

THE NEOORTHODOX THREAT

Charles C. Ryrie

"My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with the facts." This popular saying aptly describes neoorthodoxy. Its mind is made up about what it believes, and it certainly does not want to be confused with the facts, particularly if those facts come from the Bible.

It has been almost 50 years since neoorthodoxy was born into this world through the writings of Karl Barth. What influence has it had and what will be its effect on the life of the church in the next 50 years? This is not an easy question to answer, and even evangelicals are not agreed on their assessment of neoorthodoxy. Some feel that conservatives ought to be grateful to Barth for delivering the church from the curse of the old liberalism. Others feel that Barth's work is part of the increasing spirit of antichrist in Christendom. In between these extremes are many that view his influence as being partly for good and partly for ill.¹

¹See the report of the 1962 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in The Sunday School Times, January 26, 1963.

One thing is certain: Karl Barth cannot be dismissed as a flash in the pan. He is an important theologian whose influence will affect church life for many years to come. To be sure, his primacy is being challenged in Europe by the appearance of other schools of thought, (like Bultmann), but because American theology is usually about a generation behind the changes in European thinking, it will be some years before Barthianism loses sway in this country.

What is this theology called neoorthodoxy or Barthianism? How did it all start and what does it teach? Does it really affect average Christians or is it merely a theological debate?

This teaching has several names. "Neoorthodoxy" is used to designate what the leaders of the movement like to think of as the call away from the old liberalism and back to the orthodox theology of the Reformation. For this reason it is also sometimes called the "New Reformation Theology". These men feel that

since their theology calls men back to such basic doctrines as the sinfulness of men, the need for forgiveness, and the importance of the Word, it should be called a new orthodoxy or new reformation theology.

Of course the movement is also called Barthianism after the man who fifty years ago took issue with the prevailing theology and who led the way into this new system. Even though many of Barth's disciples have not followed their leader in every respect, the label sticks, for he is the titular head of the school of neoorthodox theology.

Who is this man, Karl Barth? Born in Switzerland in 1886 he studied in the leading universities of his day and under outstanding liberal professors. Though he was originally a thorough-going liberal, his liberalism and philosophical orientation began to crumble under the questions which he himself began to ask during his first pastorate. The practical pressure of knowing that his parishioners came to church to hear a message from God and not the opinions or speculations of the preacher also forced him to re-examine his own theological position.

In 1917 his commentary on Romans appeared like a clap of thunder with its announcement that God must be allowed to be God and that if anything is going to be done for man He must do it. During these nearly 50 years since that first book, Barth has been working on his Dogmatics which is his systematic theology. It is not completely finished even now, and may never be.

Of course Barth is not the only voice in neoorthodoxy. Two other men have contributed in an outstanding way--Emil Brunner and Reinhold Niebuhr. Brunner, also a Swiss born just 3 years after Barth, differs with Barth in that he believes that God reveals Himself through natural means as well as supernatural. Niebuhr is an American, born 6 years after Barth, and his special emphasis is on the social gospel within the neoorthodox framework.

Now just what is it that these men teach about the fundamentals of the faith? The most important thing to understand about neoorthodoxy is to know what is meant by the "Word" and its relation to the Bible. Evangelicals are accustomed

to using the term Word of God to mean either the written Word, that is the Bible, or the living Word, that is Christ. Neoorthodoxy uses it only to mean Christ. Therefore, when the Barthian talks about the revelation of God in the Word, he means in Christ. Of course there is nothing heretical about this, for God was revealed in Christ. It is in the relation of Christ and the Bible that Barthianism differs from evangelicalism. That is, we believe that revelation is in the words of the Bible as well as in the historical event of the coming of Christ. Neoorthodoxy believes that the Bible itself is not a revelation from God but that it only points to or witnesses to the revelation of God in Christ. Thus the parts of the Bible which speak of Christ are inspired while other parts are not. This allows the Barthian to accept all the conclusions of liberalism about errors in the Bible. The Barthian says that Adam did not really live; there was no place called the garden of Eden; the Bible is full of scientific and historical inaccuracies; the gospel writers invented facts about Christ; etc.

How can the average Christian discern all of this when reading or listening to Barthians? There are several tests to apply. First, does the author or preacher consider the first chapters of Genesis to be actual history? That is, does he regard Adam as a real person who lived on this earth at a certain time? The Barthian does not so regard Adam but understands him as a fictitious man who merely pictures you and me as sinners. Second, does he acknowledge the Bible itself as a revelation from God? Notice whether he says that the Bible is a record of revelation or the revelation itself. Sometimes a Barthian will say that the Bible points to the Word (Christ). If he avoids saying that the Bible is a revelation from God, this is a symptom of neoorthodoxy. Third, be alert to what he says about mistakes in the Bible, particularly in the areas of science, history, and the Gospels. Of course, liberals also consider the Bible to be full of errors and, unfortunately, today some former conservatives do too. But to the Barthian these factual errors make no difference to the "truth" which the Bible stories are trying to convey.

For instance, the resurrection of Christ is most important to neoorthodoxy, but whether or not the body of Jesus came out of the tomb makes little difference. In other words, they believe that you can have the truth of something without the facts. To most of us, this seems like an obvious logical impossibility, but the Barthian takes it in stride as part of his system.

Once my wife and I had a get-together in our home for the members of a class studying neoorthodoxy. We decorated the house with typical Barthian comments. On the kitchen door we placed this sign: "This is the kitchen. If you think you are going to have refreshments tonight, remember that the truth of refreshments is more important than the fact of refreshments!" But that kind of refreshments leaves you rather hungry. And so does this Barthian interpretation of the "truth" of the Bible without its facts.

If Jesus Christ is so important to neoorthodoxy as THE revelation of God, one would naturally think that Barthianism is quite orthodox on the person and work of Christ. But this is not the case. To the Barthian the facts of the life of Christ are not nearly so important as the significance of His life. Of course, you would have to say this if, as the Barthian does, you accepted the critics' attacks on the historicity of the Gospels and yet at the same time you wanted to preserve the "significance" of Jesus Christ. If you believed, as they do, that many of the stories in the Gospels were concocted by the early church or that John's gospel is a novel about Jesus written by a trembling old man, then you have to search for some way to give significance to the life of Christ on the basis of what is recorded in the Bible. His significance, they say, lies chiefly in the cross.

Just what does the cross mean in neoorthodoxy? It reveals God's displeasure with sin and it is the sign of election of all in Christ to life (this hints of universalism; that is, that all men will eventually be saved). The death of Christ is more of a display of God's feeling toward sin and of His love toward the sinner than it is a substitutionary atonement for sin. Although the

Barthian preacher or writer will speak of Christ dying for us, he will hardly ever mention the blood of Christ as an expiation for sin. The testimony of the Bible about the blood is very clear and strong, but the witness of neoorthodoxy is vague and weak.

How can a believer help someone who has become involved in neoorthodoxy? I think the best way is by trying to show him some specific error in the system. For instance, Barthianism denies the historicity of Adam but affirms the historicity of Christ. Such an inconsistency is emphatically disallowed by the teaching of Romans 5:12-21. Here Paul clearly teaches that at a certain time, in a certain place, a certain person, Adam, did a certain thing. If you remove time and space from the passage, what is left? And if nothing is left of Adam, then the parallelism of the passage requires you to conclude that nothing is real about the work of Christ. If the Barthian denies what Paul teaches about Christ in Romans 5:12-21, then he has gone right back to liberalism. If he accepts what is taught about Christ, then logically he should accept what is recorded about Adam.

Or again, one may try to show the person taken up with neoorthodoxy that the Bible itself claims to be a revelation in words. Paul claimed that what he taught in his epistles was "not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (I Cor. 2:13). Revelation was in words and specifically in the words of the Bible.

Too, one may point to the use the Lord Jesus made of the Bible. Since Barthians believe that Christ is the revelation of God, whatever His opinion of the Bible was ought to be our's. Christ appealed to the Bible again and again as the final authority which could never be challenged. He quoted the Old Testament in His temptation, and His answer to Satan was simply put on the basis that "it is written", not "it witnesses" (Matt. 4:4,7,10; 19:3-9; John 10:35). The Lord believed that the Bible is the Word of God, inspired and authoritative. Acknowledging the authority of Christ (which the Barthian professes to do) requires

acknowledging the authority of the Bible.

In a church with a conservative background neoorthodoxy can do nothing but lead the members away from the truth and especially from the authority of the Bible. And when the authority of the Bible is displaced (even with the neoorthodox emphasis on the authority of Christ) there is bound to be declension in spiritual life. The authority of Jesus Christ is never apart from His written Word, and a proper authoritative attitude toward the Bible always leads one to acknowledge the mastery of Christ. Neoorthodoxy tries to divorce the two in order to maintain some semblance of authority and yet allow for a Bible containing errors. Neoorthodoxy ~~not~~^{does} lead one back to Reformation theology. It is unbiblical, for it does not call men back to the Bible as the basic, objective and final authority. In the final analysis the authority of neoorthodoxy is subjective, for anybody can interpret the Bible as he wishes.

Neoorthodoxy seems like a perfect combination which allows one to accept the conclusions of liberalism and at the same time to preach evangelically. Nevertheless, it is divisive when it attempts to penetrate evangelical churches, and it is under sharp criticism from liberals. It cannot get along with either group. If trends in American theology run true to form, neoorthodoxy will soon be on the wane. It is being challenged now in Europe and is being displaced in some quarters by various forms of new liberalism. However, its waning influence will not reach the average church which has been taught neoorthodoxy for some time, simply because many preachers continue to preach what they have been taught in seminary, and many today are still being taught Barthianism. Perhaps as the pendulum swings with new winds of doctrine, and after the present leaders of neoorthodoxy die, some of the distinctivenesses will be dulled so that Barthianism may serve as a theological bridge in the ecumenical attempt to unite liberals and conservatives. But one thing is certain: as we approach the end of the age things will not get better. Knowledge will increase, but not the knowledge of the truth, and with that declension will come evil men and seducers

waxing worse and worse (2 Tim. 3:7, 13). In the face of this prospect, the believer's only sure defense is to abide in the holy Scriptures which are inspired and authoritative (2 Tim. 3:14-17). Only orthodoxy--never neo-orthodoxy will help you to do that.