

Modern and Orthodox?

PAUL WELLS

It is beyond unfashionable today among young evangelicals involved in theology to aspire to orthodoxy. The famous statement made by Charles Hodge about old Princeton that “a new idea never originated in this seminary” is not something that appeals to bright young theologians, nor need it be taken at face value.¹ On the other hand, new, innovative, and adventurous ideas are top drawer, in line with the attitude of our day that the latest is the greatest, and the newest the best. Orthodoxy in theology, like conservatism in politics, is cold potatoes. But have we been sold down the river? The present popularity of Jordan Peterson on social media suggests a rising counter current.

In a year in which Karl Barth will be remembered fifty years after his death, and the Canons of Dort will be celebrated by the few on the fourth centenary of the European Synod held at Dordrecht in Holland in 1618–19, questions about orthodoxy and modernity are relevant. In particular, what about the legacy of Barth: was it a blessing or a curse, a renewal or a dismantling of historic Christianity? Opinions have been divided almost from the start in reply to this question, with Auguste Lecerf, Klaas Schilder, Louis Berkhof, and Cornelius Van Til on one side, and Pierre Maury, Thomas F. Torrance, Hendrikus Berkhof, and G. C. Berkouwer on the other. Nor is the question one that belongs to a past generation because of

¹ Hodge was not berating new ideas; far from it, as his successor Francis Patton pointed out. Hodge maintained that Princeton had not modified the great truths of Calvinism and the biblical certainty of the unchanging truth of God’s revelation, and this in contrast with the “new theologies” promoted at New Haven or Andover. Cf. Rudolph Nelson, *The Making and Unmaking of the Evangelical Mind: The Case of Edward Carnell* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 42.

effervescence of interest and publications on Barth, stimulated by the like of Bruce McCormack, George Hunsinger, or the late John Webster. And so Barth continues to have magnetic attraction for young evangelicals who want to wear orthodoxy rather lightly and aspire to be on the cutting edge. James Barr stated a good while ago that Barthianism was an important theological bridge that allowed evangelicals to escape fundamentalism and cross over into mainstream.² Its perpetual attraction seems to lie in facilitating emigration to respectability from the boondocks. Today its kierkegaardian accents dovetail well with the ethos of the “post truth” generation.

Orthodox and Modern is how McCormack—incidentally Charles Hodge Professor of Systematic Theology at Princeton and a leading Barth interpreter—entitles one of his books on the Basel theologian. His work is a fingerpost, and he states the problem quite well: “My own view is this,” he says in its introduction, “what Barth was doing, in the end, was seeking to understand what it means to be orthodox *under the conditions of modernity*.”³ In a previous work, McCormack indicated that Barth’s search was for a “critically realistic dialectical theology.”⁴ Can one be *critical* and *dialectical* while remaining *realistic*, *orthodox*, and Reformed to boot? The question stimulates great expectations that it is possible to be critical and dialectical in method, and at the same time maintain a theological realism (over against nominalism), orthodoxy, and Reformed doctrine. Barth’s criticisms of the Canons of Dort, Calvin’s doctrine of election, and the classical Reformed tradition illustrates that attempting to run with both the hare and the hounds may be a dialectic too far.

Questions of orthodoxy, particularly in a Reformed context, raise the issue of creeds and confessions and their status because the proper subject of theology is the church. Modernity can do little other than regard these ancient texts as “provisional statements” that are only “relatively binding” as to what constitutes orthodoxy. Orthodox teaching, says McCormack, is “that which conforms *perfectly* to the Word of God as attested in Holy Scripture.” Given that perfection is not of this world, “Dogma” for Barth, and his neo-orthodox disciples, is an eschatological concept, something unattainable, and “dogmas” as teachings pronounced by time-bound churches “are witnesses to *the* Dogma, and stand in a relation of greater or lesser approximation to it.”⁵

² James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), 213–34.

³ Bruce L. McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 17.

⁴ Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995).

⁵ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 15–16.

Supposing that McCormack is articulating the Barthian position adequately, if not perfectly, three comments can be made. First, it might be doubted that orthodoxy ever made a pretense to conform *perfectly* to the Word of God. This introduces an uninvited quasi-mathematical condition, and one that has never been countenanced, into the act of confessing the faith. A creedal expression might be an adequate and acceptable analog of the Truth, without being *perfectly* so. In their linguistic expression, past statements may invite reformulation, but not because they are provisional or relative in their truth content. McCormack's provisionality rests on an exaggerated and abstract conception of perfection.

Secondly, we understand that "*the Dogma*" for Barthians is the living Word, the person of Christ himself, the Word of God, the second person of the Trinity. The incarnate Logos *ensarkos* is the only real revelation of God; the biblical witnesses, the prophets and apostles and their present actualizers in preaching, are not "revelation" in the strict sense, but spin-offs from it that may become revelatory. But it does not follow that it is enough to say that witnesses to *the Dogma* stand "in greater or lesser approximation" to it because even a greater approximation to *the Dogma* would not be true. The validity of witnesses in relation to *the Dogma* is a question of their truth or untruth, not one of approximation (which is not a biblical concept anyway). It is a modern fallacy to suppose that Truth as personal countermands truths about it.⁶

Finally, because confessions are only relatively binding, orthodoxy mutates rather than being a static fixed reality, as McCormack explains:

It would seem to be very hard to deny to anyone who affirms, as Barth does, the doctrine of the Trinity, a two-natures Christology, the virgin birth, the bodily resurrection, the visible return of Christ, the immutability of God, and so on, the honorific⁷ of "orthodox." And yet the issue is not quite so simple. The truth is that Barth has not simply taken over unchanged any doctrinal formulation of the ancient or the Reformation churches. He has reconstructed the whole of "orthodox" teaching from the ground up. It is not the case that he simply tinkered with the machinery.⁸

So Barth took the creeds seriously without following them slavishly, in "a confessionalism of the spirit and never of the letter." With the aid of Kant and Hegel's ontology, he was "willing to set forth an actualistic understanding

⁶ This is a consequence of what McCormack says elsewhere, that "Revelation is understood by Barth as an *act* of self-mediation in the execution of which God remains ontologically other than the chosen medium—and therefore hidden in it." McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 12.

⁷ "Title" or something comparable seems to be missing here.

⁸ McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern*, 16.

of divine and human being.”⁹ Now the question: If there is little doubt that Barth’s formulations are over the horizon from the letter of the classic confessions, how can it be demonstrated that they are compatible with their *spirit*, particularly when and if what Barth proposes runs in the face of what they say, and of biblical exegesis?¹⁰ And here is the problem: formally the words remain the same, but the content is “reconstructed” and becomes something different from the truth expressed in the confessions, “from the ground up.” At least this is a frank admission. The scarecrow is dressed up in an actualistic nineteenth-century frock coat with an idealistic German cut, but it is still a scarecrow. If we have doubts about its orthodoxy, we might equally entertain some questions about its modernity too, apart from the claim and the existentialistic dressing. In what sense can German idealistic thought forms from almost two centuries ago be claimed to be modern?

So runs McCormack’s apology for orthodoxy and modernity, but what was Barth trying to do? His intellectual achievement was enormous, unparalleled in twentieth-century theology, and the corpus of his work over sixty years is so vast that few can master it. Understandably, there are internal tensions and contradictions, and its recognized interpreters are not always agreed. With his “theology of crisis,” Barth dropped a bombshell on liberal theology and its progressive and ethical aspirations after the First World War, and he began reconstruction in the crater of the judgment of God left behind. He sought a way of appropriating the gospel that would challenge the assumptions of the liberalism of the Harnacks and create the conditions for the Word of God to confront conditions in a new world. It was a glorious project, an effort to put God’s act in Christ at the center again. However, in light of the admission that Barth changed “everything from the ground up,” the question remains, Was it orthodox in the sense of “right doctrine” and “right teaching,” and was it Reformed?

It therefore comes as no surprise that the Dort doctrine of election got the makeover treatment from Basel, with a little help from Barth’s friend Maury in Paris.¹¹ Over a few years around the start of the Second World War, after having written his main treatment of the doctrine of God, Barth

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ An illustration of the problem with regard to Chalcedon is found in McCormack’s “The Actuality of God: Karl Barth in Conversation with Open Theism,” in Bruce McCormack, ed., *Engaging the Doctrine of God: Contemporary Protestant Perspectives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic; Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2008), 219–23. Cf. Michael A. Aiken, *Chalcedonian No More: A Reformed Critique of the Barthian Christology of Bruce L. McCormack* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

¹¹ McCormack, “Actuality of God,” 213, n. 59. Cf. Pierre Maury, *Predestination and Other Papers* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1960).

reformulated his doctrine of election in an existentialist sense. It is, as John Fesko states, “post-metaphysical, supralapsarian, christological (Christ as the subject and object of election) and universal.”¹² As the subject of election, Christ is the electing God, and as its object, Christ is the elect (and rejected) man.

A double consequence follows from the historicized wrap-up of election and rejection in Christ. First, it means that outside of Christ there is little worthwhile that can be said about God. Behind the incarnate Christ, there are no divine dealings or decrees of which Christ would be the simple executor. Because there is nothing other than this, Barth calls it the “primal decision.” In this decision, God’s grace is victorious, as all opposition is defeated with a resounding Yes. Nothingness, the menace of chaos against creation, the rebellion of sin and death, human knowledge, works for salvation, revelation apart from Christ, are all swept away, as well as any analogy between God and the world. In fact, in the primal decision in Christ, God decides to be the Trinitarian God who reveals himself in this act in Christ.¹³ It is “supralapsarian” because the Adam-Christ order is inverted, since man only exists because of the primal decision in Christ and for God’s grace. Reprobation is God’s judgment passed and ended in Christ, the chosen man. There may be hot debate over whether Barth was a through-and-through universalist, as were some of his disciples, such as Jacques Ellul. However, if Christ is the reprobate humanity in whom election is decided because of the triumph of God’s Yes, the consequence of universalism is difficult to avoid. If history is open-ended and the proclamation of the gospel is serious in light of man’s unbelief, then sin, evil, and reprobation are excluded “ontological impossibilities”; because of God’s decision for life, death is defeated in resurrection.

Secondly, if the formal vocabulary of theology is the same in appearance, everything of its content or “doctrine” is reconstructed in light of the decision of divine election.¹⁴ Berkouwer calls election “the central theme of Barth’s theology [coming] to expression in his triumphant and joyful doctrine” prior to the beginning of everything that is to be said about God’s dealings

¹² John V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Mentor, 2016), 197. Fesko’s analysis on pages 195–207 is well worth reading.

¹³ “Election is an event in God’s life in which he assigns to himself the being he will have for all eternity.” Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 98, 100.

¹⁴ On this the reader can consult McCormack, “Grace and Being,” 92–110. Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 154–56.

with his creatures.¹⁵ Barth's perspective leads him into a position of opposition not only to Calvin, for Barth a lesser evil, but also to classical Reformed theology and Dort, a greater evil.¹⁶ The problem for Barth is not that Calvin and the Canons do not speak about election in Christ but that they do so insufficiently and in an abstract way. Christ is the "mirror of election," the mediator and executor of a preceding divine decree in which God sovereignly and freely decided, before the foundation of the world, to save some and not others. This deeper ground of election and reprobation behind the "in Christ" is where the decision was taken. The electing God of Calvin is a hidden God, and Christ is not the subject and the foundation of *election*, but is reduced to being simply the foundation of *salvation*, after the decision about election had been taken. The result of making Christ the executor of an absolute decree is to cause uncertainty, and it leads to a futile seeking of indications of our election in our experiences. For Barth, over against the theology of the hidden God, the foundation of election must be in Christ as the subject of election, in the concrete enactment and presentation of the divine decree, the incarnate Logos (*ensarkos*) in action.

McCormack points to the fact that over the matter of election Calvin and Barth are on a collision course, which does seem to be the case.¹⁷ Reformed orthodoxy and Barth are also on a collision course when Barth's doctrine of election strikes the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) out of God's eternal plan, as something which is behind Christ as the subject of election. This has all been extensively discussed and argued against elsewhere, and the point need not be belabored here.¹⁸

What is more important is that questions of the interpretation of Barth and Reformed theology are questions relating to the nature of the witness of Scripture. Calvin fully recognized that Ephesians 1:4–11 and other passages speak of election in Christ. The Canons of Dort (I.7) present grace as according to God's sovereign good pleasure of election in Christ, who is *also* from eternity "appointed the Mediator and head of the elect, and the

¹⁵ G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 89. Cf. John Webster, *Karl Barth* (London: Continuum, 2004), 88.

¹⁶ Klaas Runia, "Recent Reformed Criticism of the Canons," in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Synod of Dort*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grand Rapids: Reformed Fellowship, 1968), 161–65 gives a brief account of Barth's position.

¹⁷ McCormack, "Grace and Being," 98. However, the collision course is of Barth's making because, as Paul Helm quips, "there was a collision, but fortunately Calvin was not in the car at the time." Paul Helm, "John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God," in McCormack, ed., *Engaging the Doctrine of God*, 68.

¹⁸ Cf. Fesko, *Trinity and Covenant of Redemption*, 195–244. Cf. Helm, "John Calvin and the Hiddenness of God," 67–82.

foundation of salvation.”¹⁹ As Klaas Runia has commented, “the Canons do not see Christ only as the executor of the (previously decreed) election, but the election itself is in Christ.”²⁰ However, neither Calvin nor the Canons speak in a Barthian sense either of Christ as the subject of election, or of an absolute decree apart from the divine counsel in Christ, or of election and reprobation concerning Christ alone. It would also be difficult to argue biblically for a Trinity existing in relation to a primal decision that the *logos* be incarnate. The notion of primal decision itself is a conundrum and supposes an event that constitutes being in some way, over against an act expressing being. This notion is hardly problem free. If the winning touchdown in the Minnesota Vikings’ game against the New Orleans Saints came out of the blue, that supposes the existence of two teams on the field. The touchdown did not put the teams on the field. Similarly, the Trinity exists in a way that is *logically* prior to the decision of the Father for election in Christ and the obedience of the Son as the first elect-one among the many in him. Both exist as realities in God, incomprehensible and different though they may be, before the foundation of the world.

Is Barth orthodox? If “right doctrine” is to be measured by Scripture—and how else could it be measured?—then it is difficult to imagine the apostle Paul congratulating Barth on the historicizing and actualizing reinterpretation of his teaching. Is Barth Reformed? Runia admits that on certain decisive points Barth deviated from the theology of the Reformers and from Calvin, but following the lead of Berkouwer, he supposes that it cannot be denied that Barth belongs to the Reformed tradition.²¹ But can a theology that is not “right teaching,” and is adrift from biblical revelation, be Reformed? Surely not by any commonly accepted definition of what it means to be Reformed. Barth damns the Canons of Dort with faint praise, and then weighs in against them, particularly against I.7, because of an alleged *decretum absolutum* and an election of which Christ is not the subject.²² We may wish that the Canons had expressed the “unequal” character (the *non eodem modo*) of the decrees of election and reprobation more pointedly earlier in the day than in the conclusion—“Some have violated all truth, equity, and charity, in wishing to persuade the public ... that in the same manner in which the election is the fountain and cause of faith and good works, reprobation is

¹⁹ Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom* (1877; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977), 3:582.

²⁰ Runia, “Recent Reformed Criticisms,” 164.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

²² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), II.2, 94ff., 112ff.

the cause of unbelief and impiety.”²³ However, in the decree articulated in I.7, there is nothing unrighteous, unjust, arbitrary or derogatory to God’s goodness.²⁴ Could it be that Barth’s problem was his very modern embarrassment with any thought of judgment, rather than the alleged abstraction from Christ and the absolute decree, which seem rather to be problems manufactured by his interpretation of the Reformed tradition?

So how about orthodox and modern? What is the problem with Barth? It arises from the tension between an actualistic and a dialectical view of God that comes from the German idealism that forms the background to Barth’s thought, and is paradoxically self-contradictory. If “revelation is understood by Barth as an *act* of self-mediation in the execution of which God remains ontologically other than the chosen medium—and therefore hidden in it,”²⁵ then God and human reality are essentially antithetical and nonanalogous. No theology is better than its presuppositions, and in Barth’s configuration an event revelation will not secure knowledge of God any more than word revelation. If one acts, even “in Christ,” without the complementary theopneustic word revelation of Holy Scripture, God disappears into a constant becoming of historical and temporal relativity and remains unknown and beyond incomprehensible in the mutating world of phenomena. Because of this, Barth’s God is more of a hidden God than is the “hidden God” of the so-called static theology of the fathers and the Reformers.²⁶ If they managed to rescue the concrete truth of Scripture in spite of the weight of their philosophical baggage, in Barth’s theology, orthodoxy fades into space in smoke rings from his modern presuppositions.

Finally, let’s avoid the error of confusing orthodoxy and traditionalism. If orthodoxy and modernism in its various varieties do not make a happy couple, that should not force those who desire to be biblically orthodox into the arms of a traditionalism that hankers after the good old days that never were. Orthodoxy sends us back to *sola Scriptura*, the fount of right doctrine, whereas traditionalism tends to be accumulative, unreforming, and stuck in time warps. Orthodoxy has a biblical warrant; traditionalism has none. Better call Calvin!

²³ Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 3:596.

²⁴ Presenting an infralapsarian point of view, the Canons situate sin and unbelief in man and not in God (I.5), and speak of God’s leaving sinners in their sin (preterition, I.6), and of the just reprobation of God (I.18).

²⁵ See note 6 above.

²⁶ See Helm’s careful arguments on the hiddenness of God in Barth, “Calvin and the Hiddenness of God,” 79–82: “Barth’s own doctrine is certainly no improvement ... Barth’s God is truly buried away.”