

Bromiley on Barth on Scripture: A Case of Startling Consistency

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Not too long ago the Karl Barth's theology was considered by many to be "outdated." However in recent years, renewed interest in Barth has made him a major voice in contemporary systematic theological circles once again. Bruce L. McCormack, currently the Weyerhauser Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and others such as Erskine Seminary's Dr. Richard Burnett have given us a fresh new look at Karl Barth. These men contend that Barth has been largely misunderstood by evangelical critics, and they seek to show us the real Barth. They are not persuaded with the interpretation of Barth given by the likes of Cornelius van Til or Gordon Clark. Though most evangelical critics of Barth are dismissed by neo-Barthians, there is one evangelical Barth scholar who seems to have their respect, namely, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, former professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. Bromiley will be of invaluable help to anyone desiring to understand Barth today. Interestingly, Bromiley has been extolled by Dr. Richard Burnett as one who has written a "marvelous book, *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979). This book is one of the finest overviews of Barth's theology I know and I commend it highly." (E-mail correspondence, 04/28/2008)

Bromiley is well known, not only as a premier Evangelical historical theologian, but also as an editor and translator of the *Church Dogmatics* who knew Barth personally. His *Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth* is a good place to start for those who set out on the difficult task of trying to understand Karl Barth. Bromiley gives credit to Barth for helpful contributions, while at the same time exposing his more serious and dangerous errors, especially his view of Scripture. The importance of this last issue must never be forgotten. The Bible, being God's infallible and inerrant word, is the final authority for the church. To recognize the absolute truth and trustworthiness of Scripture is essential if we are to uphold its authority in the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church. It is my firm conviction that Barth's view of Scripture results ultimately in the loss of the Bible's authority. Barth may have attempted to save the Bible from liberalism, but the attempt failed. The ARPC cannot afford to look to Karl Barth's theology of Scripture if we are going to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus Christ and His Word. The

following selections from Bromiley's writings clearly demonstrate why the ARPC must reject Barth's doctrine of Scripture and resist the infiltration of neo-Barthianism in our church and its institutions.

“Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration”

(G.W. Bromiley, “Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration,” *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87, 1955: 66-80.)

Some of the earliest comments made by Bromiley concerning Barth's view of Scripture are found in an article titled, “Karl Barth's Doctrine of Inspiration,” written in 1955, appearing in the *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute*. In the introduction Bromiley states that, “In a critical appraisal acknowledgement is made of the strong points in Barth's treatment, but some unsatisfactory features are also noted.” For the purposes of this paper, a bit more attention will be given to the “unsatisfactory features” of Barth's views on Scripture. This is done so that the reader might be able to weigh these against the many positive assessments being made by the newer Barth scholars and make his or her own judgment as to whether the current praise for Barth is warranted. Bromiley identifies the primary source for his comments when he says “If we are going to speak at all about Karl Barth's doctrine of any subject, it is essential that we should study in detail the authoritative statement which he himself has given us in the *Dogmatics*.”

Bromiley begins by pointing out that Barth's view of Scripture results in a divided allegiance to the Bible and human sources of authority.

Already in this introductory section Barth raises a big issue and states one of his primary convictions. He does not believe that the Bible can be proved false or proved true by logical or empirical processes. Indeed, he thinks that it is treason not only to the Bible but to God himself to suspend our acceptance of His Word written upon what are at bottom human factors. We are not to follow the Bible because it is proved true by the mind of man or the results of human scientific or historical investigation. We are to accept the Bible as God's Word in obedience to the Bible as God's Word self-authenticated. In principle, there is little doubt that Barth is right in this contention, and it is one which needs to be emphasized in an age which sets far too much store by the cleverness of man and the infallibility of his conclusions. In our dealings with God's Word the Bible must be the judge and not the judged. Even if the decision goes in its favor, it is wrong even to think of the Bible at the bar of human reason or scholarship. At the same time, we may ask whether Barth does not carry the point too far. If we accept the Bible in obedient

faith, there seems to be no reason why it should not find a secondary confirmation in other fields. To remove the Bible as God's Word altogether from the sphere of human judgment may easily become only a device for maintaining a twofold allegiance: an allegiance to the Bible itself in the sphere of revelation and faith, an allegiance to reason and science and history in more mundane or human matters. (p.68)

Bromiley moves on through Barth's material, agreeing with him and defending him in several areas related to the canon of Scripture and its uniqueness as a divine and human book. Next in the article, Bromiley identifies a problem with Barth's view of inspiration. Inspiration of Scripture for Barth is not found in a once for all objective work, but rather an ongoing, more subjective work of the Spirit. While evangelicals would agree with the necessity of the work of the Spirit to bring about faith in the Bible as the Word of God, we would not identify the illuminating work of the Spirit with the doctrine of inspiration. Bromiley says,

In the sixth paragraph Barth comes to grips with the critical question of inspiration as the decision and act of God by which the Bible has priority in the Church and is the Word of God (pp. 557 f.). He argues that we can make the statements, that the Bible has priority and that it is the Word of God, only in a context of recollection and expectation: that it has had and will have priority, that it has been and will be the Word of God. He tries to prove this point by an exegesis of the two most relevant passages in the New Testament, 2 Tim. 3: 14-17 and 2 Peter 1: 19-21, in both of which he finds elements of recollection and expectation bracketing the statement that Scripture is God-breathed. The point of this insistence is to make it clear that inspiration is not a state but the free act of the Holy Spirit, but it is difficult to see why Timothy's past, present or future recognition of the Bible as God's Word should be necessary to enable us to say that God exercised His decision and act in the prophetic or apostolic author. It is valuable to be reminded that the inspiration is a dead thing for us if we have not read, or do not and will not read the Bible as God's Word; but surely the act of the Spirit in the authors cannot be suspended on the response of the hearers or readers, even though the work of the Spirit may not be completed until there is the true response. This is just the error in relation to Scripture which Barth now condemns in Bultmann in relation to the atoning work of Christ, and it is difficult to think that if Barth were to write this section to-day he would not make a complete shift of emphasis away from the subjective to the objective aspect of inspiration, as he does almost to excess in his most recent volume on the Atonement. But taking the chapter as it stands, there seems to be a regrettable hesitancy to accept the objectivity of the initial work of the Spirit. For fear of a lifeless orthodoxy Barth leaves the way open for a no less dangerous subjectivization. (pp. 73-74)

Bromiley interacts with Barth's acceptance of fallibility and mistakes in the biblical text. He indicates that Barth is unwilling to consider that under the direction of God's Spirit the writers of Scripture could have been kept from error and contradiction:

It is only by the Holy Ghost and in faith that we can say that the Bible is God's Word. All this is, of course, very true. But it need not alter the fact that by that earlier act of the Holy Spirit what the prophets and apostles wrote is in itself the Word of God, however we ourselves or others may read it. Nor does it mean that it is the Word of God in complete defiance of rational or empirical considerations. This is, however, the direction in which Barth's argument is leading, for separating again between the infallibility of the Bible on the divine side and its fallibility on the human he finds a stumbling-block to reason in the literary forms, the concepts, the mistakes, the contradictions and above all the Judaistic setting and spirit of Scripture. In this respect he forgets that it is only the fallen reason of man which is scandalized, as it will be in any case, not only by the form but by the whole message of the Bible. And while no one would argue that in all their thoughts and words and actions the prophets and apostles could not make mistakes, it is surely not too much to expect that at least where they were specially controlled by the Spirit according to the decision and act of God they would be preserved from gross blundering and self-contradiction. Is it not, perhaps, that at this point Barth's own reason was still in conflict with his faith? (pp. 74-75)

At the end of the article, Bromiley summarizes his main criticisms of Barth's views of the Bible.

Bromiley says:

In detail, there are two main points at which the teaching of Barth seems to be neither right nor necessary. The first is in relation to the fallibility of the Bible, which he goes out of his way to emphasize as the correlative of its humanity. But in this respect his thinking is surely a little muddled. For one thing, he is accepting a historicist standard as the norm of inerrancy, which is to be guilty of the very error of judging the Bible by human philosophies which he rightly criticizes in others. Again, it is not really necessary to insist on errors in the Bible to maintain its true humanity. Quite apart from the human wording and forms and concepts, we can readily concede the limitation of the Bible and yet believe that in virtue of the special decision and act of God which is inspiration, it is preserved from actual error. (p. 79)

Bromiley concludes the article with these words:

For after all, events have shown that his safeguards against subjectivism are not really adequate if the dynamic view of inspiration is pressed to its extreme. It is all very well to say that we are dependent on God Himself speaking in His Word, but the fact remains that if inspiration is not complete until it takes place in the individual, then God does not speak unless He speaks to me, and this means in practice that the only real or important act of "inspiration" takes place subjectively in the recipient. For a true objectivity it is necessary to insist that although there has to be the speaking to me, God has in fact already spoken: "men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost." (p. 80)

Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology, “Karl Barth”

(G.W. Bromiley, “Karl Barth,” in *Creative Minds in Contemporary Theology*, ed. by Phillip E. Hughes, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1966: 27-59)

Bromiley’s chapter in this book begins with a brief history of Barth’s life. The bulk of the chapter is a succinct summary and analysis of Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*, since Barth himself has “expressed the desire that he should be judged theologically by the *Church Dogmatics* rather than by earlier writings.” Concerning Barth’s handling of the doctrine of Scripture Bromiley says:

Nevertheless, there are real defects, not merely in lesser matters, but at points of major significance. A first group concerns the doctrine of Holy Scripture. Barth accepts the Bible’s absolute authority. He allows that it is revelation. He endorses its uniqueness. He makes no artificial distinction between word and content. But he also advances some extraordinary propositions which are poorly supported in Scripture and which open the door wide to liberal approaches. Thus he finds the inspiration of Scripture predominantly in its present use by the Spirit. In terms of historicist criterion of errancy, he attributes all kinds of errors to the Bible. In a curious application of the concepts of offense and sovereignty, he even argues the necessity of a fallible Bible. His handling of Scripture is in many ways the weakest and most disappointing part of the whole *Dogmatics*, and his safeguards against subjectivism here are very flimsy. (p. 52)

An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth

(G.W. Bromiley, *An Introduction to the Theology of Karl Barth*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, MI, 1979: 34-44)

In chapter three of this book, Bromiley assesses Barth’s section in the *Dogmatics* concerning “The Word of God for the Church.” Here Bromiley identifies Barth’s rejection of the Bible’s inerrancy. Bromiley says:

Sixth, we believe that Scripture “has priority over all other writings” and as the “original and legitimate witness is itself the Word of God” (502). It is this, not statically, nor as a compendium of human knowledge (508), but dynamically in the act of the Holy Spirit. Barth offers here an exposition of 2 Timothy 3:16 and 2 Peter 1:10-21 in support of his dynamic understanding (503-503). Scripture has been God’s Word, it will be so again, and it is so, not as a lasting state, but at the living point between the “has been” and the “will be.” He does not think that this being of Scripture as God’s Word endows it with inerrancy, although he issues a warning against the idea that we have any superior platform from which to judge it to be in error (510-512). To get at the meaning of Scripture we have to study it in its human historical context. Nevertheless, it is by the

miracle of God that the human words with their given contextual meaning are to us also the Word of God of Scripture (513). (p. 37)

He has little time for inerrancy, which he seems to regard as both irrelevant and even misleading. On the other hand, while thinking that the possibility of error must be accepted, he can see no absolute position from which to establish actual errors and he sets no store by the emphasizing of alleged mistakes or difficulties. Indeed, he does not follow here his own rule and deduce the possibility of error from its reality! (pp. 43-44)

Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth”

(G.W. Bromiley, “The Authority of Scripture in Karl Barth,” in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon*, ed. by D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, Baker Books, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995: 271-294)

Here is a more recent contribution of note by Bromiley concerning Barth’s view of Scripture. This section contains the fruit of many years of mature reflection upon the theology of Karl Barth. Bromiley still finds much that is objectionable about Barth’s view of the Bible. The following is from the section “Evaluation.”

The many quotations from so many works of Barth, which could well be multiplied, demonstrate beyond cavil his resolute commitment to biblical authority and his sincere intention to observe it in his own Christian service. Nevertheless, certain problems arise regarding aspects of his understanding of this authority that might seem to weaken or compromise the very position he ardently seeks to maintain. (p. 290)

First, his stress and insistence on the witnessing role of Scripture leave at times an impression of devaluation of Scripture as God’s word . . . the accent falls so heavily on the function of witness as to suggest, even if unintentionally, that Scripture has an inferior role except in so far as the Holy Spirit empowers it in sovereign freedom . . . (p. 290)

Second, Barth’s muted championship of the past inspiration of Scripture as compared with its present inspiring produces further uncertainty about its objective authority. Is it authoritative because God inspired it once and for all, or is it authoritative only ad hoc as God inspires it when heard or read? Here again, of course, Barth made efforts to reduce the difficulty. He did not dispute the past act whereby God raised up prophets and apostles to speak and write the primary words of testimony. . . . Yet the emphasis of his presentation leaves serious questions as to the scope, meaning, and solid objectivity of the authority he proclaimed. (p. 291)

Third, Barth’s dismissal of biblical inerrancy and his assigning of a special historical character to events like the Resurrection pose the question whether the biblical books can really enjoy the status of direct, absolute, material authority, except by a sacrifice of the intellect, if they do in fact contain demonstrably incorrect statements or tell of events that

do not meet the test of normal historical verifiability. . . . For many people, however, doubt seems unavoidably to arise about the great reality to which the Bible bears witness if it might be in error, or even under the suspicion of being in error, about plain facts. (p. 291)

Barth compounds his problem by speaking of a capacity for error but not giving examples of the types of errors he has in mind. His supporting arguments are also weak. Undoubtedly, to err is human, but this does not entail a flat equation of humanity and error, as human experience amply demonstrates and the Incarnation itself should remind us. . . . Of no more value is the [Barth's] idea that God's speaking through what is erroneous at the human level is a greater miracle than His speaking through what He himself has freed from error by His own prior action. Barth himself may run roughshod over the problems that his teaching raises in this regard, but when essential facts or doctrines are at stake, as distinct perhaps from formal points of style or syntax, he seems to be unfortunately undercutting the very position on authority that he is passionately seeking to establish. (pp. 291-292)

Finally, Barth's handling of biblical commands creates difficulties in the practical application of Scripture's authority in the ethical field. As Barth saw it, the commands were given to specific people in specific situations. Hence, we are not to make a simple transfer to different people in different situations. The commands are God's only as the Spirit so speaks through them that they go forth again as the direct voice of God. In this way, of course, Barth hoped to avoid legalism and casuistry, yet without falling into relativism or situationism. . . . The problems arise, however, whether the commands have any real authority unless God speaks through them, and how one is to know that He really does speak, either enforcing the commands or making permissible exceptions. . . . the problem still obtrudes that at any given time there may be no coincidence of the living voice of the Spirit and the permanent record of the commands. If not, Scripture may still have indirect, relative, formal authority, as church law also does, but its readers or hearers are deprived of the decisive divine authority that it ought to enjoy. (p. 292)

When I showed some of the Bromiley quotes above to Dr. Richard Burnett, he seemed mystified and wondered if Bromiley had changed his mind. But there was no change of mind. Over the course of his lengthy career, Bromiley has consistently pointed to very serious problems in Barth's view of Holy Scripture. Karl Barth may have sincerely intended to uphold biblical authority, but Bromiley demonstrates that his position actually undermines it. In seeking to reform a liberal church, Barth did not go nearly far enough.

Many in the Confessing Church movement within the Presbyterian Church (USA) are turning to Barth as the answer to the theological and moral disaster within that denomination. But how can

one fight error with error? Barth's doctrine of Scripture provides no sure foundation for faith. The ARPC at its most recent General Synod (2008) demonstrated a renewed commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible. We stand on the traditional view of Scripture as found in the reformers and the Westminster Confession of Faith. We are a reformed, evangelical denomination and if we are going to stay reformed we must reject the corrupting influence of Karl Barth's theology, especially within Erskine Seminary. Our students of theology deserve to be given a firm foundation in the Bible and theology, not the subjectivism of Barth. Barth's theology is currently being promoted at Erskine Seminary. Something must be done about it if we would be faithful to our vows to promote the peace, the purity, and the prosperity of the ARP Church.