

“WHO CAN SAY IT AS IT IS?”

KARL BARTH ON THE BIBLE¹

In the title essay of a well-known book, Paul Tillich asks whether ‘the Protestant era’ has already ended or is coming to an end. The title of the essay, “The End of the Protestant Era?” is in the form of a question; but the content of the essay comes very close to answering that question in the affirmative—yes, perhaps the Protestant era is over, alas.

Now we should be clear that the Protestantism Tillich had in mind here is not empirical or sociological Protestantism. In the USA where he spent the last third of his life, the great German theologian could hardly think that something calling itself ‘Protestantism’ had nearly petered out! Tillich was referring, rather, to what should be called historical or ‘classical’ Protestantism. Classical Protestantism is Protestantism defined by its historic roots in the main stream of the 16th Century Reformation, with its 15th Century background in pre-Reformation figures like John Wyclif and Jan Huss. Tillich defines the essence of classical Protestantism by what he calls “the Protestant principle.”

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The Protestant principle, in a word, is the consciousness that God, who is the living subject of Christian faith, must not be equated with anything less than God. So Protestants—Protestants—protest the identification of the ultimate with anything provisional, of the absolute with anything relative, of the infinite with anything finite, and so forth. Protestants do this, not because of an inherent cantankerousness, as some might suggest, but because of their determination to preserve the sole sovereignty of God against every human desire to have another sovereignty alongside God. If God is sovereign, nothing else must be regarded as sovereign, including our ideas of God. As I have sometimes put it, the great advantage of believing in God is that you are then liberated from believing in a lot of other things that incessantly try to set themselves up as god—like nations and governments and ideologies and dictators and presidents, and (yes) religions, and churches, and priestly hierarchies, or even (in democracies) majority opinion!

But this protest against things that are less than God seeking power and authority for themselves immediately raises a question: What about the Bible? Does not classical Protestantism uphold the ultimacy of the Bible? Isn't the chief methodological teaching of the Reformation, its so-called formal principle—*sola scriptura* [by scripture alone]—in fact the great

exception to the rule? While popes and councils and majority church opinion are put aside by the unconditional sovereignty of God does not the Reformation regard the Bible as the very ‘Word of God’, and thus as the one authority that in effect qualifies the Protestant principle? Does this Protestant elevation of Scripture not even in effect nullify the insistence that God alone is ultimate, confining as it does our conception of God to the biblical testimony to God?

If we want to answer this question strictly through reference to the main Reformers, I think we would have to say no: the theology of scripture that informs the thought of Luther, Zwingli and Calvin—to mention only the three primary figures of the Reformation’s main stream—does not allow for the creation of a “paper pope” out of the biblical canon. Whatever may have become of *Calvinism*, Calvin himself was not about to jeopardize his primary affirmation, *soli Deo gloria* (his very motto!), by flirting with bibliolatry! Like Zwingli before him, Calvin was trained in the humanist school. *Ad fontes!*—Back to the sources. This humanist cry was also the cry of the French and Swiss reformers. Knowledge of the original sources is paramount for the cleansing of the movements that claim to be based upon them. As for Luther, who was not humanistically trained, his treatment of the Bible seems almost sacriligious to the true-believing Bible-belter. He

was fond of quoting the popular saying of the time, “The Bible has a wax nose”; you can twist it to whatever may be your preference in . . . noses! Not the letter, but only the divine Spirit, acting upon the letter of scripture, can establish the practical authority of the Bible in the church.

But it is just this refusal of the Reformers to let even their adored and indispensable Bible usurp the sole authority and glory of God that seems to me to have been all but lost in contemporary Protestantism, and more particularly in North America and some of the newer churches in the developing world (some African situations, for instance). In fact, if Paul Tillich were to return and rewrite his essay on “The End of the Protestant Era? [question-mark], he would at least incorporate a new section that would begin in this way: “The most convincing evidence we have of the near-disappearance of classical Protestantism in present-day Christianity is the near-disappearance of the classical Protestant understanding of the nature and authority of Scripture.” He would then go on (as I have heard him go on in other contexts) to explain that the biblicist/fundamentalist conception of Holy Scripture was not only a hardening of the Reformation's *sola Scriptura* but a complete misappropriation of it, explicable only by the fact that it was worked out in the 19th and early 20th Century in opposition to Liberalism and Modernism—indeed that biblical literalism is incomprehensible except as a

reaction to the perceived relativisation of scripture on the part of Christian liberals. But then Tillich would say (what I did not hear him say in his time, because it was not yet quite true in his time) –he would say, he would in fact exclaim (!) that what he had not foreseen was how easily the old mainline guardians of a more or less classical Protestant attitude to Scripture would capitulate. How, with too few exceptions, they would gradually allow themselves to believe that the Biblicists were indeed the rightful heirs of the Reformation—that if you were going to retain an effective, working conception of the Bible’s authority for the church’s faith and life you would pretty well have to go that route. On that assumption, Tillich would note, some once-mainline Christians have actually gone over to a more or less Biblicist point of view, whilst others, spurning such antiquarianism, have joined the various camps of neo-liberalism. And so, he would conclude with a frown well-known to his students, the whole discussion of the Bible’s role in the church has been reduced to the usual polarized simplism, so beloved of the media, with one element championing an absurd literalism foreign to the Reformers and the other element courting the kind of supposed religious “freedom” that, when it does not mean pick-and-choose your texts (or ‘whatever’) , means (in practical terms) forget about the text altogether.

And, as a last word, the revived Tillich would sigh and say, “Alas, the latter element attributes its enlightened ways partly to my teaching!”

But this is where Karl Barth comes in! And were I to continue in this dramatic mode of using my teachers, revived and *au courant*, to carry my own ideas, I would of course have Karl Barth say to the lamenting Tillich, “Well, I told you so! I knew you’d regret all that re-mythologizing and ontologizing of yours! You should have kept closer to the Bible yourself!”

But I am not really capable of sustaining such a dramatic approach to the subject, so I shall revert to straightforward assertion, in the manner of true theology!

And what I want to assert, to put it in a nutshell, is that Karl Barth is not the friend of biblical literalism that he is too often made out to be, both by his critics and (even more damagingly) by his avowed admirers. Nor is he the friend of those who assume *laissez faire* liberal attitudes to Scripture—though he is less critical of such than is often supposed. Or, to state this negative thesis in positive terms, what I want to show is that Barth, among the great theologians of our immediate past, was the truest representative of classical Protestantism’s approach to the Bible. And beyond that, I will suggest that those who are satisfied with neither biblicistic religion nor a Christianity that has nearly lost track of the Bible,

could do no better than to read and reconsider Barth. In particular, those who encounter biblical literalism on a regular basis and find it, as I do, appalling, (and I understand that this happens rather frequently in Alberta!) will be better advised to look into Barth than any other modern interpreter of Protestant thought on the subject; for no-one can contend that Karl Barth does not pay attention to the Bible, and yet precisely as one who pays extraordinary attention to the Bible he does not come out where the vast majority of North American Bible-defending Christians come out.

But with this, let us try to see where he does come out.

1. THE BIBLE AS ‘WORD OF GOD’

The first thing that has to be said, of course, is that for Karl Barth the Bible, namely the canonical writings of the older and newer testaments, is indispensable to faith, to the church. He would certainly have agreed with Luther who said, “Abandon scripture, and you abandon yourself to the lies of men.” And he does embrace, wholeheartedly, the Reformation’s identification of the Bible as ‘Word of God.’ But we have to pay close attention to how he develops that theme.

God’s Word, he says, is addressed to us in “a threefold form”. It is the word preached, the word written, and the word revealed or incarnate. All three forms of the divine Word are required if anyone is really to

“hear”—as the Hebrew might put it, “hearingly to hear”—the gospel that brings faith into being and sustains it. Each of the three forms of the Word needs the other—in almost a way that parallels the doctrine of the trinity. We do not meet the incarnate Word, the *Logos* of God in Jesus Christ, apart from hearing the written word as it is made present to us through the preached word. Nor have we really heard the biblical word or the word of proclamation until they have become the means through which we are encountered by the living Word. Apart from that encounter, the biblical word and the preached word remain mere words, even though they are themselves indispensable to the encounter. Something almost comparable to a transubstantiation must take place if these scriptural words are to become for us God’s word to us.

And yet this does not and should not mean a belittling of the biblical testimony in itself and as such. Like the preached Word, the Biblical Word exists to serve the living Word, the Christ, who for Barth is at the centre of everything. Yet the Bible—and preaching too, when it is authentic—participates in the mystery and meaning of the living Word. Like the three *personae* of the Trinity, each of the three forms of the divine Word has its specific character: the preached word is speech, the written word deed, and the revealed word the mystery of personhood. But speech, deed and mystery

are involved in all three forms, just as all three modes of being in the Trinity interpenetrate one another—as in the concept of *perichoresis*.

Reading Barth on the Bible, one is made conscious of what Whitehead might have called the “livingness” of the Bible for him. Though he usually uses the neutral pronoun “it” when he refers to this collection of writings, one thinks often that he might have said ‘Thou’, in some Buberian sense. As I shall say in the second part of this, that thought must not be carried too far—there is no hint of bibliolatry here. But the quality of ‘encounter’ is never far from Barth’s mind, I think, when he refers to Scripture. That is why one must conclude that his rather stylized and even awkward development of the so-called “threefold form of the Word” is not a merely theological-academic device. The Bible has this ‘thou-dimension’, not in and of itself but because, when it really comes into our focus, it is already participating in the livingness and the mystery of the Incarnate Word that it serves.

But this encounter, far from being all fuzzy and warm, as it has been for so much Christian pietism, is for Barth (as it was for the Reformers) more nearly a rude awakening, full of surprise and even shock. Especially in Barth’s earliest writings, reaching their pinnacle in his *Roemberbrief*, the Bible contains for him an almost kafkaesque kind of judgement of human

and religious assumptions—‘judgement,’ in Greek *crisis*. What was first called Barth’s “theology of crisis” has its origins in precisely this. As a preacher (and it should not be forgotten that Barth, and not only Barth but Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and most of the other prominent theologians of the first part of the 20th Century, unlike most academic theologians since, were first preachers!)—as a preacher, the young Barth, trained in the highest traditions of theological Liberalism, felt personally judged and summoned by the scriptures that were still, even in European liberal circles, the basis of sermons.

Thus, in a stirring essay, written in 1916 when Europe was in the throes of the Great War, Barth writes about “The Strange New World Within the Bible.” We go to the Bible, he says, expecting all our religious and human values to be confirmed—and of course we usually find what we are looking for (because like Luther Barth also knew that the Bible has a wax nose!); but if we actually let ourselves be taken into these writings we shall be in for a jolt—what Nietzsche called a “transvaluation of values”. “There is a river in the Bible,” Barth writes, “that carries us away, once we have entrusted our destiny to it—away from ourselves to the sea” [34]. We look in it for history, but it is not our kind of history. We look in it for morality, but it is more shocking than any allegedly “new” morality: “At certain

crucial points the Bible amazes us by its remarkable indifference to our conception of good and evil.” [38].

. . . not industry, honesty, and helpfulness as we may practice them in our old ordinary world, but the establishment and growth of a new world, the world in which God and [God’s] morality reign. In the light of this coming world a David is a great man in spite of his adultery and bloody sword; . . . Into this world the publicans and the harlots will go before your impeccably elegant and righteous folk of good society. In this world the true hero is the lost son, who is absolutely lost and feeding swine—and not his moral elder brother [40]

Even our typical religious questions, our theology, find no immediate correlate with the Biblical witness:

It is not the right human thoughts about God which form the content of the Bible, but the right divine thoughts about men. The Bible tells us not how we should talk with God but what he says to us; not how we find the way to him, but how he has sought and found the way to us; not the right relation in which we must place ourselves to him, but the covenant which he has made with all who are Abraham’s spiritual children and which he has sealed once and for all in Jesus Christ. It is this which is within the Bible. [43]

We see from this—this kind of concreteness—that for Karl Barth “the Bible” cannot be reduced to theory, theory about the Bible. If it remains a closed book, or a book whose contents seem to us ‘old hat’, or a book that we revere without really knowing what is in it, the Bible can never become what it is meant to become, the primary concrete witness to a Word that confronts us and questions us, and only out of that kind of confrontation also comforts and consoles us.

But I have used the term “witness to the Word”, and this leads me – and Barth, too—to introduce an important nuance into this discussion of the Bible as God’s Word. Of the threefold forms of the Word, only one can be called ‘Word of God’ without any qualification, and that is the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ. Insofar as faith sees in Jesus [in the words of the Barmen Declaration] “the one Word of God that we must trust in life and in death”, all other forms of God’s Word are relativized. For Jesus Christ cannot be translated into sentences and paragraphs and book—into words. Here is where Barth adopts quite unabashedly what Tillich has named “the Protestant principle.” God precludes definition. If God’s Word could be translated into words, those words would themselves become our god, our ultimate. Barth is by no means ready to travel that road. If we want to state the matter straightforwardly, then we must say that the Bible is the primary and indispensable *witness* to God’s living Word, and therefore not to be treated as though it were the absolute. What the Bible itself wants of us, says Barth, is certainly not that we should give our full attention to it!

What it wants from the Church, what it impels the Church toward—and it is the Holy Spirit moving in it who does this—is agreement with the direction in which it looks itself. And the direction in which it looks is to the living Jesus Christ. [Gollwitzer, p. 73]

But let us not think that for Barth this constitutes a diminution of Scripture and of its authority for the church. If the Bible is denied the status of

absolute truth, it is only in relation to what is truly absolute, God as such, not in relation to other sources and authorities. Only the Bible, of all the empirical authorities upon which the church calls, including tradition and church authorities—only the Bible has primary authority. The test of Christian and ecclesiastical authenticity is first and foremost Scripture.

If the Reformation of the 16th Century means the decision for Holy Scripture, conversely we must also say that for every age of the Church the decision for Holy Scripture means the decision for the reformation of the Church: for its reformation by its Lord Himself through the prophetic-apostolic witness which He established and the force of which is revealed and effective because it is written. Let the Church go away from Scripture as such. Let it replace it by its traditions, its own indefinite consciousness of its origins and nature, its own pretended direct faith in Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost, its own exposition and application of the word of the prophets and apostles. In the proportion in which it does this, it will prevent that entry upon which its whole life and salvation rests, and therefore at bottom refuse to be reformed. [Gollwitzer, p. 75]

These are strong words. They do not sit lightly with the Catholic, Anglican or other declaration that “the Bible is the Church’s book”. No, the church exists under the authority of the Book, not vice versa. The Church’s real life and witness, to which it is called anew in each age, requires that it be continuously reformed --re-formed--[*semper reformanda*] by the same biblical Word that is the source of its message to humankind, its gospel. Jesus Christ alone is Lord of the church. Yes, but apart from the continuously renewed hearing of the Bible the church makes of Jesus Christ

whatever it wishes to make of him; and therefore the Bible must remain something like the medium through which the sovereignty of the Christ is communicated to the ‘body’ of Christ.

So (to conclude this first section) Barth’s theology of Scripture is indeed a ringing endorsement of the Reformation’s *sola Scriptura*. The Bible is for the church ‘the Word of God.’

2. THE BIBLE AS HUMAN WORDS

But it is also of course the words of human beings.

In 1925-26, when he began to teach in the Protestant Faculty of Theology at the university in that very Catholic city, Muenster, Westphalia, Karl Barth gave a series of lectures on the Prologue to the Gospel of St. John, a chapter of the New Testament that has been pivotal for so much Christian theology. In the Introduction to these lectures, Barth quotes Augustine, who had written a famous series of tractates on John’s Gospel. How, asks Augustine, can mere humans (and the writer of John’s Gospel was certainly human!) understand the things of the Spirit of God. And the Bishop of Hippo answers (in Barth’s paraphrase), “They must all understand what they can, [and say what they can]. For who can say it as it is.?” And then Barth quotes Augustine directly,

I dare to say, brethren, that perhaps not even John himself has said it as it is, but only as he could, for a man has here spoken about God, a

man enlightened by God, but still a man. . . . Because enlightened, he has said something; if he had not been enlightened, he could have said nothing; but because he is an enlightened man, he has not said it at all as it is, but only said it as a man can say it. [Karl Barth, *Witness to the Word: A Commentary on John I*; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986; p. 1.]

This is both Augustine and Karl Barth speaking, and it is a pure case of “the Protestant principle”—applied directly to the Bible. What the Bible wants to say and tries to say cannot be said, not even by this highest authority concretely accessible to humankind. And it is perhaps precisely because this highest concrete authority knows that “it” cannot be said as “it” is, and constantly acknowledges this and refuses our human and especially our religious efforts to turn it, the Bible, into the “it” that cannot be said: it is perhaps just for this reason that it is the highest authority for the church. For it denies us the very status that we long to lay claim to, namely the status of Truth’s possessors, the status of becoming ourselves and as such,--as the church, as the Christian religion, as Christendom--what is ultimate and absolute, in relation to whom all others, with their claims and beliefs, are set aside or rendered inferior. The Bible denies us, in short, the quintessential “religious” temptation and quest, the quest at the heart of the biblical story of corporate Fall, Babel: the quest, namely, for mastery through proximity to, or even control over, the master of the universe.

I have never forgotten some words that I heard from the pulpit of James Chapel in Union Seminary fifty years ago. In those halcyon days, when mainstream (if not exactly ‘classical’) Protestantism still had a strong voice on this Continent, Union Seminary had invited the rising star of fringe Christianity (yes, it was fringe Christianity then, and in Union Seminary we often referred to it, snidely as “the lunatic fringe”)—the Seminary invited one, Billy Graham, to speak from its main pulpit. Billy Graham, who today, in the light of subsequent evangelicalism, seems a veritable elder statesman of the church universal, was evidently in that bygone context very conscious of being in the enemy’s camp, and so he gave it to us with both barrels: “I’ve got it right here in the Bible,” he shouted from the pulpit. And as a young and avid reader of Karl Barth I said to myself, “Aha! And I know what the most important words are in that sentence of yours, Billy. They are the first three words, *I’ve got it* (with the clear implication: ‘And you don’t, you godforsaken liberals!’). But, Billy, if you really knew what that Book is all about, you’d never use that kind of language; because that Book that you think you’ve “got” would not even make such a claim for itself. What it would tell you, if you listened to it and not your own religious predispositions and temptations, is that “it” can’t be “got”. That Book at every point utters a polemic against the entire human project of

“possession”—the possession of property, the possession of things, the possession of health and vigour, the possession of other people and (this above all!) the possession of Truth, capital T. For the Truth to which this book is pointing to infinitely transcends its own words. Like the figure of John the Baptist in Gruenewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece, who is pointing to the crucified Christ (Barth’s favourite piece of art), the Bible in all of its testimony is saying, “He must increase, I must decrease”. The Truth that God is revealed to be in Jesus Christ cannot be said “as it is” because it is a living Truth, it is Person, it is Thou and not “it”. It cannot be reduced to words, propositions, doctrines, stories; it cannot even be understood, as we normally use that word; it can only be stood under (which is of course the etymological background of the English word ‘understood.’) It is this living Truth, this Word that became and becomes flesh, to which the words of the Bible, human words, point; and we only honour the Bible (as we have already heard from Barth) when we actually “look in the direction to which it is pointing.”

Differently put, in itself the Bible is only a sign. “Indeed,” says Barth, “it is [only] the sign of a sign.” The “primary sign” is Jesus Christ himself. Not even he, the living Word, points to himself; he points to the God whom he represents in our midst. The Bible is a sign whose function is to point to

this living sign, Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection point us to the God by whom he is sent.

3. ON HAVING IT BOTH WAYS

So, to sum up, Karl Barth seems to be saying two things about the Bible: that it is God's Word; and that it is a compilation of human words. But how can these two things be said at the same time? Isn't that a contradiction? Doesn't Barth want to have his cake and eat it too?

Certainly that is the way popular religion is bound to see it. This religion thinks in either/or terms: Either the Bible is the Word of God or it is not. Is it or is it not God's own word? We cannot have it both ways.

But unlike the popular or so-called 'evangelical' Protestantism that has come to be in North American and elsewhere, the classical Protestantism of the Reformation, which Barth faithfully represents, insists that the church must and does have it both ways; that Christians must live in the dialectical tension between the yes and the no; and that when, instead of living in this tension, the church opts for either Yes or No in answer to the question whether the Bible is the Word of God, some very bad consequences—quite predictable on the basis of church history—occur. To those who say, 'Yes, the Bible is unqualifiedly God's Word', it inevitably happens that they fall into idolatry, by the Bible's own standards: the idolatry of Bible-worship,

bibliolatry.’ And to those who say, ‘No, the Bible is really only a compilation of human words, documents, letters and the like,’ it happens that they fall into a vacuum of authority, where anything and everything goes, and, eventually, where other authorities that are less helpful and less merciful than the Bible, easily take over. We do not need to speculate about these dangers; they have dogged the steps of Christendom since its inception, and they are with us in abundance still today.

So Barth’s and the Reformation’s conception of the role of Scripture is at least pragmatically important. It guards against these very characteristic dangers, on the one side bibliolatry, on the other confusion and fragmentation. But is it not also more than a merely pragmatic teaching? Is it not the attempt of thoughtful human and Christian minds to describe what is finally not reducible to an either/or. Life is full of realities that cannot be defined in straightforward, 1, 2, 3 thinking; realities that we have to walk around, and examine from many different angles; realities about which, to describe them with any kind of adequacy, or at least not to dishonour them, we must say things that seem (to the strictly logical mind) contradictory. And are not such realities in fact most of what we experience most deeply, like love and death and fear and friendship and every living person who enters closely into the sphere of our existing?

Clearly, a Book that has been and is so significant for the whole Christian sojourn as the Bible has been and is cannot be dispensed with or rendered optional without very serious consequences for the community that does this. Guardians of the Bible in our context are in this respect quite right in warning liberal Christian bodies that they will lose touch with their own foundations and *raison d'etre* if they do not become better students of the scriptures.

On the other hand, no thinking person or community today can approach the Scriptures as though they had fallen straight from heaven—a possibility that the Scriptures themselves consistently reject. The Bible is to be taken with great seriousness, and studied, and made the basis of our preaching, and the guide to the church's ongoing reformation of itself; but in the knowledge that it is a human book, however transcendent the message that it wants to convey to us.

Is there a way of stating this duality—this both/and—about the nature and authority of the Bible without contradiction: can one at the same time affirm its unique spiritual authority for us and its character as an historical collection of writings, humanly produced and therefore, like fall human productions, fallible?

Yes, I think there is. And Karl Barth himself puts it admirably in the following statement from his Church Dogmatics, with which I shall end:

. . . we cannot regard the presence of God's Word in the Bible as an attribute inhering once for all in this book as such and what we see before us of books and chapters and verses. Of the book as we have it, we can only say: 'We recollect that we have heard in this book the Word of God; we recollect, in and with the Church, that the Word of God has been heard in all this book and in all parts of it; therefore we expect that we shall hear the Word of God in this book again, and hear it even in those places where we ourselves have not heard it before. Yet the presence of the Word of God itself, the real and present speaking and hearing of it, is not identical with the existence of the book as such. But in this presence something takes place in and with the book, for which the book as such does not indeed give the possibility, but the reality of which cannot be anticipated or replaced by the existence of the book. A free decision is made. It then comes about that the Bible, the Bible *in concreto*, this or that biblical context, i.e. the Bible as it comes to us in this or that specific measure, is taken and used as an instrument in the hand of God, i.e., it speaks to and is heard by us as the authentic witness to divine revelation and is therefore present as the Word of God. [*Church Dogmatics I/2*, p. 530.]