VOLUME XVI, NUMBERS THREE/FOUR, 1970

Canadian Journal of Theology

A QUARTERLY OF CHRISTIAN THOUGHT

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Dialectical Theology: Karl Barth's Reveille*

The period around the year 1920 is of great note for theological and ecclesiastical history, because at that time a group of young theologians came to be heard, whose concern was eventually called 'dialectical theology.' The name arose out of the way of thinking peculiar to these men. Today it may quite safely be said that dialectical theology led to a very far-reaching upheaval in both theology and church. H. Berkhof spoke of the activities of Karl Barth, the leading representative of dialectical theology, as effecting 'a Copernican revolution in Protestant theology.' J. Moltmann sees the over-all significance of dialectical theology as a setting out 'to lay a new foundation of evangelical theology.' Aside from Karl Barth, the most noteworthy representatives of this theology are Emil Brunner, Rudolf Bultmann, Friedrich Gogarten, and Eduard Thurneysen. How revolutionary and novel were the things they said can be seen vividly in the dumbfounded lack of comprehension with which those theologians, whose views had been setting the trends before and during the emergence of dialectical theology, reacted to its theses and antitheses. They thought of the representatives of this theology, now as enthusiasts, then as mystics, now as gnostics, then as psychopathic angry young men. Adolf von Harnack admitted that the apparently decisive issue of this new theology was 'totally incomprehensible' for him. Adolf Jülicher just gave up before 'this holy egoism' in which these young theologians pass by contemptuously all that resulted from, and was hallowed by, earlier research, and pay attention only to their own questions. Indeed they had the audacity to question not only individual conclusions, but the very presuppositions and foundations from which their teachers thought and on which they built. They said 'No!' where the neo-Protestant theology of their teachers stressed the uniqueness and the difference of the Christian religion over against all other human and spiritual phenomena. They denied the boundaries erected in that theology, since these led to a characterization of what was specifically divine as something special to man. They denied those boundaries, since speaking of God had to be something different from 'speaking of man in a somewhat higher key' (Barth). They also said 'No!' where the neo-Protestant theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries placed great value on the significance of Christianity for the human and the spiritual, and on the entering of Christianity into culture, science, and society. They denied the effacement of the boundaries which occurs in this theology,

*Translated by H. Martin Rumscheidt from Eberhard Busch, ed., *Karl Barth – Eduard Thurneysen: Ein Briefwechsel* (Munich-Hamburg: Siebenstern-Taschenbuch-Verlag, 1966). The translator and the Editor of this *Journal* are grateful to the author and his publishers for permission to print this article in translation.

[CJT, XVI, 3 & 4 (1970), printed in Canada]

since as a consequence of that effacement God's revelation was taken to be a beautification and transfiguration of the existing world. In their view the divine should really be recognized as 'something essentially new and different from the world' which can 'not be applied, pasted on and made to fit ... not be divided or apportioned' (Barth). By protesting, here against the understanding of Christian revelation as religion, there against the union of church and culture, dialectical theology raised a protest against what had been commonly regarded since the eighteenth century as the task of theology and church, against what had been spoken of as 'God,' and indeed asked whether neo-Protestantism had in fact spoken of *God*. It was precisely this question which drove the dialectical theologians into the attempt at a fundamentally new reflection on the problem which is absolutely determinative of the existence of proclamation, church, and theology: namely, to what extent speech about God really speaks of *God*. 'The real issue above all will be that we once again acknowledge God as God' (Barth). The question and the task which moved dialectical theology must not be simplified. Its reproach to neo-Protestantism was not merely that the latter had not spoken of God, but rather that neo-Protestantism was convinced that it *could* in fact speak of him. Since it was sure that it could do so, and consequently minimized the infinite perplexity before God on the part of man, or at least tried to extricate itself from that perplexity, God became for it in no way a 'totally incomprehensible,' but instead a very well-known, presupposable factor, which holds the world in equilibrium. Consequently it spoke of the godliness of behaviour, or of man's word or history, and not of God. Neo-Protestantism, therefore, finally became deeply uncertain about the over-againstness (*das Gegenüber*) of God, yet even in this uncertainty it did not learn the fear of God but continued to assert itself through apologetic activity on this assumption that it *could* speak of God. Faced with this belief, dialectical theology did not want to create a new, purer 'possibility' of speaking about God. It offered no new 'standpoint,' for it had become problematical whether the word of God could be considered a defensible 'standpoint' at all, and no new method, since that would have meant as much as 'turning a patient from one side over on the other for a change' (Barth). That a method made the understanding of God's revelation possible was doubted. It sought no new assuredness, since to be, or wanting to be, 'sure' of God led to the suspicion that God was not allowed here 'to have his say.' Dialectical theology and its critical theses passed within a hair's breadth of the danger of really speaking of man rather than of God. If it was revolutionary, then it was so only as long as, in its awareness of the impossibility of speaking of God, it nevertheless insisted on speaking of him and of nothing else in exactly this way. On account of this 'dialectic,' this theology has rightly become noteworthy. On account of this dialectic, church and theology – if they want to know what they are there for – will again and again be led to listen to dialectical theology.

Today we believe, of course, that we have gone beyond 'the beginnings of dialectical theology.' We think that we have to put greater emphasis on the

problematics in which the alleged change and refounding of theology was caught at that time. It is stated critically that dialectical theology too rashly broke with nineteenth-century theology and put aside its intention of orienting itself above all by humanity. It has been thought unfortunate that these theologians turned the 'aporiae' of liberalism and the 'relativizations' by historicism into an all too short-sighted form of scepticism – a scepticism by means of which they then could dispense with the liberal question of the positive significance of the gospel for culture and with the historical problem of the bondage of Christianity to history. It has been believed, furthermore, that the protest against *Kulturprotestantismus* and the proclamation of a crisis in the foundations of theology was conditioned by the situation of the day, namely, by a general cultural fatigue and by the pessimistic *ressentiment* of the post-war years. For that reason, dialectical theology is said to have contributed to the state of affairs which assisted the rise of National Socialism; for that reason, it is also of little help in the solution of problems arising in our time. In the principle, asserted by this theology, that revelation is the sole object of proclamation and theology, someone is said to have discovered the 'egg-shells' of its ancestry in the philosophy of neo-Kantianism. The consequence of that principle was said to be either an agnostic criticism (*Kritizismus*) for which, given the 'qualitative difference between God and man,' mediation could be, and in fact was, unthinkable, or a naive biblicism which claimed to have immediate access to 'the Word in the words.' Both were rejected by these critics. Finally, could not the very fact that even the representatives of this theology themselves later went beyond this position – indeed went their separate ways – encourage such objections against dialectical theology? In other words, is dialectical theology on the whole not passé for us? With all due respect to its audacity, is not its design too unsatisfactory to be of any value for us in orienting ourselves? Are the questions which we put to it today not really the defusing of the question it may put to us in any event?

It could be true that, as Karl Barth himself wondered concerning his own development, the lion who then roared magnificently ('Well roared, lion!') has learned 'to eat straw' in the meantime. Or it could after all be true that, from the position in which these objections to dialectical theology are raised, we do not get beyond it and its faults, but instead fall back behind it and its insights which cannot be relinquished. It could very well be true that, by having toiled for a better outlook on what was justifiable in the theology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, we have basically vindicated that theology again. Our progress beyond the theology against which dialectical theology raised its objections could consist in this: that we face that protest with even less of a chance to see anything in it than did the proponents of the theology under attack; that we have become only the more immune against the questions of dialectical theology, since we believe that we have learned and weighed what was 'justifiable' in it also. It could very well be that the effort to reconsider, which leads us today to withdraw from

it, merely reflects the same lack of comprehension and the same embarrassment which those neo-Protestant theologians felt before that question posed by dialectical theology – necessarily a fundamental as well as a worrying question – namely: the extent to which theology was anything other than theo-logy. The endless procession of questions, which make theology far more difficult for us than dialectical theology seems to have been aware of its being, could indicate that we have lost the one real question, the question of God. That we correct and analyze this theology could merely indicate that our contemporary theological and ecclesiastical speaking and acting move along a road which will come to an end precisely at the point where dialectical theology found it necessary to begin. That point is a new version of *Kultur-protestantismus*; it is repeating an historicism which doubts 'absoluteness' and then nonetheless does all its shopping in the 'relative'; it is a fresh hallowing of what now exists; it is rehabilitating the neo-Protestant 'man-god.' It could end once again in displacing the essential object by the authoritativeness of a method, in the illusion which claims that human events and ways of behaving can be divine, in 'a loss of theology in the hands of theologians' (Moltmann). There is evidence that it may have already come to this in contemporary theology and the contemporary church. The objections cited above against dialectical theology resemble remarkably those of the representatives of late neo-Protestantism. Ernst Troeltsch, for example, replied to the dualistic, paradoxical emphasis on the beyond and on God's judgment with a reference to the task (also unavoidable) of the world-affirming 'mediation with the "world," ' and to 'the element of empathy found in Jesus' idea of love with everything human and natural.' Von Harnack warned that in this theology, since 'it did not stay with the reality of history,' the person of Jesus is changed from a 'real' to an 'imaginary' one, and the assurance of faith to 'an illusion.' He deplored that the 'lectern of the professor was made into a pulpit,' and that science was exchanged 'for any suitable fantasy.' Jülicher complained that this theology, by pushing through the 'historical aspect' of the Bible to its 'spirit,' made translation and exegesis much too simple, and became subject to a gnostic 'betrayal of history,' and so forth. Should contemporary theology, with its arguments against dialectical theology, reveal its very direct connection with the spirit of the neo-Protestant era, it could mean that dialectical theology has abandoned us in the solution of our theological and ecclesiastical task. But it could also mean that we have not taken at all seriously the 'need and promise' of theology, which was heralded in dialectical theology. Should these two latter considerations be true – and who can reject this suspicion offhand? – then it would certainly be time to think again about the 'biblical questions, insights, and vistas' which were brought to attention in the years around 1920, and to test against them our entire theological and ecclesiastical stock.

What is it that could well be learned in the school of dialectical theology? What was the principal concern in its presentation? Put briefly, it was that theology should once again have its only justifiable orientation, an orientation comparable to that of the finger of John the Baptist in the impressive painting

of Mathias Grünewald – that it should be, in other words, a theology of the testimony which points beyond man to the God revealed in the crucified one, a theology which lives completely in, but not by, that testimony, a theology which rather lives exclusively by him to whom it points. The discovery of the need for this orientation in theology is tied to the fact that the concrete point of departure where dialectical theology began was the problem of preaching. It was not the practical question, 'How *does* one do that?' but the critical question 'How *can* one do that?', which led that theology to the road on which the hard-pressed question of preaching became 'the elucidation of the essence of all theology' (Barth). Theology must not lead *out of* the dilemma of the preacher who must say what no man can say, namely God's thought about man and not man's thought about God; instead theology must once again take him back to it. For this reason theology can have no other subject where it really counts except proclamation, and this subject, according to the basic insight of dialectical theology, is only this: the Word of God addressed to man.

This narrowing down in the definition of the subject of theology means first of all, negatively, that both church and theology are about something which man never 'has' and indeed never can 'have.' Here is the root of the critique of all human possessions defended and claimed in the name of God. Here arises above all the criticism of religion as that which makes God's truth into man's wealth of inward values – into an argument which in the end justifies and confirms man – and which, in its repudiation of solidarity with those who do not have those pious advantages, demonstrates that it does not understand God's grace. Here arises also the criticism of the church which sees its task and ability in appropriating the salvation of souls, and which, precisely on that account, validates and justifies, explains and transfigures, all other human possessions, the given and existing orders. In this way it gives evidence that it has lost hope in the God who makes all things new. Hence the reminder, given in the Reformers' teachings, that man stands with empty hands before God. Hence the discovery of the intruders upon modern Christendom as witnesses to the truth: Kierkegaard, Dostoyevski, Overbeck, Blumhardt. Hence the question whether Christianity, instead of trying to convert the socialists who do not want the God of the church, should not rather convert itself through them to the 'God of the godless' (Barth). God is really not to be found where men are 'possessors' in any sense. The God whom one nevertheless believes one finds there – whether in the content of human consciousness, or on the pinnacles of cultural activity, or in the products of worldly evolutions – would correspond far too much to man's desires and being, would be far too much an image 'according to the likeness of man,' so that one could not and would not resist protesting against that God, with the atheist Ludwig Feuerbach, that he is an 'illusion.' It must be noted – and Barth especially was aware of this – that the criticism of all 'disposing' does not all of a sudden mean that the understanding that we cannot dispose here, the critical intrusion and the protest against disposing of God, now has got a hold on him. Since one cannot 'have' God at all, since he cannot be assumed by us but rather gives himself to us,

God cannot be grasped in our 'No!' – in the unworldly or the irrational. The criticism of the existing orders, therefore, does not lead beyond the human, but is at best only testimony to God, and thus, precisely in its radical nature, it can also acknowledge the relative dignity of what is human, and can perceive smilingly, patiently, and gratefully, 'parables of the kingdom of God' in the secular. But does man, who can never 'have' God, ever come in contact with God? Yes, he does, when God reveals himself. That the word of God addressed to man is the object of theology signifies positively that church and theology stand and fall by the fact that the revelation of God in his word is their very precondition.

The revelation of God – above all the revelation of God – does not mean that in the final analysis we are offered the chance of grasping, comprehending, and possessing God. Revelation 'is present as precondition in our theological sphere only when it pleases God to establish this precondition, to let it become reality in the activity of the Holy Spirit' (Bultmann). 'Theology is suspended in mid-air precisely in its primary presupposition. Its object is not "on hand" but must be given to it ever anew' (Thurneysen). God's revelation is the object of theology, not as a demonstrable entity or as a supposition in need of proof, but as an event which is given as one that must come to pass anew again and again. The total uncertainty of proclamation and theology, resulting from their inability to presuppose God, is nothing but their being made free to encounter, in the event of his revelation, not an imaginary but the real, the living God. The recognition that God is beyond the grasp of man is at one and the same time a confession of God's sovereignty to be man's 'over-against.' That means, however, that God, when he reveals himself, becomes revealed as *God*. This statement is tautological only on the surface; in fact, it bears witness to God's freedom for man and his freedom in the encounter with man, and thus it also signifies the liberation of theology *from* illusion and *for* objectivity. That God is not man's invention but is God, and that therefore man is not secretly divine but is man, becomes apparent above all in the fact that God unveils himself, not in correspondence with, but rather in contradiction to, man. If God does appear in man's horizons, he does so, neither as the climax of man's perceptions nor as the answer to man's questions and searches, but rather as the intensifying and the going to the roots of all the questions that man raises. God really is 'the wholly other,' the one who is different from all worldly phenomena; he becomes revealed when he becomes revealed in the cross, in hiddenness, in discontinuity with what exists, in the denial of all human possibilities. If he is merciful, then it is in judgment. If he gives life, then it is through death. To be sure God is so much 'the wholly other' that he is different even from that which man knows as 'otherness.' (It was Karl Barth who drew attention to this most prominently.) He is so different that he is not merely the one who is different over against the world, and thus also leaves the world as it is; he is so different that the world, evil and godless in its self-affirmation, is changed by him effectively. Similarly, man is raised up by God by being judged by him. 'The history of God is *a priori* a history of victory' (Barth). A movement is

introduced by God into the world, in view of which man, suffering with the whole groaning creation, can wait, full of hope, for the renewal of all things by God, and can accomplish significant deeds which spread this hope.

We cannot simply resume today where dialectical theology and its insights left off; we cannot repeat it without heeding its counsel to test everything. We are prevented from doing so by the readily apparent fact that the circle of dialectical theologians no longer exists, and that the names of its formerly united representatives indicate more or less clearly the fronts and oppositions which dominate the contemporary theological scene. In 1933, when Barth and Thurneysen discontinued their co-operation in the journal *Zwischen den Zeiten* (the publication of the dialectical theologians), and the circle broke apart, owing to their diverse reactions to the régime of Hitler, differences became apparent which also illuminated in a flash the inner problematic of dialectical theology and its progress up to that point. Two things must be taken into account here.

1 Right from the start, there was obviously a grave, though initially fruitful, misunderstanding among the theologians of this circle about the possibility of working together. Of course, they wanted to stand together and speak, unlike neo-Protestantism, of the word of God, of the event of his revelation and of its reality. But in saying things that were alike, did they not mean things that were different? There was in fact a difference. It is one thing to think that neo-Protestantism is overcome theologically when you make a categorical-methodical distinction between 'reality' (Gogarten), 'word' and 'encounter' (Brunner), or 'event' (Bultmann), and the subjectivism of neo-Protestantism. But it is another thing to see precisely what was said in distinction to neo-Protestantism once again under a 'final proviso' (*letzten Brechung*) (Thurneysen), and to be content to leave it at that; and it is another thing again merely to point to the one reality, the one word, the one event of God's revelation (Barth). Sooner or later the representatives of dialectical theology had to understand that they were not at one in the way in which they wanted to be theologians in relation to neo-Protestantism. Sooner or later Barth's friends had to take the view that he was neglecting to classify his concepts and methods, and was in danger of falling back into traditional thinking. Sooner or later Barth had to object to his friends that they were not coming to grips with the real matter, because of their preoccupation with their preliminary questions.

2 The insights which led to the formation of dialectical theology had apparently been insufficiently analyzed, so that they not only had to be worked out further, but in fact were analyzed in accordance with the various perspectives in which these theologians later proceeded and went their separate ways. The understanding that God is not at our disposal, and that it was not possible to lay hold on him, was emphasized very rigorously at first. But this understanding raised problems which called for further explanations and for its maintenance or correction. Granted the basic position, it was not absolutely impossible, for example, to proceed in such a way that this understanding

would be supplemented by the thesis of the autonomy of the secular and by a justification of secularization (Gogarten). Or one could conclude from it that one had better give up speaking at all of God as such, and then get over this renunciation by speaking of the man who perceives revelation (Bultmann). Or one could concentrate one's thinking on the consideration that, if man is not able to speak of God, God himself is able to speak of himself, and that it is precisely in this divine self-expression, which becomes present to man by bringing him into correspondence with it, that the actual theme of theology is given (Barth). These three noticeably divergent ways in which one could go beyond the beginnings of dialectical theology were all chosen, apparently, with the same motive: that, after the initial emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the dimension of man and of his questions had to be considered more strongly. But in formulating this second concern at this time, decisions were made which were obviously of such import that it was no accident that between the theologians of this circle there arose sharp divisions. Today theology and proclamation must still contend with these problems, and with the tensions which arose from those divisions; they make it difficult for us to find our way in performing the tasks of the theologian and the preacher. But this fact could once again, and with great justification, be a reason for us to occupy ourselves anew with the beginnings of dialectical theology. The reason for this is not merely that we would better understand the problematic which has determined theological thought since the break among the representatives of dialectical theology, once we understood how it came about historically. The primary reason is that the question of how we are to get out of this problematic, or (more modestly) how we can make a decision within it, may perhaps find an appropriate answer only when we begin at the very beginning with no less daring than can certainly be learned from dialectical theology in its own beginnings – when we begin once more to spell what is, and what must be, unequivocally meant by the word 'God,' which we have come to take for granted, but which cannot be taken for granted.

The excerpts of the Barth-Thurneysen correspondence of 1914–25, which were published not long ago, will be helpful for an intensive study of dialectical theology.[1] Their correspondence is suitable for an introduction to their theological thinking, precisely because of the perspicuity with which the 'conversation' of these two friends takes us into the turbulent course of that theology's growth. However, if one wants to do justice to these letters, one must honour the fact that they are marginal notes to the writers' theology. That means that their perusal demands a good measure of hindsight and care: hindsight, because these letters are private and therefore not always fully weighed, and because they are 'off-the-cuff' statements which as such reveal clearly how human – indeed too human – was the growth-process of dialectical theology; care, because these letters are not to be taken as direct representations of the theology which their authors put forth at that time, so that one must not seek

1. For an English translation, cf. James D. Smart, ed., *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1964).

to find in the letters what the authors actually meant or what made that theology possible in the first place.

While Thurneysen was studying at Marburg, he came to know Barth and also Bultmann. He met the former through his friend Peter Barth, but it was not until they became ministers in the Canton of Aargau, Switzerland (Barth in Safenwil, 1911, and Thurneysen in Leutwil, 1913) that their friendship grew. This friendship was strong enough to continue when Thurneysen was called to the pastorate of Bruggen in St Gallen (1920) and Barth to a professorship in Göttingen (1921); moreover, it continued when the larger circle of friends, consisting of these two and the other representatives of dialectical theology, broke apart. What brought Barth and Thurneysen together in the first place was their common dismay at the fact that the theology of the day had completely failed in its practice – namely, in its guidance for preaching and in its ethical response to the war and to socialism. Then there was the equally disconcerting discovery (likewise common to both) that the Bible had to be read with totally different eyes – had to be read again as God's word. The dismay and the discovery together led them onto the path which we can follow in their correspondence, the path on which Brunner, Gogarten, and Bultmann joined them, the path on which there took place a reconsideration of the tasks of theology and of proclamation, and on which dialectical theology was formed. See how exciting things were on that path! It was a path full of steady, never-resting search, which never operated with final insights. (Consider the reception and the later critique of 'religious socialism,' the 'No!' to 'positive' ecclesiasticism, and the eventual *rapprochement* with orthodoxy; the repudiation of 'immanentism' in theology, followed by questions about the good meaning of 'natural theology' and about the idea of 'God's immanence in the world'; the critique of the combination of faith and morality, and the final inclusion of the ethical problem in theology. Consider also the critical discussions between the two men and their colleagues Gogarten and Bultmann, which had started quite early.) On their chosen path the two friends apparently strengthened each other and pointed the way forward. If it appears that Thurneysen, playing 'second fiddle' (Lüthi), was less prominent than Barth, Barth himself was still deadly serious when he said in a letter: 'Eduard simply is quite irreplaceable.' One must not overlook that Thurneysen, in his own particular emphases, has proven himself to be a theologian in his own right. Contrary to Barth, he was not impressed by Wilhelm Herrmann in Marburg, and therefore he was sometimes more open than Barth to Gogarten's quick disposal of subjective 'experience' by means of 'reality' and 'authority,' as well as to the religious-socialist emphasis of ethics, and to Hermann Kutter's predisposition against theological science. It is noteworthy that Thurneysen tried to get Barth back into the pastorate with as little success as Barth tried to get Thurneysen to take a professorship. It is possible that deeper tensions could have arisen between them because the one placed great emphasis on theological reflection and the other on pastoral practice. That their difference did not cause them to separate, but let them, in their different areas of work,

remain united in a common concern, probably constituted the strength and fruitfulness of their friendship. Perhaps the unity and difference in the theological concern of Barth and Thurneysen could not be expressed more beautifully than it is in the respective titles of their collected essays: *Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (The Word of God and Theology)[2] and *Das Wort Gottes und die Kirche* (The Word of God and the Church).

Their correspondence is a revealing document which acquaints us, through their remarks about a variety of details, with that period during and after the first world war which is so significant for the history of theology and of the church. It will have served us best if it has introduced us to the question which moved the two friends at that time. '*Veni, creator spiritus!* ... You have been introduced to "my theology" if you have heard that sigh' (Barth, 1922).

2. Published in English as *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1928).