

[1975. In *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*. Howard Vos, Charles Pfeiffer and John Rea, eds. Chicago: Moody Press.]

NEOORTHODOXY. Neoorthodoxy, Barthianism, dialectical theology, or the theology of the Word came into existence because of the failure of modernism.

First, modernistic theology lacked a sense of sin, understood evolution as a “fall” upward, and optimistically expected to establish the kingdom of God on earth in a decade or two. Second, modernism, at least in its more advanced and consistent form, had no place for a transcendent God. Under Hegelian influence the stress on God’s immanence virtually amounted to a disguised pantheism. Then, third, biblical criticism and “the quest of the historical Jesus” required a constant alteration of one’s religious faith with the ever changing conclusions of scholarly investigations.

War and brutality in 1914-18 shattered the liberals’ optimistic picture of man. Hegelian pantheism was no better than atheism, which indeed it explicitly became in Feuerbach and Marx. In addition it volatilized the human individual into abstract concepts. And, finally, the instability of historicism could lead only to skepticism and despair in a world of constant danger.

By the end of World War I a group of German and Swiss theologians discovered the writings of the heretofore unrecognized Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He had stressed the existential individual in opposition to abstract concepts, defined truth as subjective passion, and destroyed the uniformity of Hegelian pantheism by a radical dialectic between time and eternity. *See Existentialism*. Karl Barth and Emil Brunner then saw man as a sinner who needs a divine revelation that biblical criticism cannot shake.

[Neoorthodoxy, then, is the name given to the theology developed by Barth and Brunner on the basis of Kierkegaard’s theory of indirect communication in revelation, his views of time, original sin and salvation. Though called a neo or new, orthodoxy, it is closer to a neomodernism in that it accepts the conclusions of high criticism but rejects the position of evangelical Christianity and fundamentalism with regard to inspiration, the infallibility of the Bible, sin, the Fall and regeneration. Its position on Christ and the Trinity is weak and varies with its different proponents. The doctrine of the Trinity particularly suffered at the hands of Barth, who presented a Christomonism which proves

to be pure modalism, while it disappears altogether in Tillich, who transformed the Trinity into a Hegelian dialectic within the Absolute or Being. In his earlier writings when he desperately tried to rescue theology from historicism by an emphasis on eternity, Brunner would have nothing to do with the temporal life of Christ at all; later he admitted the crucifixion as essential.

[Soren Kierkegaard faced a crisis early in his life over a guilt problem, the loss of faith in the infallibility of the Bible, and the insistence of Immanuel Kant that God is timeless and spaceless. Ready to completely discard the Bible, which appeared to him to be filled with the absurd, the contradictory and the paradox, Kierkegaard suddenly saw a solution. It is because God is timeless and spaceless, and man is in time and space, that the Bible presents so many problems. Man has no categories, no mental containers in which to receive timeless-spaceless eternal truth. There is a disjunction, a Chinese wall between God and man. Whatever gets through, man perverts and forces into his own categories. He clothes eternal truths in the garments of time and locates it in space. For example, the Fall, the fact that every man sins- that I am Adam and you are Adam- is pictured in the bible as occurring as an event in time and space. It is depicted as at the beginning of man's life on the earth, and as happening at a particular place, the garden of Eden. Thus revelation comes only indirectly through such myths, i.e., by indirect communication.

[According to Kierkegaard, several things follow as consequences. If God is beyond created time, then He lives in an "eternal now" in which past, present, and future are one homogenous present. In the existential experience of revelation, the way in which man receives eternal truth, through and in spite of the fallibility of Scripture, he experiences contemporaneity with God and all He has done through Christ in redemption. Thus revelation is identical with salvation. This is the cure for the guilt complex. How were the OT saints saved? In a similar way. As part of the eternal now, a primal history or *Urgeschichte*, Christ has always died and, therefore, the OT believers are contemporaneous with His death in the experience of revelation. Though much is said of their *Erwartung* or expectation of that event, it means little in the light of contemporaneity.

[What is the Christian answer? First of all, it is necessary to see that the Bible is the inspired, infallible Word of God. Then it is necessary to consider the biblical view of time and understand the fallacy of Kant's three infinities. God works in creation and redemption entirely within time. Time is not a category of quality merely of creation and the finite, but a relationship which finds its existence first in God and then in creation. The same holds true for space. If this were not so, the creation would add to God by offering new relationship to Him, and thus become both a necessity for Him, if He is to be fully God, and also a limitation to Him in the sense He cannot be fully God without its existence.

[Kant's argument about the three infinities is fallacious. One infinity does not necessarily rule out another, particularly one of another kind. Infinite time does not rule out infinite space, nor either of these an infinite God. If infinities which are alike, such as an infinite number of infinite lines and infinite time and infinite space, do not exclude each other, how much more infinities which are different, such as the relationships of time and space on the one hand and God on the other. When we add to this the fact that relationships are not material in nature, we clear time and space for their finite dimensions. – R.A.K.]

Though the neoorthodox recognize the sinner's need of a revelation which scholarship cannot overthrow, they do not precisely equate it with the Bible. God speaks in the Bible, to be sure; but Brunner dallied with the notion that God also speaks in the Koran and the Vedas. In any case, God need not speak the truth because "God can, when he wants to, speak his Word to a man even though false doctrine." (*Wahrheit als Begegnung*, p. 88; *Divine Human Encounter*, p. 117).

Barth finds the Word of God in three places: the weekly sermon, the Bible, and the revelation-event. The Bible is not infallible, for "the prophets and apostles as such, even in their office, even in their function as witnesses, even in the act of writing down their witness, were... actually guilty of error in their spoken and written word" (*Church Dogmatics*, 1.2.p.529).

Barth's revelation-event, corresponding to Brunner's divine-human encounter, seems to be a wordless, unintelligible experience. If the apostles could not avoid error in relating their experience, it is doubtful that anyone else can find in it a credible and stable

theology of salvation. It would seem therefore that neoorthodoxy has not solved the problems it inherited from modernism.

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