

Features of Karl Barth's Theology of the Word of God

Dr. Daniel G. Oprean

*Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Aurel Vlaicu University of Arad, Romania
daniaoprean@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is that of exploring the features of Karl Barth's theology of the Word of God. Starting with the way Barth sees the forms of the Word of God and their indissoluble unity and continuing with way Barth sees the nature of the Word of God, the analysis will show the features of Barth's thought about the Word of God as a witness to the revelation of God, as constitutive for the life of the Church and as paramount for the proclamation of the Church. Moreover, the analysis will reveal the way in which argues the fact that the Word of God is the medium in which the knowledge of God, is possible to the believer as an individual and for the Christian community as well.

KEYWORDS: Revelation, knowledge, faith, witness, proclamation

Introduction

It is notorious in the Christian circles, the insistence of Protestantism on the importance of the Word of God in the life of Christian believer and of Christian community (Rotaru 2012,7). This importance is underlined by the fact that the preaching of the Word is many times, at the same level, in Protestantism, as the sacraments of the Church (Barth 1936, 1).

In contemporary Evangelical Church, one of the main areas in crisis is the one related with the Word of God. Many of the disagreements among Christians today, are related to the way in which they interpret the Word of God. In this context Karl Barth's doctrine of the Word of God, might be relevant for the correction of the way in Evangelical Christian believers and communities relates to the Word of God.

Barth's doctrine of the Word of God is, therefore, relevant for contemporary Evangelical Christianity for the very reason that keep in balance the necessary equilibrium that needs to encompass any discussion of the work of man with God, the faithfulness of God that reveals Himself, and the faithfulness of man that respond to God's revelation.

The Three Forms of the Word of God and their Indissoluble Unity

Barth starts his inquiry into the doctrine of the Word of God, by analyzing *the Word of God as preached*, saying that "the event of real proclamation is the life-function of the Church," and that in this event the church "becomes the Church" (Barth 1936, 98). Accordingly, for the proclamation to be real proclamation, the Word of God is the base, the object and also, the judgment, (Barth 1936, 99-104) of proclamation in order for the Word of God to constitute the event of proclamation itself, "a miracle of revelation and faith," in which the proclamation is not only "man's language about God, but also and primarily and decisively God's own language" (Barth 1936, 104).

Barth says that human service in proclamation must be done in obedience and recognition of being created by God, and as such, not at the same level with God. Only in this state of obedience and recognition of God's sovereignty, human service is real, and could be done without taking out from the center God's sovereign will. Only as such, the proclamation of the Church is constituted by the will of God and is "the event of God speaking Himself in the sphere of human events, the event of Jesus Christ's vicariate plenipotentiary" (Barth 1936, 105-106).

Secondly, Barth analyses *the Word of God as Scriptures*. Church's proclamation means, says Barth, also "recollection of past revelation and expectation of future revelation of God," and as such the actualization of a revealedness of God," meaning "the discovery and fresh appropriation of a long hidden, forgotten, and unused part...of the timeless essential state of man himself, namely, his relationship to the eternal or absolute" (Barth 1936, 111). This is the reason why the church, in its proclamation, is not grounded in itself, rather in what transcends it, the person of Jesus Christ, who is "immanent in the church because He transcend her." This distinction between Christ and the Church, says Barth, is materialized in the fact that Holy Scripture is the instrument of "God's past revelation, and as such constitutes itself as the source of Church's proclamation, being the base, object and the judgment of Church's proclamation, its "direction for work, her marching orders." (Barth 1936, 113-114).

For Barth the constitutive role of the Scripture as the Word of God, for the Church, is seen in the "vicariate of the church's proclamation" that is succession (Barth 1936, 115). Unlike the Roman Catholic view of apostolic succession, a mechanical transmission from Peter to every Roman bishop, Barth's view is that this apostolic succession is pneumatic, beginning with Christ, apostles and the church. Therefore, says Barth, the apostolicity of the church is "a divine gift and a human task," and as such "a pointer and a guide."

Pneumatic Succession obviously implies that the *successor* is pneumatically identical with the *antecessor* but certainly not mechanically and therefore in such a way that the *antecessor* is left with a field of operation of his own as contrasted with the successor. But such a field was assuredly not given to the first Peter in the Roman Catholic system, but here the *antecessor* is taken up and absorbed in the successor..." (Barth 1936, 116).

Here the apostolicity of church's proclamation is constituted, and as such, "Peter, the apostolate, and Holy Scriptures" are a "free power in the Church and over against the Church," rather than the church being "left to herself, pointed to herself, and so to reflection upon herself." (Barth 1936, 116). Barth concludes:

The apostolic succession of the Church must mean that she is guided by the canon, i.e. by the word of prophets and apostles as by the necessary rule of all expression valid in the Church – that she enters upon the succession of the prophets and apostles in their office of proclamation...(Barth 1936, 117).

For this to be a reality there is necessary, says Barth, to be "a living succession" between antecessor and successor that could be preserved in the fixation in writing of successor's proclamation, that is, says Barth, the "very written Word" with its "free power to-day over the Church." Here in "the scriptura sacra" is grounded the "free power towards the church" and also the "living nature of succession" (Barth 1936, 117).

Speaking of tradition of the church, Barth shows the difference regarding the Scriptures. He says that while "in the unwritten tradition the Church is not addressed, but is engaged in a dialogue with herself," the written Word has the "authority irremovably confronting the Church" (Barth 1936, 118). In this context Barth speaks about biblical exegesis:

Exegesis is always a combination of taking and giving, of expounding and inserting. The very exegesis...is thus also a sign of the standing danger of a confiscation of the Bible by the Church, of an absorption, a making up of its own life by the Church's life, of a transmutation of its free power into Church authority – in short, of an annulment of its character as the norm, which magisterially confronts the Church... All exegesis may become predominantly an imposition instead of an exposition, and to that extent deteriorate into a dialogue of the Church with herself... Bible exegesis should be left open...not for the sake of free thinking, but for the sake of a free Bible (Barth 1936, 119).

Holy Scriptures, continues Barth, is "the word of man, who longed for, expected, hoped for this "Immanuel," and finally saw, heard, and handled it in Jesus Christ. It declares, attests, and proclaims it" (Barth 1936, 121). As such, the "recollection of God's past revelation, the

discovery of the canon, faith in the promise of the word of the prophets and apostles, or better, the Bible's imposition of itself on the strength of its special content, and therefore the existence of real apostolic succession- all that is an event and can only be understood as an event. In this event the Bible is the word of God." (Barth 1936, 120).

Accordingly, the Bible is the Word of God when God allows it to be as such, speaking through it. So, the affirmation that the Bible is the word of God is a statement of faith that hears God speaking through the Bible. Therefore, "the Bible becomes God's Word in this event ...in the statement that the Bible is God's Word. It does not become God's Word because we accord it faith, but of course, because it becomes revelation to us (Barth 1936, 123-124).

Thirdly, Barth analyses *the Word of God as revelation*, starting by saying that the Bible is "the concrete medium by which the Church recalls God's revelation in the past." He continues and says, that the Church "is called to expect revelation in the future," and "thereby challenged, empowered and guided to proclaim." The Bible "is not itself and in itself God's past revelation" and the proclamation of the Church "is not itself and in itself the expected future revelation" Rather, the Bible is the Word of God "by *really* attesting the past revelation of God, and the proclamation is the Word of God by *really* promising revelation." (Barth 1936, 124-125). The three forms of the Word of God, says Barth, have to be regarded in an indissoluble unity.

The revealed Word of God we know only from the Scripture adopted by Church proclamation, or from Church proclamation based on Scripture. The written Word of God we know only through revelation, which makes proclamation possible, or through the proclamation made possible by revelation. The proclaimed Word of God we know only by knowing the revelation attested through Scripture, or by knowing the Scripture, which attests revelation (Barth 1936, 136).

The Nature of the Word of God

After the analysis of the three forms of the Word of God and the indissoluble unity between them, Barth continues to analyze the nature of the Word of God. Firstly, in regard with its nature, Barth evokes the spirituality of the Word of God. Even though, the Word of God is displayed in a "natural and corporeal" in the physical event of preaching, it is "primarily spiritual" and only as such also "a corporeal or natural event" And this is so, says Barth, because "the Word of God is a rational and not an irrational event." This is the framework in which are interconnected the speaking, hearing, understanding and obeying of the Word spoken by God and answered by man through faith. "It is faith," says Barth, "that hears, understands, and obeys God's speaking." (Barth 1936, 151-153).

Barth concludes his assertion on *the spiritual character of the Word of God*, by pointing out that this is the reason why the Word of God is unique and different by any other word. And this uniqueness of the Word of God, circumscribes its "power of truth," reflecting the character of God, and as such, having "the normal arrangement of spiritual and natural," unlike the "naturalness and spirituality" of man's word, limited by its fallen condition. Secondly, Barth evokes *the personal character of the Word of God*, reflecting the personal character of the Person who speaks it, God. The Word of God therefore is to be regarded, says Barth, "in its identity with God Himself" (Barth 1936, 154-155).

The personification of the concept of the Word of God, which we cannot avoid when we remember that Jesus Christ is the Word of God, does not signify any lessening of its verbal character. But it signifies (and signifies of course) the knowledge of His personalness as distinguished from all thingness or materiality, even though and so far as it is the Word, the Word of Scripture and the Word of preaching (Barth 1936, 157).

Barth concludes by saying that this personal character of the Word of God, points also to its freedom, reflecting the freedom of God, a freedom that God exercise in regard to His Word, expressing it anew as He expressed in "the verbal form of Holy Scriptures" (Barth 1958, 19), this being an expression of His faithfulness: "God's faithfulness to His Church consist in Him

making use of His freedom to come to us in His Word, and in reserving to Himself the freedom to do this again and again” (Barth 1936, 158).

Thirdly, Barth evokes *the purposiveness of the Word of God*, meaning that God’s Word is always related, points towards man, and has a specific address, as an expression of God’s initiative towards man (Barth 1936, 158). In this context the Word of God, says Barth, “always tells us something new, which otherwise we could never hear from anyone. As such the Word of God aims always “to touch us in our existence,” for the necessary “renewal of the original relationship between us and Him, and to bring this restored relationship through reconciliation to fulfillment and completion (Barth 1936, 160-162).

If God Word’s spiritual and personal character and its purposiveness are related with the nature of the Word of God as God’s language, Barth continues his analysis on the nature of the Word of God from the perspective of God’s language as God’s act. In this regard, Barth considers first, *the contemporaneousness of the Word of God*. The framework in which this contemporaneousness is regarded, is defined in Barth’s perspective, by the three times: the time of direct and unmediated “utterance of God Himself, in His revelation, the time of Jesus Christ; the second time is that of testimony of the apostles and prophets, and the time of the Church itself (Barth 1936, 164). Yet, given the differences of these three times, the only constant element is the revealing act of God.

Because the Word of God is this act in this step from revelation to Scripture and to Church proclamation, i.e. in the full, strict distinction of times, it is one, it is contemporaneous.... We said “contingently contemporaneousness,” just to emphasize the character of this contemporaneousness as an act, an event (Barth 1936, 169).

The second meaning of the Word of God as God’s act is, says Barth, “*its power to rule.*” He says:

Where and when Jesus Christ becomes contemporaneous with us through Scripture and proclamation, where i.e. the “God with us” is uttered to us by God Himself, we come under a Lordship (Barth 1936, 170).

As such the Word of God challenges us and offers us the entry under the Lordship of God, and also, it challenges us to face the promise of God that confronts us with the result of moving us into a totally new position. And because of this power of the Word there is no neutral position for man after the encounter with the Word, and in accordance with the acceptance of the Word and of the Lordship it brings, makes man saved or lost (Barth 1936, 173-175).

And this lead, thirdly, to the fact that *the Word of God, as God’s act is a decision, a divine decision* that “becomes operative on and in a decision of the man to whom it is spoken” (Barth 1936, 182). Barth concludes:

Faith and unbelief, obedience and disobedience are only possible in that action in the judgment of God they are the answer, one way or the other, to His Word addressed to us. In faith and in obedience my own resolution and choice are genuinely God before God, I exist, whatever else may be said of me, according to the Word of God. I have adopted and received His grace. In unbelief and disobedience my own resolution and choice, whatever else may be said of them, are genuinely bad before God, I exist in contradiction to the Word of God, I have not adopted His grace. In one way or the other it is *I* – so that it is, my extremely responsible decision (Barth 1936, 183-184).

If under the rubric regarding the nature of God’s Word, firstly, Barth spoke of God’s word as God’s language and secondly, as God’s language as God’s act, thirdly, he speaks of God’s language as God’s mystery. Barth says that *God’s Word remains a mystery in its presentation to the world*, presentation in which God “veils Himself.” The facts are that God Himself veils Himself and in the process –which is why we should not dream of intruding into the mystery– unveils Himself. (Barth 1936, 188-192).

The second aspect of God's language as *God's mystery is the Word's one-sidedness*. This aspect refers to the fact that the unveiling of the Word, in its veilingness produces reactions in the life of man to whom it is addressed, reactions that determines man's attitude to life. The profundity of these reactions depends says Barth, "when our clarity, our thoughts, our attitude in life...has its very determinate limit in other: the limit set by the very Word spoken to us..." (Barth 1936, 198). From here Barth continues:

Faith is therefore invariably the recognition of our limits and the recognition that our hearing is bound to God Himself who wills to lead us now through form to content, and now through content back to form, and in both cases to Himself, who one way or the other does not give Himself into our hands, but keep us in His hand (Barth 1936, 201).

Finally, says Barth, *God's language is mystery in its spirituality*. And this is related to the Holy Spirit, the One that mediates the spiritual touch of the Word to the life of man. The Word of God is as mystery in that it really touches us spiritually, i.e. invariably only through the Holy Spirit, in full mediacy only immediately from God's side (Barth 1936, 209).

The last analysis, after the three forms of the Word of God and its nature, for Barth is that of God's Word knowability, regarding three aspects: The Word of God and man, the Word of God and experience and the Word of God and faith. For Barth, the Word of God is the reality that constitutes the identity of man:

Being mediated through their acquaintance with it, it will commend itself to them as reality. It is directed to them in order that they may let it be spoken to themselves and so may be what they are no longer apart from it, but with it. (Barth 1936, 217).

Also, says Barth, the Word of God, incarnated in Jesus Christ is the One that opens the possibility for man to enter in the movement from what „they were” to what „they will be... as bearers of this Word,” as knowers of it and through it of themselves, a knowledge that comes exclusively from God, outside any ability of man himself, rather only because of God's sovereign will, that gives the ability for knowing, to man, in His Word (Barth 1936, 218-224).

Second, if the knowledge of the Word of God is possible in the event of the Word of God, then also, says Barth the experience of the Word of God is a real possibility.

We defined knowledge as that confirmation of human acquaintance with an object whereby its trueness becomes a determining factor in the existence of the man who knows. It is precisely this factor determining the existence of the man who knows that we call experience (Barth 1936, 226).

Barth continues by defining the experience of the Word of God as being the reality of the Word that determines men's existence, in the "act of human self-determination," a determination that consist in the acknowledgment of the Word of God as true, in the context of a personal relationship with God, an acknowledgment that leads to acceptance of the Word as being good for man's life, as the Word means Christ's actual presence to man. This reality of the power of the Word in the life of man is grounded in God's own decision of sending "the Word to man," an "act of divine freedom and choice (Barth 1936, 227-235).

Experience of the Word of God to man is, therefore, invariably experience of divine freedom and choice and therefore itself decision, decision about man which becomes manifest by characterising man's decision as a decision for faith or unbelief, for obedience or disobedience. (Barth 1936, 235-236).

Third, the knowledge of God is an event of faith, in which, says Barth, the "control passes to acknowledgment of the Word of God, that becomes "man's act and experience...put in force...by the Word of God acknowledged (Barth 1936, 263-272). This experience presupposes and is conditioned, says Barth, by the necessity of "a point of contact" between God and man:

Apprehension of the Word of God could not take place, were there not in and along with this event something in common between God who speaks and man who hears, an analogy, a similarity, for

all the dissimilarity involved in the difference between God and man, “a point of contact” between God and man (Barth 1936, 273).

Only through faith, therefore, the knowledge of the Word of God is possible, faith being a reality only of a man in whom God’s image, lost in Adam, was restored in Christ, and as such, he can hear the Word (Barth 1936, 276). Barth concludes:

The Word of God becomes knowable by making itself knowable... The possibility of knowing the Word of God is God’s miracle on and in us, just as much as are the Word itself and the utterance of it... we are concerned here to realise that the mutual involution, in fact oneness of human and divine possibility, of man’s knowing and his becoming known by God, is an event in man’s freedom, and cannot in any sense be regarded as the product of it, and therefore as the result of an intuition, of a thinkable or achievable deepening or heightening of the life of the soul of man... the knowability of the Word of God is really an inalienable affirmation of faith, but that precisely as such it denotes the miracle of faith... (Barth 1936, 282-283).

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to analyze, the Word of God in Barth’s theological perspective. According to Barth’s thought the Word of God is first, the base, the object and the judgment, of Church’s proclamation that is as such the event in which the church becomes the Church. The Word of God presents itself in three forms that are indissolubly united: the proclaimed Word, the written Word and the revealed Word.

Secondly, we analyzed the nature of the Word of God, as God’s language is a spiritual and personal reality characterized by purposiveness. Moreover, God’s language as God’s act is characterized by contemporaneousness and the power to rule, being also a divine decision that requires man’s decision of faith. Then God’s language is God’s mystery by the fact of veiling and unveiling, in its one-sidedness and in its spirituality.

Thirdly, we analyzed the knowability of the Word of God regards three aspects: the Word of God and man, the Word of God and experience and the Word of God and faith, all these aspects of the Word of God reflecting the character of God as the God of revelation and man’s answer in faith and obedience to this revelation.

References

- Barth, Karl. 1936. *Church Dogmatics* 1:1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
 Barth, Karl. 1958. *Church Dogmatics*, 3:1. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
 Barth, Karl. 1966. *Church Dogmatics*, 3:2. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
 Barth, Karl. 1966. *Church Dogmatics*, 3:4. Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
 Niebuhr, Richard. 1951. *Christ and Culture*. New York: Harper & Row Publishers.
 Rotaru, Ioan-Gheorghe. 2012. “Mai are vreun rol Sfânta Scriptură astăzi în viața ta?” (Does Holy Scripture still have a role in your life today?) *Argeșul ortodox* XI, 541:7.