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KARL BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF  
INSPIRATION

By

the Rev. G. W. BROMILEY, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

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THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE

22 DINGWALL ROAD, CROYDON, SURREY

# KARL BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF INSPIRATION

By the Rev. G. W. BROMILEY, M.A., Ph.D., D.Litt.

## SYNOPSIS

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The subject of the paper is the detailed teaching of Karl Barth on the subject of inspiration. Attention is first drawn to the general setting of his chapter on the Bible, and then to the narrower context of the section on inspiration. An account is given of the sub-sections on the Bible as witness of God's revelation and the Bible as God's Word. Special consideration is accorded to such crucial questions as the concept of witness, the notion of recollection and expectation, the doctrine of an objective "inspiredness", and the incarnational pattern of the doctrine. In a critical appraisal acknowledgment is made of the strong points in Barth's treatment, but some unsatisfactory features are also noted. It is suggested, however, that with his new and necessary emphasis on objectivity Barth himself would probably agree in part with certain criticisms.

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### I

IF A PROPHET may not always have honour in his own country, a theologian is often misunderstood abroad. In our own age this is particularly true of Karl Barth. Barth's theology underwent a rapid process of development before it began to acquire definitive shape in the massive volumes of his *Church Dogmatics*. But those who are dependent on translations know only the earlier Barth. Even those who have a smattering of German find the great bulk and the apparent difficulty of the *Dogmatics* far too formidable. There are some, indeed, who prefer the earlier Barth, and there are others who know Barth only as he is refracted through associated thinkers like Emil Brunner, from whom Barth himself has now radically parted. The result is, of course, that Barth is subjected to all kinds of generalized pronouncements and suspicions and enthusiasms and hostilities which have very little reason or foundation in his own writings. Even the writings themselves can sometimes be twisted and tortured into strange shapes, for from such a vast output it is not difficult to pick out individual statements or sections which can then be pieced together into an alien scheme. And without an intensive knowledge of the text it is not easy to know the true picture from the caricature.

In these circumstances, 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*. Even then the situation is not quite so simple as it might appear. It is all very well to look up the relevant section in the table of contents. But, like any genuine theology, the teaching of Karl Barth hangs together. It forms a coherent whole. Properly speaking, a subject like inspiration can be understood only in relation to the full doctrine, and especially the doctrine of revelation or the Word of God of which it forms an integral part. There is the added difficulty that in a theology

spread over so long a period—it is some twenty years since the *Church Dogmatics* first began to appear—there has been a certain shift of accent, so that if he were to say the same thing to-day Barth would probably give to it a different emphasis. Now obviously in a short paper it is not possible to set the specialized doctrine of inspiration against the background of the whole doctrine of the Word of God, to which Barth himself devoted two very substantial half-volumes. In the last resort, a full knowledge of the teaching can be acquired only from the text itself. What we can do is at least to try to see what Barth does actually say about inspiration and to attempt some estimate of the qualities and the possible defects or deficiencies of his work.

The doctrine of inspiration is treated in the chapter on Holy Scripture, which is to be found in the second half of the first volume, immediately after the very long second chapter (in three parts) on the threefold work of the Trinity in relation to the divine self-revelation. The chapter on the Bible is followed by a chapter on the Church's preaching which fulfils the three-fold scheme of the Word, the Word written, and the Word proclaimed, and in that way terminates the first volume. The chapter itself is a long one of over two hundred and fifty pages and is sub-divided into three parts, each of which consists of two sections. The first is on "God's Word for the Church", the second on "Authority in the Church", and the third on "Freedom in the Church". The parts on authority and freedom both develop important aspects of Barth's teaching on the Bible under the headings of "The Authority (and Freedom) of the Word" and "Authority (and Freedom) under the Word", but it is with the first part that we are more directly concerned in the present context. This consists of almost a hundred pages, and the two sections are entitled "Scripture as Witness of God's Revelation" and "Scripture as the Word of God".

Barth always commences his main divisions with a brief statement of the substance of what he wishes to say, and it may perhaps be helpful to reproduce this verbatim. "The Word of God is God Himself in Holy Scripture. For the God who once spoke as the Lord to Moses and the prophets, the evangelists and the apostles, now speaks through their written word as the same Lord to His Church. Scripture is holy and the Word of God as by the Holy Spirit it became and will become to the Church the witness of God's revelation." The long sub-sections which follow are an expansion of these basic or guiding sentences.

## II

Barth opens the discussion by pointing out that we do in fact use the Bible as the normative Word of God and that our obedience in this respect is a practical answer to the doctrinal question involved. The doctrine of Scripture is not one which has to be argued or demonstrated, for either way this would mean a fundamental disobedience, but it is

one which we certainly have to explain (pp. 505–507). He has a short historical note on the importance of the doctrine, especially in the Reformation period, but even in the theological practice of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (pp. 507–509), returning then to his main contention that the doctrine of the Bible is a confession imposed upon us by the question of our attitude to the Bible. Its true content will be “a development of our recognition of the self-grounded and self-justifying law under which we stand,” and it will take the form of exegesis of the Bible itself. We make this confession with the Church and as a personal act of obedience, but it is the Bible itself which we confess as the Word of God, and we do so because the Bible is self-demonstrative as the manifestation of the glory of the Triune God (pp. 510–511).

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 favour, 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. But we will have to return to this question later.

On p. 512 Barth takes up his first main point, that we confess the Bible to be the witness to revelation rather than revelation itself. In a sense this argument can be understood only in relation to the previous chapter. The Bible is the glory of the Triune Godhead only as mediated through human words or human speech. But while this is true, while the Bible is not revelation as it comes directly to prophets and apostles, the Bible is certainly revelation as it comes to us who are not prophets and apostles. The witness is the contemporaneous representation of revelation, so that to receive the witness is to receive revelation itself. In this way Barth tries to do justice to the twofold truth, that since God has revealed

Himself in His Son, we cannot equate the Bible quite simply with the Word or revelation of God, but that all the same we cannot deny that the Bible is itself the word of life and power and therefore the Word of God. The word "witness" is a dangerous one if used in its ordinary sense, but if we think of the Bible as a witness in the way in which the Bible itself describes the prophets and apostles as witnesses—"he that receiveth you, receiveth me"—it is perhaps not quite so objectionable as some critics of Barth suppose. This at least is how Barth himself is thinking of it, and in this sense it has the merit of being a word which the Bible uses even about itself (cf. John 5: 39).

The next point is almost parenthetical, that in view of the mediation through human words and speech, it is right and necessary that the Bible should be studied as a human book and therefore historically (p. 513). Barth makes this point in a way which is almost reminiscent of the last century, but at once he goes on to make the next main point, which is very much of this century, that in studying the Bible in this way we have to take account of its content and therefore to read it theologically. A mere description of the background and circumstances is not enough. What matters in the Bible is that which is beyond itself: the message. And the message or content cannot be read in or read round: it can only be read from the actual text of the Bible itself. The exposition which disregards this fact can never be truly historical. That is to say, it is not possible to read the Bible humanly in an abstract way, or with a concentration on the human element. It is not possible to expound the Bible simply in the void, or without a knowledge or awareness of the thing revealed. In these circumstances Barth thinks that the notion of a scientific impartiality or detachment is merely comic when applied to the exposition of Holy Scripture, for it makes true and valid and genuinely historical exposition quite impossible (pp. 514–519). He emphasizes again, of course, that revelation can be only through revelation. We cannot come to a knowledge of the true content of the Bible as we would come to a knowledge of the contents of a historical or scientific text-book. But this fact does not allow a legitimacy of other accounts than that which the Bible gives of itself. There is only one truth, and this truth comes, not by soliloquizing on the Bible, but by listening to what the Bible itself has to say, by allowing oneself to be gripped and mastered and instructed by it. The peculiarity of the Bible as God's Word is that it can make itself heard and known in this way, but in so doing it is normative for human communication as well, which ought to be and sometimes may be received in the same way, which we learn to receive in this way when we are instructed by the Word of God (pp. 519–522). On this note the first sub-section concludes.

With the argument of this passage it is impossible to find any general fault, although there may be criticisms in point of detail. Barth has finely seen that the true weakness of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century

exposition is not so much in its attempted correction of the Biblical data as in the failure either to adopt or even to understand the Biblical message: the attempt to oppose to—or, even worse, to impose upon—the Bible an alien outlook and philosophy. But this fault has characterized the orthodox of different ages as well as the heterodox, for with all their faithfulness to the Bible text the scholastic theologians understood the Bible message in Aristotelian terms, and the sound dogmaticians of the later seventeenth century attempted to impose upon Scriptural doctrine a Cartesian framework. Indeed, even in our own day the temptation is strong to try to work in the Biblical message with current philosophical or scientific dogma, on the plea, perhaps, that the teaching of the Bible will in this way be supported or explained or interpreted. As Barth sees, a grappling with the historical and therefore the plain sense of the Bible in its proper context is fundamentally right so long as we are prepared to carry it through consistently and to receive the message which the Bible itself is seeking to deliver. If it is more necessary than Barth allows to answer the detailed literary and historical criticisms of the Bible, it is certainly far more important, as Barth suggests, to free the message of the Bible not only from the alien but also from the friendly reinterpretations and adaptations with which we so easily invest it. To do this, to expound the Bible not in terms of something else but in terms of its own message, is the primary aim of the so-called Biblical theology of our own day, as it was of the exegetical and expository theology of the Reformers. In so far as he has contributed to this movement and brought us all under the criticism of the Word of God itself, Barth certainly deserves our gratitude, for nothing is more destructive of the Bible than an inordinate concentration upon its form or a subjection of either its form or content to a non-Biblical view.

### III

Having made this preliminary estimate, Barth turns in the second sub-section to a discussion of the Bible as the Word of God. Necessarily, he begins with some remarks upon the canon (pp. 524–531), for obviously we have to know what is meant by Scripture and why it includes these particular books and not others. In relation to the canon Barth maintains strongly the Reformation position that the canon is not made or determined but only recognized by the Church. Scripture is already there as such before the Church pronounces its decision. To the question of the canon Scripture has its own infallible and authoritative answer. But because our hearing of that answer is human and fallible the question of the canon still remains, and in theory if not in practice it is always an open question. There is no such thing as a canon closed by the decision of the Church. Previous decisions of the Church may prove to be wrong. It is possible, if not very likely, that new writings may be unearthed which authenticate themselves as Holy Scripture. Barth does not take this

possibility very seriously, nor does he propose, as Luther did, that there should be any definite alteration of the existing canon. But he wants to emphasize that in this matter as in all others it is not a ruling of the Church but the self-witness of Scripture which must be the judge, and therefore the canon of Scripture is not dependent upon a definitive ruling of the Church. With this principle all evangelical Christians would agree, and there are not a few who would be prepared to admit that individual passages like the present end of Mark do not have any very secure self-authentication as Holy Scripture.

The canon as self-authenticated and recognized by the Church consists of the Old and New Testaments, which Barth now considers in their inter-relationship and unity (pp. 533–536). In this respect he introduces two important principles, that the one consists of expectation, the other of recollection, and that they are divided by the act of redemptive revelation. The elements of expectation and recollection are also found in the two main divisions of each Testament, the Law and the Prophets in the Old, the Gospels and the Epistles in the New. Although there are great differences in the individual writings, Barth emphasizes that as the living Word of God they give to the Church to-day the totality of recollection and expectation, and that the Church has to hold to this totality as a unity. But the unity is not an idea or a principle which we can control, and the totality is not that of a Christian economy or philosophy. It is here, Barth thinks, that Reformed dogmatics went astray in the seventeenth century with its Aristotelian and Cartesian systematizing. The centre and presupposition of the Bible's unity is the person of Jesus Christ Himself. But again, since the Bible constitutes a unity, we are not allowed either to divide it or to approach it with arbitrary preferences, and whatever passage we read, we have to remember that it implies all the rest. Here, too, we must be grateful to Barth for some valuable emphases. The idea of expectation and recollection is obviously true in a general way. The unity of the Bible with its centre in Jesus Christ certainly needs to be brought out at a time when the pressure has all been in favour of division, and whether or not the seventeenth-century dogmatists were guilty of the charge brought against them, it is obviously wrong, although sometimes very tempting, to unite the Bible in terms of an essentially non-Biblical principle or philosophy.

But is the doctrine of the Bible as uniquely Scripture itself a Biblical doctrine? Barth deals with this question in a third discussion (pp. 538–544), and he gives two main answers. The first is that the Bible understands itself as the witness to Jesus Christ, and supremely to His resurrection, which it is the function of the Holy Spirit to attest. It understands itself, therefore, as the self-attestation of God by the Holy Spirit. The second answer is that it was written either by or about those men who had a direct encounter with God, bearing witness to them as the men they were as created by Jesus Christ Himself. This leads Barth to

a consideration of the apostolate, and with the apostles he links also, as the Bible itself does, the Old Testament prophets. Passively the apostles were chosen as those who saw and heard revelation in its historical environment. Actively, they were chosen as those who had to proclaim it. This twofold function is most succinctly described in the opening verses of 1 John 1. It was in this function that the apostles wrote Scripture (or Scripture was written about them). Obviously, therefore, their writings are meant to be understood and can only be understood as unique Scripture. With these statements there can be little quarrel, for they are both Scriptural and Reformed. In their own way, however, they dispose of one common but misinformed criticism of Barth, that on his view any writing can be Scripture if the Holy Spirit chooses to make it such to this or that individual. Nothing could be farther from the truth than this accusation, for Barth insists in the strongest possible way that God's revelation is only in Jesus Christ, that the prophets and apostles have been selected as its witnesses, and that their writings and their writings alone are therefore Holy Scripture.

But this being the case, Barth goes on to point out in a further paragraph (pp. 545–548) that the content of revelation binds us strictly to its form. The form is a necessary one because this witness to revelation is the only witness. And it consists in the texts themselves, not in the so-called facts behind the texts. At this point Barth has some valuable remarks about the error of trying to arrive at the Biblical message by treating Scripture as a book of historical sources and reconstructing from it a history of Israel or a life of Jesus. It was one of the greatest mistakes of Strauss and Wellhausen and their innumerable progeny to try to separate between the texts of the Bible and the subject of the Bible, as though there were some historical truth to be found beyond Scripture. With this pertinent and trenchant criticism we can only express our fervent agreement.

#### IV

So far, so good. But now Barth comes to a more difficult paragraph (pp. 549–556) in which he considers the reverse side, the limitation of the uniqueness or particularity of Holy Scripture. The Bible is a book apart by its very nature. But it is so, Barth maintains, only by its nature as witness. Considered in other respects or on other levels, as a book of history or religion, it is like other books. The distinction is not just one of degree. It is the distinction of the book which instructs us in the revelation of the absolute God. The absoluteness of God can be known only in this way, as the divine favour in which God associates Himself with man. But because God does associate with man, mediating His revelation through human writings, we must not attempt to absolutize or divinize the Bible as such. As in the case of Christ, the Bible has both "divine" and human factors, but there is not in this case an actual unity of the person of God with the human authors. The identity is only

by virtue of God's decision and act. The same is true of preaching and the administration of the sacraments, and less properly of the Church, of dogmas, of Christian experience and the like. We cannot therefore equate the Bible in a strict sense with the Incarnation. We can say only that the latter does carry with it the former, that the fact of the Word made flesh involves the prophetic and apostolic word. In its own way, therefore, the Bible is true God and true man, giving the glory to God, but having authority over the proclamation of word and sacrament. Only when it recognizes this particular place and function of Scripture will the Church be strong and healthy.

The main drift of this paragraph is not so much to emphasize the humanity and therefore the fallibility of the Bible, as it seems from the opening sentences, but rather to safeguard the uniqueness of God Himself and especially of the Incarnation of the divine Son. In this respect we may agree wholeheartedly that the Bible is not God, and that there is no *essential* unity of God and its words or authors. Certainly the "inscripturation" of the Word follows the same pattern as the Incarnation, but it is only a reflection and it takes place only by a special act of association, not by a unification of person. On the other hand, it may be wondered whether any theologians of any school have ever seriously suggested that the Bible is absolute and divine in the way that God is, or the Incarnate Christ. It may also be asked whether the limitation of the peculiarity of the Bible is rightly found in its humanity on other levels, for it could easily be argued that Jesus Christ is like other men if viewed from the historical or religious, or more narrowly from the physical or intellectual standpoint, yet this does not in any way affect His uniqueness and deity. Surely if God does associate with the human authors by His own special decision, we cannot isolate this or that aspect of their work and say that it is excluded from the divine act. We can rightly say that even in virtue of this act the Bible is not God as Christ is God. We can also say that in so far as it does have a human "form", it can be studied as one book of history or poetry or religion with others, just as Jesus Christ as man can be studied as one man with others. But it is rather another thing to state baldly that in these respects there actually "is no difference between the Bible and other quantities and factors of our human cosmos" (p. 549). This involves a basic "Nestorianism" which is no less intolerable in the doctrine of the written Word than in that of the Word Incarnate. But in view of what he says later (p. 571), Barth can hardly have meant his statement to have quite this implication.

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.

## V

He continues with a consideration of the statement that we believe the Bible to be God's Word, and in the first instance he emphasizes the word *believe*. This leads him to an attempted characterization of the work of the Spirit in the human authors. It takes place as the obedience of these authors to the revelation then given, and it is therefore their own thinking, acting, speaking and writing as embraced and controlled and impelled by the Holy Spirit. The resultant work is not a book of divine propositions directly imparted, but a witness which we have to recognize in faith to be the Word of God. At this point we see why Barth is afraid of a proper stress on the objectivity of the initial inspiration. He does not want our acceptance of it to be perverted or misunderstood as though it were something that we ourselves could manipulate or control. We cannot prove the Bible to be the Word of God by rational or empirical processes. Men may read it in other ways and even criticize or reject it, and by the ordinary means of argument we cannot bring them to the point of confession. 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?

But he returns on p. 568 to a more positive note with the insistence that, if we have to believe the Bible to be God's Word, we do have to believe it to be *God's Word*. This is not a quality or characteristic. It means that the Bible is linked up with the Word of God, not *vice versa*. But it is true all the same, for to live by the Bible is to live by the revelation of Jesus Christ in the Bible by the work of the Holy Spirit. This leads Barth to a definition of inspiration (p. 571) as the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the Bible. To do justice to it we have to bring out the full reality of the union in the free act of the grace of God. As Barth sees it, the union has two moments or phases which he illustrates from the two passages, 2 Cor. 3: 4-18 and 1 Cor. 2: 6-16. The first has to do with the reader, who cannot understand the Bible apart from the hidden work of the Spirit. The second has to do with the writer, who cannot proclaim Christ apart from the work of the Spirit. In a historical survey (pp. 574-584) Barth then shows that the Reformation period is the only one which properly balances these two aspects with its full acceptance of the inspiration of the writers, but its relating of the Bible strictly to Jesus Christ and its stress on the inward work of the Spirit. The early Church maintained a firm doctrine of inspiration, but it concentrated attention on the inspiration of the writers, it was rather too interested in the minutiae of wording, and it ignored the human aspect. The result was a secularization of the concept in which inspiration became "inspiredness". The post-Reformation period repeated this movement, ignoring the human element, insisting upon the inspiration even of the vowel-points, trying to substitute an assurance of palpable human certainty for the assurance of faith. As Barth sees it, the tragedy of this view is that it diverts attention away from Christ to secondary factors, that it provides a certainty which is wrongly based and therefore vulnerable, and that it provokes the inevitable reaction away from a Docetic view of Scripture to an Ebionite.

## VI

What are we to say to all this?

In the first place, we have to admit that there is a work of the Holy Spirit in the reader without which no amount of argument or demonstration or investigation will give to the Biblical text its life-giving power. In so far as orthodoxy is in danger of forgetting this, it is as well that we should be reminded of it again, although in our own day it seems that the main threat to the inspiration of Scripture is to be found in a different direction.

Second, we may again ask whether a proper emphasis on the human element of Scripture necessarily involves errancy in the historical or scientific material. It involves a general fallibility of the authors as such, i.e. apart from the special working of the Holy Spirit for this particular purpose. It also involves, perhaps, a limitation or restriction of knowledge. On scientific, historical, geographical and other factors the Bible only gives us such simple and largely generalized information as is necessary for its own purpose. Again, it definitely involves a use of such language, concepts, literary forms and even methods and materials as were in general use at the time of writing, although in the case of the first three there was a certain necessary adaptation, as, for example, in the New Testament use of a word like *agape*. But it is rather another thing to say that the Bible may and does contain definite error, or that because our recognition of the inspiration of Scripture does not depend on its human infallibility, therefore we have to say almost *de fide* that it is humanly fallible.

Third, it is just a question whether in the biblical sense the term "inspiration" ought strictly to be applied to the illumination in which the Holy Spirit opens our eyes to the truth of Scripture. By extension it often has been used in this way, as in Cowper's well-known hymn:

"The Spirit breathes upon the word,  
And brings the truth to sight."

If we make the extension, Barth is no doubt justified in arguing that the twofold act of inspiration is not complete until the first phase is succeeded by the second, and the inspired authors find an inspired reader. But this question prompts the further one, whether in the strictest possible sense we are right to speak of an inspiring of the text itself and not only, as the Bible itself seems to do, of the authors, and later, perhaps, of the readers. Of course, in a sense this is a pedantic question, for men who spoke and wrote as moved by the Holy Spirit will give us inspired writings. But the point is that the act of inspiration takes place in the human writers, and later, if we like, in the readers, not primarily in the text. The text itself is a given thing: the product of the one act and the basic material for the other. But if this is the case, may we not be right to speak of the "inspiredness" rather than the inspiration of the Bible, so long as

we make it plain that this "inspiredness" is only in conjunction with the inspiration, the act of inspiring, of the Holy Spirit, primarily in the writers, and secondarily, if we like, in the readers? The doctrine of "inspiredness" is a dangerous one, for attention may easily come to be focused on a quasi-miraculous text instead of its ultimate Author and His act of inspiration. But the mere fact that a doctrine is dangerous does not mean that it is false. Almost all doctrines have been abused at one time or another. What is necessary is to prevent the abuse by relating this secondary doctrine clearly and strictly to the primary inspiring of the authors and the subsequent illumination of the hearers or readers.

## VII

In the final pages (pp. 585-597) Barth brings his survey to an end with some positive statements or conclusions. The first is that the Bible is God's Word and therefore that it cannot be controlled by us. Second, it is the work of God and therefore an act and not a state, reminding us of the work which has been done in the past and kindling the expectation of new work in the future. Third, it is the miracle of God, a new thing which sets in train new events. Fourth, it is human in form, and therefore it involves the offence of the Incarnation and the Cross. Fifth, the presence of God's Word is not a quality inherent in the book, but that which, by the free decision of God, intervenes between recollection and expectation but is incomprehensible as time. Sixth, this intervention takes place only according to God's decision, but it is something which can and will take place, so that we are to search the Scriptures in expectation. In our approach to the Bible it is no less wrong to be unfaithful or indolent than to try to isolate God's Word from the rest of Scripture as though it were only "contained" in it, or to rest in recognized experiences in time past. We must move from faith to faith, in gratitude and also in hope. Seventh, there is a twofold actuality: God Himself who speaks, and the text in and through which He speaks. Although Barth dislikes the idea of the "inspiredness" or human infallibility of the text he insists most strongly that it is in and through the text, the actual words of the text, that God speaks. Therefore he argues that inspiration is in the true sense verbal, and that what is required of us is exegesis. Eighth, and finally, he recognizes the danger of pure subjectivity, as though it all comes back to our own experience or faith, as though the Bible is only the Word of God as we experience or believe it to be such. But the objective side is not so much the text itself as God's twofold action of inspiration in the writers and the readers. He brings the whole section and the first part of the chapter to an end by emphasizing again that the statement that the Bible is the Word of God is an analytical sentence, and that ultimately, as God's Word, it cannot be known by rational or empirical considerations but only in and through itself. He appeals to

Calvin to show that other factors are only secondary to the divine self-attestation, which must not be confused of course with our own experience or faith. This divine self-attestation is the work of the Holy Spirit, that is to say, of "God Himself in the free act of His turning to us". It means that in this doctrine too "we must be content to give the glory not to ourselves but to God".

### VIII

Even from the short review of these conclusions, and indeed of the part as a whole, it is easy to see what is the real strength of Barth, what are his weaknesses, and the way in which he himself would probably wish to amend his work after an interval of seventeen years. At the risk of a certain amount of reiteration we will gather together our own comments and criticisms under these three heads.

(1) On the credit side, in spite of the lip-service that he pays to it, Barth sees clearly the weakness of the historical approach to the Bible and the irrelevance of most of its findings to a genuine understanding of the Bible. More than that, he perceives and states that the radical error in liberal work does not lie in the detailed criticisms or reconstructions of the Bible, but in the underlying deviation or alienation from the theological content of the Bible. In the same context, there is something to be learned from his criticism of orthodoxy in its attempt to vindicate the Bible along human lines and its only too frequent subjugation of the Biblical material to the current philosophical framework. The criticism is perhaps carried too far, but there can be no doubt that in their own way these friendly and well-meant efforts are no less humanistic and non-Biblical than the more hostile activities of liberals. We learn from Barth that the basic need of the day is not so much to counter this or that individual critical finding as to meet and overthrow the non-Biblical theology which is only too frequently expressed in orthodox no less than liberal argumentation. Once this is done, detailed historical questions will be seen in their proper perspective, and the main difficulties will disappear. Barth is surely right that it is an inversion to suspend our acceptance of the Biblical message on our ability to prove the historical accuracy of the Bible. A genuinely historical study ought to lead us to the message of the Bible itself, and it is in terms of that message rather than empirical or any other philosophy that the Christian will approach the Bible and everything else. But of course the Biblical message cannot be known only by historical means, and this leads Barth to its most valuable feature—the tremendous emphasis upon the primacy of God in everything that concerns what is after all His own Word. He maintains this primacy in many different ways: against the orthodoxy which wishes to control the Bible; against the liberalism which wants to historicize it, or to try to sift the divine factors from the human; against the rationalism which eliminates or depreciates the illuminating work of the Holy Spirit;

against the subjectivism which identifies that work with human faith or experience. At every point and in every respect Barth's effort is to reckon seriously with God Himself in His own Word, and it is because of this concern for the divine glory that he has a derived concern for the honour of Scripture as that which must be in all things the master and judge of Christian thinking and practice, both for the individual Christian and also for the Christian Church.

(2) For these insights and emphases our thanks are due to Barth, for although what he says is not basically new, he says it with a new freshness and authority. But there is a debit side as well. In a general way, he has, I think, a tendency to give rather too great a prominence to the dangers which he finds in orthodoxy, for although they are possible and indeed actual dangers, they hardly seem to be practical dangers for the majority of people today. Possibly the situation is different in Switzerland, but in this country the number of orthodox is frighteningly small anyway, and if they are at fault at any point a positive approach will surely do more good both to them and to others than a more or less consistent denunciation. The historical criticism, e.g., of seventeenth-century dogmaticians is fair enough, but the more generalized pronouncements tend to be negative, dogmatic and misleading. 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. In point of fact, in his own exegesis Barth takes surprisingly little notice of the supposed errors, so that his rather trenchant statements in this regard seem designed mainly to clear himself from the possible charge of obscurantism. The second point is in relation to the understanding of inspiration itself. It is right and proper that the work of the Holy Spirit in the reader should be given a greater prominence than in many statements, but it is just a question whether this can rightly be described as the second phase which completes the work of inspiration. The true work of inspiring was properly in the authors, so that in a derived and secondary but very real sense their works can also be described as inspired. And this is irrespective of the spiritual state of the readers, just as on an artistic level the works of Shakespeare are "inspired" irrespective of the appreciative capacity of those who read them. Therefore, while we have to insist strongly that the Scriptures can be properly

read only in the Spirit, and we cannot altogether divorce this fact from the primary writing in the Spirit, we merely confuse the doctrine by claiming that there are here two complementary aspects of the one inspiration. Nor have we any real reason to refuse to the actual text of the Bible an inspiration which certainly derives from the primary act but which is not dependent on the illumination of the recipients.

(3) The final question remains whether Barth himself might now wish to modify his presentation of the doctrine. To judge from the recent trend of his writing, it seems certain that he himself would not now be ready to give quite the prominence that he then did to the act of the Holy Spirit in the reader. 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." It is noteworthy that in his doctrine of the Atonement Barth has swung over almost to the opposite extreme. There has to be an entry into the reconciling work of Christ, but it is still true that reconciliation took place once and for all when Christ died and was raised again from the dead. The reason for this swing is to counter the subjectivist extreme that the atoning death and resurrection of Christ takes place in the true sense, not in history at Golgotha, but inwardly in the individual movement of repentance and faith. But if this very strong objectivism is necessary in relation to the Atonement, it is no less necessary in relation to Holy Scripture. Inspiration is certainly an act of God like reconciliation. But like reconciliation it is an act which has taken place, and the results are still with us in the enduring form of the inspired writings. In the one case as in the other there has to be a personal entry into the act, so that it becomes an act for and to the individual. This can take place only by the Holy Spirit. But the fact remains that the act itself has already taken place. And there can be little doubt that, faced with a thorough-going subjectivization, Barth himself would admit the inadequacy of his earlier safeguards and be prepared drastically to alter the balance of his presentation.

This would mean necessarily the softening if not the removal of some of the less satisfactory features of the discussion, and the value of what is on any showing an instructive and stimulating contribution would be considerably enhanced.