commandments of God, are one and the same thing. God opens this road to us; he commands us to pray. Thus it is not possible to say ‘I shall pray’ or ‘I shall not pray,’ as if it were an act according to our own good pleasure. To be a Christian and to pray are one and the same thing” (Barth, 2002: *P*: 15).

We cannot choose to pray or not to pray, or perhaps only pray when we feel like it. We cannot sit back and expect that the Holy Spirit will pray on our behalf. To these capricious attitudes Barth exclaimed: “Never!” We must pray. Being granted by grace the freedom to pray, having received the promise that God will fulfil our incomplete faith and obedience, that the Holy Spirit will perfect our prayers, we dare not reject this gift of freedom, by refusing to use it. We must act. We must believe and obey. We must pray. We are not only allowed, but also commanded to do so (Barth, 2002: *P*: 20).

Prayer is a human act. Prayer is our act. Prayer, according to Barth, is a very simple act, that can be done by everyone, not only professors in theology, but also prisoners in Basel. It is simply to accept and use the gift given by God, i.e., that we are allowed and commanded to ask God for help, having received the promise that God will indeed help. By performing this simple act of asking for God’s help in prayer, we believe the gospel and obey the law (Barth, 2002: *P*: 18).

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Prayer is not only a gift given by God, but also a gift that must be accepted by humanity. Prayer is a human act. It is the act wherein we know the unbelief of our faith, but believe nonetheless, it is the act wherein we know the disobedience of our obedience, but obey nonetheless, because the grace of God allows and commands us to do so, because in Jesus Christ our life of prayer becomes real faith and obedience. Barth said:

“To obey grace – to give thanks – means that prayer is also an act on the part of human beings, who know themselves to be sinners and call upon the grace of God. We find ourselves confronted by the gospel, the law, and the weakness of our faith, even if we are not conscious of it. We experience at once a certain sadness and a certain joy. But we have not yet understood that we are sinners or that we do not perfectly realize obedience. We do not yet know that we are under a veil. It must be removed. When we pray, our human condition is unveiled to us, and we know then that we are in this distress and also in that hope. It is God who places us in this situation; but at the same time he comes to our aid. Prayer is thus our human response when we understand our distress and know that help will come” (Barth, 2002: P: 18).

The primary movement

Barth calls prayer the “primitive movement” in faith and obedience. Although he discussed faith and obedience before prayer in his doctrine of creation, giving them logical precedence, yet he described prayer as the “primitive movement,” as the first step in both faith and obedience (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

Barth said,

“Prayer is the primary thing in faith as well as obedience. Basically, faith is prayer, and obedience too is prayer” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265).

This shows once again that although these three elements of the Christian life are distinct from one another, they truly are inseparable. Faith comes first, and yet faith, from the very first moment, is an obedient surrender to the One in whom we believe. Without this obedient surrender, faith is impossible. In fact, to come to faith, is to bow down in obedient surrender before the Lord. And also, while faith and obedience describe the basic presupposition and attitude of the Christian’s existence, yet prayer is the primary movement, the first step, in both faith and obedience. That very first step in faith, to trust that Jesus Christ is Lord and to entrust your whole life in the hands of this Lord, as well as the very first act of obedience, to bow down in obedient surrender to Jesus Christ as the Lord of the universe, the Head of church, and the Lord and Master of your life, is in fact done in the act of prayer. Although it might perhaps be logically possible to think of faith as the way in which one *becomes* a Christian, obedience as the way in which one *is* a Christian and prayer as the way in which one *acts* as a Christian, it is very plain that it is merely different ways to speak about and understand the one reality of the Christian life lived in encounter with the living God, the one response or answer to the Word of God addressing and claiming the Christian in the totality of his or her life, being, thoughts and actions.

And yet prayer is distinguishable from faith and obedience as a unique element of the Christian life, which *should be* distinguished in order to do it justice and to prevent it from being absorbed into faith and obedience, as merely the “basic form” of both faith and obedience (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 265-266).

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If prayer is not to be misunderstood as some abstract theological principal, religious concept or human attitude, but as the concrete, material, primary act of faith and obedience, then it has to be understood in its own right.

Asking

Barth said that Christian prayer can properly be described by the sequence of praise and thanksgiving, confession and penitence, petition and intercession, and again praise and thanksgiving, but to fully understand prayer, to grasp the unique characteristic that prayer brings to the Christian life, we have to understand its essence, its centre (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 266).

This centre, Barth asserted, is not worship. Although being a fundamental part of prayer, we might misunderstand prayer as the awe struck, dumb founded gaping of something small and insignificant before something enormous and magnificent, if we understand worship as its centre. This is not Christian prayer. Even if we add to this understanding the confession and penitence of a creature aware of his or her complete depravity, as well as the thanksgiving and praise of the goodness and grace of the God who is merciful to this sinful creature, it still does not capture the very essence of Christian prayer. It might perhaps describe some religious awareness, or some anthropological phenomenon, it might describe some kind of reverent awe under the heavens, or fearful terror over the abyss, perhaps some kind of gratefulness at the goodness of God, or horror at the corruptness of humanity, but it will not describe *Christian* prayer, specifically (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 266-267).

What is truly surprising in the Christian situation, according to Barth, is not how great and holy and rich God is, nor how small and unworthy and poor humanity is, but how near this great and holy and rich God draws to this small and unworthy and poor human, as a Father to a child (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 268).

Christian prayer is not thinking high thoughts about God or low thoughts about humanity, but asking God to give us everything that we need to live faithfully and obediently under God the Father's lordship. Christian prayer is not idly staring in awe or terror, in gratefulness or remorse, at the grace of God, but actively using the freedom granted by that grace, by simply turning to God who has drawn so near in Jesus Christ, asking and receiving everything from God (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 269).

"The Christian is able to ask. The mystery that God is the Father of man and man the child of God is a mystery which has been revealed to him. And so he does ask" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 269).

Prayer, according to Barth, is in essence to ask. It is to ask God to do what we cannot do. We are allowed to ask, and we are commanded to ask. This understanding of prayer unveils the essence of the Christian attitude. For Christianity holds fast to the qualitative distinction between God and humanity on the one hand, and the nearness of God to humanity on the other hand, like no other faith (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 268).

In all languages the word "prayer" denotes the act of asking, which is ultimately correct. It might be that in practice prayer consist in a sequence of praise and thanksgiving, confession and penitence, petition and intercession, and again praise and thanksgiving, but the one element that makes prayer *prayer*, and which makes it in fact *Christian* prayer, the "constitutive element" of prayer, is petition (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 267).

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Prayer, first of all, is “an asking, a seeking and a knocking directed towards God; a wishing, a desiring and a requesting presented to God.” The person who prays, really prays, is seeking something from God, hoping and expecting to receive something from God, something which he or she cannot receive from anyone else but God. Other lofty theories about prayer, with all its profound and wonderful philosophies and supposed theologies, misses the plain fact that the concrete person who prays, who concretely prays a concrete prayer, is asking something from God. What makes the centrality of petition in Christian prayer evident, is not any theological argument, but the simple, concrete fact that the Lord’s Prayer is a list of six petitions (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 268).

The asking of prayer is not self-seeking, it is not the freedom of self-will, but it is the free and obedient doing what is allowed and commanded (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 270).

It is precisely not seeking its own will, but seeking the will of the Father, “Thy will be done,” for all the world, but also, since it is not abstract speculation, but real, concrete prayer, a true personal response, the seeking of the Father’s will for him- or herself.

Asking for him- or herself, the Christian is not self-centred or selfish, but he or she is discarding all false humility and hypocrisy, all pretence of an elevated piousness which is too noble to ask for self, and praying a real prayer as allowed and commanded in the surprising situation of a good and gracious Father who has drawn so near to humanity that we may ask for anything and everything.

What makes this asking, this Christian prayer, so peculiar, is the fact that we do not ask out of want for something that we do not have, but we ask because we have already received everything that we need. We ask because all our prayers have already been heard and answered in Jesus Christ. This is the foundation of our asking. And therefore our asking is not born of despair, but born out of a confident hope (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 270-271).

Barth explained:

"In the fact that Jesus is there, the world is already helped, and everything that creation needs, and at the heart of creation man, is already provided" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 271).

It is because we lack nothing, that we can ask for everything (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 272). As in Psalm 23, we can pray, because our prayer is based on the first verse of Psalm 23: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Of course, in the world we are surrounded by darkness and trouble, we are completely and utterly lost, lacking everything. But in Jesus Christ, in communion with Jesus Christ, as part of the community of faith of which Jesus Christ is the Lord and Head, as we die and are resurrected with Christ in our baptism, as we sit at the Lord’s Table, as we live daily by God’s Word, as the Spirit of promise daily renews our faith in our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, living *in Jesus Christ*, we are already with God, already at God’s side, already with our Father in heaven, already with the Creator, Preserver and Ruler of heaven and earth, living already as new creations, living already within the reality of the inheritance which is ours in the age to come. It is the child who is safe, lacking nothing, in the arms of her Father, in the midst of a fierce and dangerous storm. It is only *in Jesus Christ*, the Lord and Saviour of the world, it is only *at the side of the Father*, the Creator and Recreator of heaven and earth, it is only *from the eschatological promise of the Spirit*, the Redeemer in the age to come, that the community of faith can truly say it lacks nothing, while seemingly lacking everything. It lives by the Already of the divine gift and answer to all the world’s problems, within the Not Yet of the eschatological fulfilment which is still to come (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 271-272).

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And that is why we ask; that is why we pray the Lord's Prayer, because everything which is needed for the salvation and redemption of the world has already been given and answered, but everything has not yet been fulfilled in time. Living by the Already, within the Not Yet, we are allowed and commanded to ask, in the knowledge that all our prayers have already been heard and answered in Jesus Christ, and in the expectation of the eschatological fulfilment of this divine gift and answer which has already been given.

Barth said:

"And Christian petition ... is simply the taking and receiving of the divine gift and answer as it is already present and near to hand in Jesus Christ" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 274).

Christians, in Barth's view, are the strange people who know that we have nothing in ourselves, but simultaneously know that we have everything in God. Vermeulen points out the paradoxical character of prayer in Barth's theology. The justified ask for justification. The sanctified ask for sanctification. We who have the Holy Spirit ask to be filled by the Spirit. We who have received grace, beg for mercy. We who have been found by God, seek God. We who are witnesses, ask that we will become witnesses. Vermeulen sees this paradoxical reality as the inner connection between what has already been accomplished in Jesus and what is yet to be fulfilled by the Holy Spirit. Because we have everything in Christ, we may ask for everything in the Holy Spirit. This paradoxical character of the church's life of prayer, Vermeulen argues, safeguards the church against acting triumphantly and self-righteously within the world (Vermeulen, 1986: 288).

The church exists as a community that asks; asking for its own existence, and asking on behalf of the world. The church is separated from the world in order to be sent into the world, as the community who knows that there is help for the world, that there is an answer for the world, and that asks for it. The church is the community of faith who takes and receives the divine gift and answer which is given, for its own sake and for the sake of the world (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 278).

Intercession is not an optional addition to prayer. As the Christian asks for his or her own desires and concerns – and the more personal and private they are, the more this is true according to Barth – he or she is in fact praying for the community of faith and praying on behalf of the world. Intercession, just like petition, is not an element of prayer next to other, equally important elements, but it is the very essence of prayer. The most personal and private prayer of the Christian, the most intimate desire and longing of the Christian, is that God will enable him or her to trust and obey Jesus Christ, as an obedient and useful co-worker, for the sake of his or her own salvation, the salvation of the community of faith and the salvation of the world. Therefore, as the Christian prays that God's Name be hallowed, God's kingdom come, God's will be done in his or her own life; that he or she will receive daily bread, forgiveness of debts and deliverance from evil, the Christian is necessarily and essentially asking this not only for him- or herself, but also for the community of faith, on behalf of the world. And the reason why this asking is necessarily and essentially intercession, is because the only reason that the Christian may and can pray this prayer, is because it is prayed in the Name of Jesus Christ, it is prayed in communion with Jesus Christ, it is prayed as a prayer of which Jesus Christ is the true Subject. Jesus Christ is the One who is in actual fact praying the Lord's Prayer, praying it for the church and on behalf of the world. The Christian is participating in Jesus Christ, co-operating with Jesus Christ, when he or she is praying the Lord's Prayer, asking it in and with Jesus Christ, interceding together with Jesus Christ, for him- or herself, for the community of faith, for the world (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 280-281).

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Since Christian prayer is asking, based upon the gift and answer which has already been given, it must include faith within it. It is asking in faith. It is asking in the trust and knowledge and confidence of the divine gift and answer which has already been given (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3: 282*).

Barth distinguished Christian prayer from other cries, by saying that it is not a despairing shout into the abyss; it is "not a yearning sigh or cry addressed into the void, into the mystery of a supposed transcendence in which man finally runs up only against his own limitations" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3: 282*).

God hears and answers and gives a gift even to the creature who groans and sighs into the abyss, unaware of God the Father the Lord of Creation, but this is not Christian prayer. Christian prayer is more than a desperate cry in the face of your creaturely limitations; it is turning away from yourself and your limitations and turning towards God who has no limit and who has already given in Jesus Christ everything that the creature needs and which the creature cannot give to itself. Christian prayer is not the lonely existential agony of the individual confronted by his or her own limitations, but it is joyful and confident participation in Jesus Christ; participation in the Christian community, who are full of hope as we live by the Holy Spirit – hearing and obeying the Word of God, partaking in the sacraments and serving the world as we are commissioned to do by our living, present and active Lord Jesus Christ (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3: 282*).

Praying with faith and in obedience

Without faith prayer is impossible. Without faith the whole life of the Christian – participating in Jesus Christ; being an active and living member of the body of Christ – is impossible. It does not have to be a great or strong or impressive faith. But it must be real faith. What is real faith? It is faith in the merciful God, the Father, who has given creation everything it needs in Jesus Christ and therefore has already heard and answered all our prayers. How does someone attain this faith? It is only as God the Father gathers the creature by the power of the Holy Spirit into the Christian community, the body of Jesus Christ, that the creature is awakened and given the freedom to believe as a child in God the Father, the Lord of creation (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3: 283*).

Freedom is not stepping into nothingness, just as faith is not leaping into the abyss, just as prayer is not crying into the void. The freedom of the Christian life is to be a living and active member of the Christian community, who hears and obeys the Word of God, who believes like a child in the grace and mercy of God the Father, who prays because he or she knows that all our prayers have already been heard and answered in Jesus Christ. As 2 Peter 1:3 says: "His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness."

And as prayer is impossible without faith, so too it is impossible without obedience. In fact, Barth once again affirmed:

„...the prayer of the Christian to God is the basic act of the obedience engendered in faith” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3: 283*).

Because obedience is included in prayer, the Christian, although he or she prays for him- or herself, does not pray private prayers. Obedient prayer means asking in the Name of Jesus, asking together with, in co-operation with Jesus' asking, following Jesus' teaching on prayer, praying as we are allowed and commanded to pray, as part of the community of faith, in service of the Head of the community of faith, as witnesses and co-workers of the Lord's

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salvation of the world. Because prayer includes obedience, it is not arbitrary or whimsical asking, it is not enslaved by selfish and fluctuating desires. It is the free and joyous asking, in and with its Lord, as part of the community of faith, for its own salvation and for its own participation in the salvation of the world, of which it is already assured and confident in faith (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 283).

The obedience of prayer, means that prayer is bound to the community of faith and to the world:

“At his own place and in his own way, according to his own part in the community, he prays the prayer of the community, the common prayer of all Christians. Praying for himself, therefore, he prays with and for all other Christians, because he prays for the service and work of the community; and in so doing he prays for all men. In this way he prays obediently” (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 283).

God's co-workers

What is truly remarkable about prayer, is that it is the Christian activity wherein we are given the gift of co-operating with God's activity in the world, with God's lordship over the world, "living and ruling and reigning with Him." Barth explained that in faith we are the children of God, in obedience we are the servants of God, but in prayer we are the friends of God, drawn to God's side. The Christian life – faith, obedience and above all prayer – is indeed "a human co-operation in the doing of the will of God." Of course it is a mere *human* co-operation, fully dependent on the power and action of God, with no possibility, capacity or merit of its own, but nonetheless it is real co-operation, especially in prayer as petition. As we ask that God's Name be hallowed, as we ask that God's kingdom come, as we ask that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we are made into co-operators with God in doing God's will on earth. As we pray in this way, we become more than objects or spectators or critics of world events. As we pray in this way, we are transformed by the active and creative grace of God into subjects with a voice and a responsibility (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 286).

Prayer is the chief exercise of our faith, for in prayer, we are co-workers with God. Barth explained:

“Our participation in the work of God is the action that consists in giving our allegiance to this work. It is a great thing to preach, to believe, and to fulfill our small obedience to God's commandments. But in all these forms of obedience and faith it is prayer that puts us in rapport with God and permits us to collaborate with him. God wishes us to live with him, and we on our side reply, ‘Yes, Father, I wish to live with thee.’ And then he says, ‘Pray, call me; I am listening to you. I shall live and reign with you’ (Barth, 2002: *P*: 20-21).

I have to quote Barth at length to show that by this co-operation, Barth in no way implies a human achievement, but truly participation in Jesus Christ. Barth said (with my emphases added):

"Originally and properly the Christian who is at the side of God and has His own voice and responsibility in the divine rule is the one Son of Man, Jesus Christ. It is *He* who sits at the right hand of the Father Almighty. It is *He* who with God is the Lord and King of all things. It is to *Him* that there is given all power in heaven and on earth. It is *His* asking which is answered, which the work of the creature which includes within it the fulness of the divine presence and gift, and therefore helps to

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determine the divine will and action. Far be it from us to ascribe to the Christian creature, and his piety, and the strength of his faith, and the seriousness of his obedience, and the depth and fervour of his prayer, the power to rule and reign with God. Without *Christ* there are no Christians and there is no Christianity. But by and with *Christ* there are Christians and there is a Christianity, and it is to these that we refer. There is a discipleship of *Christ*. There is a faith in *Him*, and through *Him* in God. Likewise there is an obedience to *Him*. Likewise there is prayer or asking together with *Him*, and on the basis of *His* asking. Likewise there is a participation of the Christian not merely in *His* prophetic and high-priestly but also in *His* kingly office. In *Him* God came to our side and entered into our humility. And in *Him* we are set at God's side and lifted up to Him and therefore to the place where decisions are made in the affairs of His government. And this is what takes place in Christian faith and Christian obedience and Christian prayer... It is not the Christian in and for himself, but the Christian *in Christ*, who is at God's side. It is not the Christian in himself, but the Christian *in Christ*, who is the servant and child and also friend of God, and as such a free lord with him over everything" (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 287).

We have to remember at this point once again that Jesus Christ is the one and only true ethical agent. It is Jesus Christ who fulfils the law. It is Jesus Christ that is obedient. It is only in so far as we are *in Christ* that we are able to act as Christians, i.e., to live in obedience to the will of God, to obey the Word of God as it addresses us as the law of the Spirit. Nimmo explains that the reason that we are ethical agents only in so far as we are *in Christ*, is because it is Jesus Christ who is the covenant partner of God elected by grace. In God's grace it is not the individual that is elected, nor a group of individuals, but one person, Jesus Christ, and only *in Jesus Christ* the people of God are elected, and only *in Jesus Christ* human beings are elected. Therefore Jesus Christ is the true responsible human being, and our obedient response to God can only take place *in Jesus Christ* (Nimmo, 2010: 220).

The fact that Jesus Christ has fulfilled the law, the fact that Jesus Christ is the only true ethical agent, the only true elected human being who is able to respond obediently to God's Word and work, does not, however, lead to antinomianism or passivity on our part. To the contrary, it means that we are also commanded and enabled to obey the law, since we are *in Christ*. The right action of Christ enables us and obligates us to conform to that action with our right action (Nimmo, 2010: 231).

Barth emphasised that this participation in Christ means participation in the Christian community. Believing and obeying and praying outside the Christian community, as an isolated individual, Barth suggested that one will most probably end up "groping in the void," whereas when a Christian believes and obeys and prays as a living and active member of the Christian community, when a Christian prays with the Christian community to "Our Father," that Christian's small faith, meagre obedience and stuttering prayer will be filled with the fullness of Jesus Christ, who is the original Subject of the Christian community's faith, obedience and prayer, or in other words, who is the *life* of the Christian community (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 288).

What Barth was doing by once again emphasising so strongly the participation of the Christian at prayer *in Christ* and *in the community of faith*, is to dispel any possibility of a misunderstanding at this point – after he has described how prayer truly is the basic act of our faith and obedience, up to the point of reigning with the Lord of creation in prayer – that prayer is merely a subjective reality which achieves anything within its own capacity or power. Yes, prayer is a subjective reality. It takes place within the creaturely sphere; it is a free act of the one who is praying. But it is precisely within that subjective act, the act of asking – in communion with Christ and the community of faith – for God's divine presence and action, that it participates in and co-operates with the objective reality of God's Word and work, and it is *therein*, in the objective reality in which it participates and with which it co-

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operates, that all its power and significance lies. If the objective reality is ignored, if there is not a living, active Lord of creation who is asked, if the asking is not grounded upon the divine gift and answer already given, then it is surely the most useless, deluded and senseless way of wasting our time and efforts (Barth, 1960: *CD III,3*: 284, 288).

And yet, in prayer, we are active agents, even co-workers with God. Mangina shows that in Barth's special ethics of reconciliation, Barth employed prayer, invocation of God, to describe the very real dialogue taking place between God and believers. In prayer, we are God's covenant partners, real agents of action responding God's action. Mangina sees a reciprocal pattern in this conversation between God and the community of faith, wherein God acts by calling us to call upon God, we act by calling upon God to act in the world, God acts by bringing the salvation of the world to eschatological fulfilment and we act by corresponding acts which serve as temporal signs of God's saving action. Although in prayer we ask God to act and to do what we cannot do, we correspond and conform to God's action, and thus become God's co-workers, by doing so. By praying, by asking God to act, we conform to God's action and are thus transformed into agents of faith and obedience. That is why, says Mangina, Barth could argue *lex orandi lex agendi* – as we pray so we act (Mangina, 2001: 176-177).

Hope in action

Prayer, as it is used in everyday language, is understood to mean the end of action. When we can do nothing about a situation, we pray. True prayer, however, is hope in action. In prayer, we act and work and move in Jesus Christ, with Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit, towards the reconciliation and redemption, the recreation of the world. Hope is not a human disposition or attitude, and it can never become a human attribute or possession. It is an event always happening anew, becoming who you already are in Jesus Christ, a new creation, being awakened by the Holy Spirit to live a life of hope. It is a life lived in free self-determination, but lived not within your own abilities or capacities, not within the possibilities of this age, but within the actuality of the coming kingdom of God, by being engrafted into the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, by being filled by the Spirit of promise. Prayer is the primary act of an active life of faith and obedience, lived in hope and expectation (Nimmo, 2007:150).

Although we are claimed and commanded by God, with no choice in the matter, to be people of prayer, there is no greater gift and no greater liberty. To be people of prayer, is not an achievement of the human spirit, but a life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit.

For the despondent, disillusioned, despairing young students standing in 1946 in the semi-ruins of Bonn, young people who had to learn once again to smile, Barth said:

“When it happens that man obtains that freedom of becoming a hearer, a responsible, grateful, hopeful person, this is not because of an act of the human spirit, but solely because of the act of the Holy Spirit. So this is, in other words, a gift of God. It has to do with a new birth, with the Holy Spirit” (Barth, 1949: *DiO*: 140).

For Barth, the Reformers Luther and Calvin were not as radical in their eschatological understanding of prayer as they could have been. Praying for God's Name to be hallowed, God's kingdom to come, God's will to be done, on earth as it is in heaven, is the great eschatological directedness of all Christian prayer. Even as we pray for our daily bread, for the forgiveness of our debts and the deliverance of evil, we are stretching out towards the eschatological fulfilment of God's redemption and renewal of the whole of creation. In praying the Lord's Prayer we pray in and with the resurrected Jesus, by the power of the

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Spirit of promise, against all that opposes God's Word and work, for the fulfilment of God's covenant history with humanity and creation. In prayer, and specifically in praying the Lord's Prayer, we realise our future reality, we live within the possibilities of the age to come, we act as the new creatures that we will be when God unites heaven and earth (Saliers, 2002: xv-xvi).

Mangina shows that in Barth's usage of *Anrufung* / invocation, in the special ethics of reconciliation, he addressed "passion," i.e., zeal for the coming kingdom of God. Christian passion is passion orientated toward God's future, the eschatological fulfilment of God's action in Jesus Christ. We pray and work passionately because of our longing for and anticipation of the coming kingdom of God. The community of faith are those people who know, because of our faith, that God's future is not yet fulfilled in the world and in our lives, and it is our longing and anticipation for this to happen, our zeal for the coming kingdom of God, which makes us pray and work so passionately (Mangina, 2001: 178-179).

At the end of Barth's Gifford lectures he said the following about the future orientation of prayer, the gift of comfort and hope in prayer, and its relationship to our knowledge of God (faith) and our service of God (obedience):

"The teaching of the Reformation is only rightly understood when it is realised that its Confession of faith must end with prayer and therefore naturally must begin with prayer too, and that the only prayer possible at this place must be the one found here, 'Arise, O Lord,' and 'give Thy servants strength' – the prayer for God's Word and Revelation, and the prayer for faith and thus in the first instance and in the second a prayer for God's own action, which alone makes amends for what we ourselves shall do badly on all occasions, however hard we strive after right knowledge of God and right service of God. The church, by praying and praying thus, declares that she puts her trust not in herself but in the comfort and hope, whose name is Jesus Christ – and in the power of the name of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the one true God, to whom alone all Honour and Glory is due" (Barth, 1938: *KG&SG*: 244).

6. Conclusion: Prayer: the chief exercise of faith

This dissertation has attempted to show how Karl Barth, throughout his theological career, understood, explained and attempted to live the Christian life, i.e., as a life of prayer. It has been argued that within differing contexts, addressing different issues, in discussion with, or in opposition to different theological voices, Barth continually emphasised the centrality of prayer in the Christian life, in faith and obedience. For Barth, the Christian life at its core, is a life of prayer. Prayer, for Karl Barth, is the chief exercise of faith, the primary act of faith, the basic form of faith and obedience, the fundamental attitude in all our dogmatics and ethics.

Not Barth's focus

However, it has also been pointed out that neither prayer, nor faith, nor obedience, nor even the Christian life as a whole, functioned as the focus of Karl Barth's theological work and ministry. Although the focus of this dissertation was to show how Karl Barth understood, explained and attempted to live the Christian life, it was argued throughout that the Christian life was not the focus of Barth's life and work. The focus, the true emphasis of Karl Barth's career, was not the Christian life, but the life of God. Karl Barth's great achievement was indisputably to make God once again the object of theological study and work, rather than religious humanity, as in the modern Protestant theology of the 19th and 20th centuries. Whereas modern Protestant theology made much of faith and decision, i.e., the acts of religious humanity, Barth was much more concerned with the acts of God.

It is precisely this concern of Barth that forced him, whenever he was addressing the Christian life, to emphasise repeatedly the unity of faith and obedience, and the centrality of prayer in faith and obedience. The Christian life that is a proper response to the Word and work of God, the Christian life that does not stand on its own as an independent reality, the Christian life that cannot exist without the existence of God, the Christian life that is brought into existence and sustained continuously by the life of God, the Christian life that lives in participation with the life of God and that acts in correspondence to the acts of God, is a life of faith and obedience, i.e., a life of prayer.

In Barth's theology, God did not function as a concept, as a neutral, impersonal counterpoint, allowing him to speak about the faith of religious humanity, while leaving the living, the acting and speaking triune God, attested to in the Bible and proclaimed in the church, out of the discussion. Barth attempted to speak, act and live in such a way, that his words and actions would correspond to the Word of God and the action of God, that God might reveal God-self through his (Barth's) meagre, limited, sinful, human words and actions. As in Grünewald's depiction of the crucifixion, wherein John the Baptist is pointing to Jesus on the cross, Barth attempted to point to the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, rather than pointing to the faith of religious humanity. And therefore faith, or the piety of religious humanity, could never serve as the focus of Barth's work.

The Christian life in response to the living God

So whenever Barth had to speak about the Christian life, the life which is lived in correspondence to and in participation with the life of God, Barth emphasised the unity of faith and obedience, as well as the centrality of prayer in faith and obedience. In this way, he ensured that the Christian life he was speaking about, was not a life abstracted from the life of the triune God. By always emphasising the life of faith as a life of obedience, and the life of faith and obedience as a life of prayer, Barth ensured that the Christian life he was

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addressing is a life lived in a personal relation and a personal response to the living, speaking and acting triune God. This allowed Barth to address the Christian life, without taking God out of the picture, without abstracting it from the life of God, without trying to make the Christian life stand on its own feet, isolated and independent from the real and living God, as Barth was convinced the modern Protestant theology of the 19th and 20th centuries indeed did.

By repeatedly emphasising the unity of faith and obedience, Barth ensured that the faith he was speaking about, could not be misunderstood as a mere axiom which is accepted intellectually, and which does not make ethical demands upon the life of the believer. This emphasis was especially important within the German, Lutheran situation wherein Barth lived and worked for a large part of his career. In the times of turmoil, i.e., the First World War, the rise of Nazism and the Second World War (although Barth was banned from Germany in 1935), Barth repeatedly took a critical stance within the church, arguing that the church's actions do not correspond to its faith.

But for Barth, it was not as if the church's faith was in order, and it only needed to apply it to the practical situations of life. Barth was convinced that the church's faith itself was the problem. The "God" the church believed in, according to Barth, was no longer the personal, living, acting and speaking God, which must be heard in faith and obeyed in life, but rather a neutral, impersonal, passive, conceptual God, which does not stand over against humanity, but which is the sum total of our human thoughts, words and deeds.

The God of modern Protestantism, according to Barth, was not a God that needs to be heard in faith and obeyed in life, since this God does not say anything different from what religious humanity is already saying and does not demand anything different from what religious humanity is already doing. So the problem for Barth, was not merely a lack of ethical discussions or an overemphasis on faith within the German, Lutheran church context. The real issue was that the God in whom the church had faith, the God that the church obeyed, was no longer the personal, living, speaking and acting God that stood over against humanity. Jesus Christ was no longer the personal, living, speaking and acting Head of the church that must be heard and obeyed in life and in death. The God of modern Protestantism was not able to say or do anything other than that which the church was already saying and doing. And that is why obedience became redundant, because the God in whom the church believed, approved and affirmed everything that church was already saying and doing.

And by emphasising prayer as the central part of faith and obedience, Barth made his criticism even clearer. If the God that we believe in approves and affirms all our thoughts, words and deeds, if God does not really think, speak or act independently, then obviously prayer is also utterly redundant. Why ask, when we must supply the answer? Why knock, when it is up to us to open the door? Why seek, when we are not looking for someone outside ourselves? If God is not really on the scene, if the personal, living, speaking and acting God is not the One to whom we are responding in faith and obedience, why then should we pray? Obviously we shouldn't pray. It would be foolish to do so. But if the God in whom we believe is the personal, living, speaking and acting God, then it becomes apparent why prayer is indeed the chief exercise of our faith, since it entails a personal, living, speaking and acting response to the personal, living, speaking and acting God.

The offense to modernity

Following the Reformers in their assertion that the chief part of our faith and obedience is in fact prayer, and specifically petitionary prayer, Barth was striking a sensitive nerve with

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regard to the modern Protestant theology of his day. In a sense, a theologian's whole theology can be exposed by his or her understanding of prayer. For in prayer, speculative talk about God is laid aside, and the personal response to God comes to the fore.

For modern Protestant theology, with its focus on religion, and more specifically on the subjective side of humanity's religion, on the faith or the spirituality of humanity, it would be impossible to describe prayer as the central element in our faith and obedience, if it could use the word "obedience" at all! To see prayer, petitionary prayer, the prayer wherein we ask God to give us all that we need and to do all that we cannot do, at the core of the Christian life, would be impossible, for then God would have to be understood as an objective reality outside the person who is praying, as a personal God who can hear this prayer, who can be addressed in prayer and who can answer this prayer, as a living, active God who can act, who can give, who can help and save.

Although prayer itself is problematic for this type of theology, it would perhaps be able to "de-mythologise" a prayer of thanksgiving, and describe it as the expression of a basic human attitude of gratefulness for the gift of life, or to "de-mythologise" a prayer of worship, and to describe it as the expression of the basic human attitude of awe and wonder at the greatness of the universe, or to "de-mythologise" a prayer of repentance, as an expression of our own frailty and vulnerability as human beings.

But it becomes exceedingly difficult to "de-mythologise" petitionary prayer without exposing the complete absence of God in your entire theology. For if petitionary prayer is "de-mythologised" as a mere expression of the human "feeling of absolute dependence," whereby we do not in actual fact address God or ask anything from God, but express our own experience of need, then it becomes embarrassingly clear that true "dependence" is the furthest possible thing from what is meant, because nothing is sought, nothing is asked and nothing is expected from God!

Most probably, a theology of this kind will try to assert that prayer is in essence silence. It might give very flattering reasons for this assertion, perhaps saying that we worship God simply by silently being in God's presence; that we show our gratitude for all of life by not thanking God for this or that blessing, but simply by being grateful for everything, for all of life; that we repent not by confessing this or that sin, but by simply appearing before God with the whole of our being, just as we are; that we express our feeling of absolute dependence not by asking for this or that thing, but simply by being silent before God, and perhaps thus realising that we actually have need of nothing. Perhaps it will assert that all of life is in reality prayer, since we live our whole lives before God, and therefore we have no need to say specific prayers with specific words.

However this type of modern theology or spirituality will explain what prayer is, it will most definitely never describe prayer as asking God for all that we need and expecting God to give that to us. It cannot do this, because God is not truly on the scene. Only humanity is present. The term "God" is merely used to describe the best or highest aspirations of humanity.

The active life in reaction to the active God

One would expect that the theology of modern Protestantism encouraged the church to become more active in its faith. One would think that a theology that equates God's words and actions with religious humanity's words and actions, enables the church to become much more active in word and deed. If the church can no longer pray and ask God to say or do anything, then surely the church will take up its own responsibility and say and do all that

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it can. If the church can no longer defer its ethical responsibility to God, then surely it will take its ethical responsibilities upon itself. It seems logical that a theology that views God to be passive, will help believers not to shy away from their own responsibility, hiding behind God, but to become active and to take up their responsibility.

Ironically, however, history proved the opposite to be true. Barth experienced first-hand how the church, even his theological professors and mentors, even some of his dearest colleagues, got swept along passively with the historical and cultural movements of the time, unable to swim against the stream of the *Zeitgeist*. Counter-intuitively, history showed that a passive God creates passive believers, whereas an active God, creates active believers. A speaking and acting God does not make believers mute and passive, as one might expect hypothetically. In practice, it was revealed that a speaking and acting God enables believers to speak and act, responding and reacting to the words and actions of God.

In response to the Word of God and in reaction to the action of God in Jesus Christ, Barth was able to take up a very critical stance and swim against the stream in all the differing cultural and historical movements that he experienced throughout his life. Barth was always able to speak and work actively over and against the *Zeitgeist*, and not to be passively swept along with it, beginning with his disillusionment in 1914 when 93 German intellectuals, including some of Barth's former theological professors, gave official support to the German war effort, during the rise of Nazism in the 1930's, which culminated in the Barmen declaration in 1934, through the Second World War, even changing direction near the end of the war and warning against a graceless post-war attitude towards Germany, and especially (yes, especially) during the Cold War years, when the capitalist West was so confident in its unanimous condemnation of the communist East, and Barth found himself unable to join the choir of condemnation, but rather warned against the dangers of nuclear war.

Even when at times it appeared to some that Barth had retreated behind a Chinese wall, focusing on the mammoth task of writing his *Church Dogmatics*, doing theology in Basel as if nothing had happened in the rest of the world, concerning himself with dogmatic questions regarding the nature of God, that seemed far removed from the pertinent ethical issues of the day, Barth started every day by reading his newspaper from end to end, and concerned himself very much with the ethical issues of the day. But he did not attempt to answer these questions by asking: What should we say? What should we do? Rather, he attempted to answer these questions by asking: What is God saying? What is God doing? Because he was convinced that the church can only speak and act faithfully and obediently when our words and actions are a response and a reaction to the Word and work of God in Jesus Christ.

Because the God revealed in Jesus Christ is the personal, living, speaking and acting God, who is still alive today, who is still speaking and acting today, whose being is identical to his action, the church cannot merely speak *about* God, and merely act in *remembrance* of God, but we must always speak and act in a personal response and reaction *to* God. And that is why prayer is the most basic manner in which the church speaks and acts. That is why prayer is at the core of our faith and obedience.

That is why faith, knowledge of God, is always personal, relational knowledge. It is knowing God always anew. It can never be inherited knowledge or the knowledge of tradition. Even the very personal knowledge of the religious experiences we had yesterday, cannot serve as the source of knowledge of God today. God can only be known as God chooses to reveal God-self today in Jesus Christ, within the covenant history, the salvation history that God is taking to its fulfilment, through the power of the Holy Spirit, as attested to in the Bible and proclaimed by the church. Faith, to know God, is to know God personally, always anew, and therefore faith is to pray, to respond to the Word of God spoken to us today.

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And that is why obedience is not to obey the law, but the freedom to react to the action of God, today. It is the freedom, being allowed and commanded, to participate in the action of God, to be co-workers with God, in the work God is doing today, in the continuance and fulfilment of the covenant history, the salvation history, which God is doing in Jesus Christ, by the power of Holy Spirit, witnessed by the community of faith, today.

Obedience, the freedom to react to the action of God in Jesus Christ, is the freedom to pray. Obedience is the freedom to ask that God's will be done on earth as in heaven; the freedom to ask that not our will, but God's will be done; the freedom to ask that God will enable us to do what we cannot do. Obedience is the freedom to ask that we will act in reaction to God's action, today. True obedience is not to obey the law. And true freedom is not to do what you want. True obedience and true freedom is to pray: "Not my will, but Your will be done." True obedience and true freedom is to pray like Augustine: "Give me the grace to do as you command, and command me to do what you will." True obedience and true freedom is to pray that our actions will be a reaction to the action of God, today.

The irony is that the efforts of modern theologians to make religion more relevant to modern people by describing it in philosophical, anthropological, historical and psychological terms, rather than "abstract" theological terms, by focusing on the faith and the decisions, i.e., the life of the believer, rather than the "abstract" God in whom the believer believes, made religion less relevant in the real and concrete struggles of the 20th century. By focusing its gaze upon faith itself, upon the decision of faith, upon the agent of faith, religion became less active in its faith. As if installing a mirror rather than a window in the front of a motor vehicle, religion was brought to a halt by its own inward gaze.

Barth's criticism upon modern theology still holds true today, especially upon the popular "spirituality" theologies that are filling the book stores, that are so prevalent in the modern media and that are infiltrating the church's theology today. Barth's theology asks the critical question whether the living, the speaking and acting God, the God of covenant history, the God revealed in Jesus Christ, the crucified and resurrected Lord who is reigning over heaven and earth, the God who is redeeming the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who is gathering, equipping and sending the community of faith to be witnesses to the living, speaking, acting, triune God, is addressed in these theologies? Or, for that matter, whether any other living, speaking and acting god is addressed? It seems rather that humanity is addressed. Humanity is addressed in philosophical, anthropological, historical, psychological and religious, spiritual terms. To a very large extent, the popular spirituality which is informing so much of our current theology, is not theology at all.

Talking to God

Theology, in order to truly be *theos-logos*, God-talk, must be *nachdenken*. Theology, if it makes any claim of saying anything about God, has to be a response to God's prior Self-revelation. Theology has to be faith seeking understanding, in the knowledge that only as God graciously and miraculously reveals God-self to faith, do we have any possibility of reflecting upon the knowledge of God, which can only be given by God.

Theology which places knowledge of God and knowledge of humanity on an equal plane, which no longer views knowledge of God as dependent upon the pure miracle and grace of God's Self-revelation, will inevitably end up being anthropology, or psychology, or some other form of human knowledge, but it will not be theology. Theology can only be done in prayer, as a personal response to God's gracious Self-revelation. Theology can only be done by always asking for God's Self-revelation anew, never claiming to produce or possess any knowledge of God. Theology can only be done as witness, by pointing to God's Self-

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revelation. Theology can only be done in obedience, being bound to God's free Self-revelation.

Of course, even the strictest, most conservative adherence to the Bible, confessions of faith or church tradition, does not guarantee that theology will be God-talk. The threat always remains that God will not reveal God-self, even when quoting the Bible word for word. God is only known through God-self, i.e., as God freely and graciously chooses to reveal God-self in Jesus Christ, by the miracle of the Holy Spirit. Although theology is bound to God's Word, God is not bound to it, and the threat always remains that God can choose to remain silent. That is why theology is always done in prayer, always asking anew that God will freely, graciously and miraculously reveal God-self.

Talking to the world

But if theology is bound in this way, to what extent can it be relevant to the surrounding world? It seems obvious that the theology of modern spirituality is seeking to speak in a way that is relevant to the contemporary mood of society, and perhaps thereby succeeding in gaining a hearing once again from the surrounding world.

Despite perhaps appearance to the contrary, in the theological jargon of Barth's theology, or the sheer size of the *Church Dogmatics*, which is intimidating in itself, Barth never supported a view of theology as done in isolation from the surrounding world. Barth truly believed that theology must speak to the world. He was appreciative of the effort the theology of the 19th century made to speak to its time, as we can be appreciative of the effort made by popular spirituality to speak to our time.

But a critical question that Barth's theology poses towards this popular spirituality, is whether it will be able to swim against the historical and cultural streams of our day; whether it will be able to hear and obey God's Word over against the spirit of the times.

If faith is not really faith in God, but rather just a human possibility, if faith can exist without obedience, real obedience, the obedience wherein the Word of God is heard today and obeyed today, if the life of faith is not a life of prayer, of real prayer, prayer that asks real things from God, rather than just being silent "in prayer," then how will we be able to respond to the Word of God, to react to the action of God? What will prevent us from passively flowing with the historical and cultural, even the political and economic streams of our time, if God is not truly present, if our faith is not faith in God, if our faith is not obedient faith, if our faith and obedience is not at its very core, prayer?

The critical question Barth poses to our theology, our God-talk, be it a liberal theology in the form of modern spirituality, or be it a conservative theology in the form of strict adherence to the Bible, confessions of faith or church tradition, is to what extent does it take the grace of the triune God and the sin of humanity truly seriously? To what extent does our theology allow us to say that it is impossible for people to believe in God and to obey God by their own ability and power? To what extent does our theology allow us to say that God alone can justify and sanctify humanity? To what extent does our theology allow us to say that all human knowledge is in fact ignorance, and that we can only know God and ourselves by God's gracious Self-revelation to humanity? To what extent does our theology allow us to speak of the victory of God's grace in Jesus Christ over completely sinful humanity?

Barth's legacy asks the critical question whether our "relevant" theologies are able to confront evil and sin in the world and in humanity. Barth's life and theology asks the critical question whether our theology, our God-talk, is in fact really talk about God, about the God

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who confronts humanity in its sin, or whether it is in fact elevated speech about humanity. Does our theology allow us to see and to say that there is evil in the best ideas, causes, movements, institutions, nations, cultures, economies, technologies, moralities and religions, and that even the best of people are completely sinful? Or does our theology, in its effort to be relevant, flatter humanity, by talking about its inherent faith and obedience, rather than its continual unbelief and disobedience?

The greatest test of liberal theology, is whether it is able to speak about the complete sinfulness of humanity, and the greatest test of conservative theology, is whether it is able to speak of the all-embracing, victorious grace of God in Jesus Christ. In our efforts to speak relevantly to the world, have our theology become irrelevant by underestimating the sinfulness of humanity, as well as underestimating the grace of God in Jesus Christ? In a world which is thrown to and fro between optimism and pessimism, truly relevant theology will not be tempted by either, but speak of the world's and humanity's real predicament of evil and sin, and of our real hope in the victorious grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Good news in good and bad times

Perhaps in times of prosperity and peace we will be able to disguise how toothless our "relevant" theology is against the powerful currents of our time, but in times of crises the impotence of our God-less theology will be exposed, as it was in Barth's day.

This does not mean, however, that this God-less theology is any less harmful in times of prosperity and peace. Barth's theology, a theology wherein the living God is sought and addressed, is not only useful when the devil shows both horns and both cloven feet, but it is especially necessary when we are fighting against anonymous powers and principalities, that are very difficult to discern, that are interwoven with many good things, and that are very seductive and tempting. It is much easier to fight against Adolf Hitler than racism. It is much easier to fight against the Apartheid government than economic injustice. It is much easier to fight against nuclear war than global warming.

The criticism that Barth's ethics is only relevant in times of crises, that it only enables us to battle against obvious enemies, and that it does not help people with the little decisions of every day, does not hold. It is true that Barth's refusal to accept any eternal laws or universal principles, and his rejection of casuistry, does make the ethical task much more difficult. But we must keep in mind that if the personal, living, speaking and acting God is not sought and addressed, eternal laws and universal principles, or even the most thorough casuistry, will not help us in living ethically.

It must not be forgotten that Germany under Hitler's reign (as well as South Africa under the Apartheid government, as well as Eastern Europe during the Cold War, as well Middle Eastern countries under a totalitarian government today) was very much a place of law and order. The problem was not that people acted outside the law, but rather that they found themselves unable to stand up against the law of the land, and were swept along passively by the law of the land. And in the case of Germany under Hitler and South Africa under the Apartheid government, it cannot be argued that the laws were "unchristian," since it was most definitely "Christian" societies, if ever a claim could be made that there can be such a thing as a "Christian" society, a common assumption that Barth criticised.

Even if it is not the law of the land, even if it is merely the categorical imperative within the individual, arrived at by the individual's reason, to act in such a way that your action could be made into a universal law, as Immanuel Kant argued, then still, and even more so, the law will not guarantee ethical behaviour. Was the ethical dilemma of Germans under Hitler (and

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South Africans under Apartheid) not precisely that they acted in a manner that could be expected of everyone, instead of swimming against the stream, fighting against the spirit of the time? If the Christian life merely entails acting in a manner that could be expected of all people, how does that make it then a *Christian* life? Are the heathens not already doing that? Is the Christian life not exactly the opposite of acting as everyone else is expected to act? Is the Christian life not to be found rather in the following: to give your body as a living sacrifice, not conforming to the world, but being transformed, by thoughts that are not generally accepted, thoughts which are renewed by God-self, and that can thereby discern what is good, acceptable and perfect, what is the will of God (Romans 12:1-2)?

Freedom under the Lord

The power of the Christian life to swim against the stream of the time, lies in its freedom to live under the Lord, to believe and obey Jesus alone, free from all other powers in the world and in itself.

The great dilemma of modern humanity is that in its attempt to be liberated from external powers, it becomes captive to internal powers, to its own desires and fears, to its own compulsions, obsessions and addictions, to its own illusions, delusions and fallacies. Free from all authorities or powers that oppress it, modern humanity underestimates the subtlety and craftiness of sin and evil, and becomes a victim of its own inner turmoil.

This is not to say that there are no more external powers that have authority over modern humanity, or that oppress or exploit it. This becomes especially clear in situations of poverty or illness, terror or warfare. But in situations of relative prosperity, peace and wellbeing, in the *bourgeois* context, the external powers are mainly experienced internally. Middle class people attempt to protect themselves from the external forces with their inner world, which can be effective to some extent, but enhances their captivity to their inner world, and blinds them to the fact that the external forces, the forces of evil and sin, are also present inside them. People can pretend all they want to be free from all the powers and authorities in the world, they can claim to live only according to their own inner reason and will, but within their inner reason and will, there are many, many powers and forces at work, not to mention the forces of sin and evil itself.

True freedom is not freedom from all authority, not freedom for our own will, but freely living under one authority, Jesus Christ our Lord; freely living for God and for our fellow humanity. Running away from all powers and authorities which seek to enslave, oppress and exploit us, will not do, since we cannot run away from ourselves. The only answer is to run to Jesus Christ, to believe and obey Jesus Christ as our only true Lord, to pray and ask that we will be liberated from all other wills, all other kingdoms, also our own, and that God's will and God's kingdom alone will reign over our lives.

A free theology will have to go beyond liberation theology's divide between victims and perpetrators, oppressed and oppressors, exploited and exploiters. With the same attention and concern for, the same solidarity with people who are victims, oppressed and exploited, a free theology will have to speak about the righteousness of God which stands over against humanity, judging all our acts as unrighteous, justifying us by the grace of God in Jesus Christ. A free theology will have to be able to show that perpetrators, oppressors and exploiters are in as much need of liberation as are the victims, oppressed and exploited. And a free theology will have to be able to show that the victims, oppressed and exploited are not innocent, righteous people, worthy of liberation by merit, but that they are also sinful people who contribute to their captivity.

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A free theology will refrain from siding with any idea, cause, group, movement or institution and from ascribing divine legitimacy to it. When the situation calls for the church to give support to any of the above, in obedience to our Lord, we will do so with the clear understanding that it is only a temporary, contextual decision, by which we point to the ultimate destiny of the world in Jesus Christ. As far as possible, however, we will never support one group against others, one cause against others, one movement or institution against others, but always give witness to the reality which is beyond all these human conflicts, namely the reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ.

True freedom, the ability to swim against the stream of the time, to give witness to God's action which stand over against all human actions, to proclaim the victorious grace of God in Jesus, grace that overcomes all humanity's sin, can only come by acknowledging, recognising and confessing in faith Jesus' lordship, by freely obeying Jesus alone as our one and only Lord in life and in death, and by asking in prayer, always anew, for Jesus' gracious rule over the world and over our lives.

Faith, obedience, prayer

As a faithful church, we must proclaim, with joy and hope, that humanity is not able to believe by its own power. We must have the confidence to acknowledge that faith is not a human possibility. We must confess that also our own faith is not our own accomplishment, nor our possession. We must proclaim the good news that faith is real in Jesus Christ, by the miracle and power of the Holy Spirit, although it is hidden to our thoughts and feelings.

In true freedom we must discard all attempts to defend our faith, or to make it more acceptable to modern humanity, and call others to believe with us, to have faith in the future of the world and of humanity in Jesus Christ, which is also their future. We must pray with and for the world, that faith will also be given to them, as it is daily given to us afresh, so that they can also live today in the promise of their future in Jesus Christ, so that they can become who they already are in Jesus Christ, just as we do on a daily basis, by the miracle and power of the Holy Spirit.

As an obedient church, we must live in the freedom granted to us by our Lord whom we trust in faith. Liberated from the desire to respond to the surrounding world, we must respond freely and boldly to the Word and action of our living Lord within the world. We must become who we are in Jesus Christ. We must live as people who are justified, sanctified and called in Jesus Christ. We must live for God and for our neighbour. We must love others, because God loved us first. We must live in solidarity with our fellow humanity, because God became human and lives in solidarity with humanity in Jesus Christ. We must value every human being more than any idea, principle, cause, movement, institution, nation or culture. We must not tolerate humanity in its sinfulness with a distant apathy, but truly love humanity because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and carry its burdens, confess its sin, and suffer on behalf of it, in intercession before God, in the knowledge that Jesus and the Holy Spirit intercede for us.

Prayer is the chief exercise of faith, the basic act of faith, it is at the centre of our faith and obedience, the fundamental attitude with which theology and ethics is to be done, because prayer is our personal, living, active and speaking response to the personal, living, active and speaking God. In prayer we ask God to give us faith by grace, because we cannot believe in God by our own power. In prayer we ask that God's will be done in our actions, because we cannot obey God with our own will. In prayer our faith and obedience is directed towards God, who justifies the unbelieving in Jesus Christ, who sanctifies the disobedient in Jesus Christ, who makes the blind see in faith and the lame walk in obedience, by the power

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of the Holy Spirit. In prayer our faith and obedience respond to the prior Word of God, react to the prior action of God, and thus we live in correspondence to God's life, thus we work as co-workers of the work that God is doing.

This dissertation was an attempt to show the inseparable relationship between faith, obedience and prayer in the Christian life, according to Barth. Throughout the dissertation it has been argued that Barth's emphasis on these three aspects of the Christian life, was not incidental and not unrelated from each other. They were not of importance in and of themselves. They did not function as the focus of Barth's theology. Rather, Barth held onto the central importance and inseparable relationship between faith, obedience and prayer, in order to do theology in such a manner that the personal, living, acting and speaking God remained the object of his work and ministry, his theology and ethics.

By looking away from the faith of humanity and toward the God in whom we believe, by submitting himself in obedience to the God who has all authority in heaven and earth and thereby liberated from all other laws or authorities, and by accepting the permission and obeying the command to pray, to seek the God that cannot be found by humanity but who reveals God-self, to knock on the door of the kingdom of heaven, which can only be opened from the other side, to ask that not our will but God's will be done, Barth found himself able to swim against the ever changing cultural, historical, political and even theological streams of the times, and to speak, act and live in response and correspondence to the personal, speaking, acting and living God.

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