

*[Untitled notes of Dr. Gordon H. Clark from the Sangre de Cristo Seminary library. These notes are fragmentary and it is uncertain whether the pages are in the correct order. - DJD 11 Nov 2014]*

When Karl Barth makes retractions, it is news. In these three lectures, delivered between 1953-1957 he admits that the phrases “wholly other,” “infinite qualitative distinction,” “tangent,” and so on were unfortunate because they stressed the deity and transcendence of God at the expense of God's humanity. i.e. “God's relation to and turning toward man.” (p. 37).

Barth does not retract his basic criticism of nineteenth century theology. It was humanistic, anthropomorphic; it had nothing to say on the deity of God; it was a “blind alley” (p.41). Nevertheless nineteenth century theology is not to be dismissed. With all their limitations, so cruelly brought to light in 1914-1918, those men were great men. “They will not cease to speak to us. And we cannot cease to listen to them” (p. 33). The reviewer gets the impression that Barth looks upon theology as a continuous development, of which Schleiermacher, D.F. Strauss, F.C. Baur, et. al. are integral parts. When he says, “we cannot cease to listen to them,” he does not mean that we should take them as horrible examples and warnings.

This spiritual respect for them does not seem to harmonize with Barth's definition of evangelical theology as “informed by the gospel of Christ as heard afresh in the sixteenth century by direct return to the Holy Scripture.” Surely this phrase is inapplicable to Strauss and Baur. They had none of the gospel of Christ and even less respect for Scripture. To list them as evangelical theologians is an incorrect categorization. How can a Christian, a man devoted to Christ, take any spiritual pleasure in the views of Strauss and Baur?

In the third lecture Barth retracts his earlier repudiation of ethics as a sickness unto death. He defines freedom to do righteousness as a gift of God. Well and good. But to do righteousness one must know what is right and what is wrong. Barth is not clear as to how this can be determined. Ethics cannot be a set of rules, nor should one quote the Bible to determine what to do or what not to do. “To offer ethical norms to man ... is to hold out a stone instead of bread” (p. 85).

It is currently popular to deny that Biblical ethics is a “set of rules,” but this view cannot mean that all men always do right in this life on earth; but it must at least mean that all eventually become righteous.

On an earlier page Barth had tried to defend universalism: (1) Don't panic before finding out what the word means; (2) Col. 1:19 says that God will reconcile all things to himself; (3) a critic should not be suspicious and gloomy and (4) “we have no theological right to set any sort of limits to the loving kindness of God which has appeared in Jesus Christ” (pp. 61-62).

But we do have a right – the right to set the precise limits that Jesus himself set in his repeated teachings about hell. If the neuter in Col. 1:19 is made masculine and so brought into contradiction with the teachings of Jesus, Barth must explain the norm he uses for selecting as the word of God the vaguer statement of Paul instead of the clear statement of Christ. Indeed, this is the greatest question of all: What is revelation and what is the word of God? Has Barth given, even in his C.D., a satisfactory answer?

This view raises three questions: (1) the general question of distinguishing right from wrong, (2) the Scriptural question as to the meaning of the Ten Commandments – so prominent in Calvin's theology; and (3) the pertinence of Barth's own insistence on obedience to the “divine imperative.”

Another important point emerges. God apparently gives freedom to all men. “The concept of an unfree man is a contradiction in itself” (p. 76). Combine this universalism with the following assertions: “It would be a strange freedom that would leave man neutral, all equally to choose, decide, and at rightly or wrongly ... nor can sin be explained and theoretically justified by this freedom ... Human freedom ... does not allow any vague choices between various possibilities” (pp. 76-77).

It is clear that Barth does not admire these men, as we might do, merely for their intellectual ingenuity. He confesses to a spiritual affinity. Theologizing, he says, is done in the community of the Church. A theologian “refuses to part company with them not only personally and intellectually, but above all, spiritually” (pp. 94-95).