

Introduction

Karl Barth's famous commentary of Romans (The Epistle to the Romans) questioned the methodology used by academic religious study, the so called "historical-critical method". Adolf Harnack tried in turn to question Barth's new approach and a discussion about the proper way of understanding the revelation of Scripture developed. This paper is an analysis of the exchange trying to find out the distinctive views of both authors on the following questions:

- **The role of history and historical concerns for an understanding of Scripture.**
- **The requirements for good exegesis.**

Central to both is the unquestioned notion of a "scientific theology" supposedly without any bias. Karl Barth's greatest difficulty in establishing another way of understanding Scripture is that he accepts the basics of the historical critical method, yet sees that in practice the biblical message deviates from "Scientific Theology" as commonly understood. Barth tries to bridge the gap between both understandings with his "Dialectic Method".

The Historical Critical Method: Harnack

Harnack's method of interpreting Scripture is based on his optimism about the ability of human reason and empirical research (Science) to know the world. Every thing has to be judged by the knowledge that humanity has acquired. Knowledge and reasons cannot be challenged and have to be the measuring rod for everything not only natural science but also including the understanding of Scripture.

The content of Scripture has to be understood using historical knowledge and critical reflection (H165). In itself Scripture is not self evident or clear. Historical analysis must determine our Christian experience (H166). Miracles cannot have happened since they are contrary to our empirical scientific findings. "Scientific theology" is the way of mastering a subject through means of the intellect (H171). It is a science and therefore has to be done

like all other natural sciences progressing from empirical knowledge gained through experience.

The Gospel is simple in that it demands obedience. The Gospel needs to be relevant to daily life and this relevancy is accomplished by the ethical teachings.

Barth's Critique

Barth's basic critique is that the "Scientific" method for understanding Scripture has the wrong priorities. The common scholarly methods try to analyze faith basically from the outside putting reason first and then trying to get at the center of the issue. Scripture has to be understood from the inside out, one has to grasp the central things first to understand the outside. Barth voices here the same complaint that Schleiermacher already expressed against his "cultural despisers" (*Schleiermacher's Speeches* p. 14 in Syllabus). "Scientific Theology" has had the wrong emphasis and has moved away from its theme which should be the revelation of the Bible. Barth wants theology to have a new focus on the "one revelation of God" which can only be understood by the Holy Spirit and not by intellectual exercises (B167).

"Scientific Theology" is not stable and depends largely on the opinion of Scholars that will fluctuate as society changes. It therefore cannot be normative for theology and is not as objective as commonly held (B170).

Barth sees a great distance between the critical historical method and the old inspirational understanding that he personally prefers. Yet he accepts both and as a result has to deal with a constant tension between these two ways of approaching Scripture (R61). The critical historical method is a way of preparation (and is necessary! R91) but is worthless without the "Spirit of the Bible" pointing directly to the understanding. The critical method only establishes and deals with historical and textual problems. Scholars are usually content with this restricted task, but it is necessary to proceed to an understanding and meaning of the text in order to make it relevant and to make it good exegesis.

Barth accepts the results that stem from establishing the text and the historical understanding, but the interpretation that modern scholars give from the text are usually banalities. The ways of Calvin and Luther in understanding the Bible and in applying it to life were much broader and have to be revived (B92). The dualism between Science and Orthodox Theology is bridged by building on the basis of what modern science has established about the text and then a second step has to be taken. The text needs to be understood and applied. Calvin and Luther had a great ability in this field and applied biblical teachings freely to contemporary living. The current scholars are in contrast very hesitant to see anything that is still applicable and are more or less content to find the sources of biblical passages and thought (R92).

What Barth was taught at German universities was devoid of just how to make the text relevant, the most important task of all. Barth had to work out how to do exegesis by himself (R94).

For Barth the Gospel is not simple and especially not the simple moralistic Gospel of Harnack. Life is difficult and so is the Gospel (R90). Barth sees that it is very easy to find something to criticize in the Bible as for example many view of Paul. But the primary task of exegesis is not to find something that is wrong with Scripture and to despise the primitivity of it all but to understand and rethink what the author thought to gain some insight from it. It is important to think through points that are offensive to the modern mind and not judge the Bible on contemporary thought¹. The true Gospel is to be preferred over a simplistic harmonized Gospel. The true Gospel can be grasped by any student reading the text, which has been seen as dangerous by some scholars. But exactly this dangerous effect is what Barth wants to produce. The Gospel should be offensive and not politically correct (R96/97).

¹A very good insight. This might be a very useful argumentation against modern "purification" of the Gospel as practiced today at Fuller for example in the issue of the roles of genders.

Harnack's Critique of Barth

Harnack first of all denies that there is something like Barth's evident meaning of Scripture. Meaning can only be determined using historical knowledge and historical reflection. It is basically an intellectual task. Knowledge of the Bible does not simply pop up in the mind nor is it gained by subjective experience (H165).

For Harnack his own version of the "Gospel of the Gospel" (simple Gospel) is self evident and stems from a "true feeling". He has the same problem as Barth. He can argue for his own "Gospel" also by referring to subjective feelings in the same way that he accuses Barth of doing with the "evident meaning of Scripture" (Quotation 4 from Syllabus). "Experience" is also important for Harnack to gain "convictions" (Quotation 16). His tower of reasoning is therefore also not purely rational as he wants others to believe.

For Barth conformity with the message of the Bible is very important. The initial attitude must be a trust in the truth of what the author writes and in his sincere intentions (R128).

For Harnack the trust and faithfulness of the author and the message has to be first established by research. Jesus stands at the center of the Gospel but can only be reliably understood by careful critical historical analysis otherwise a imagined Christ instead of the real one will be the center of theology (H166).

Harnack is focusing very much on the importance of the ethical teaching of the Gospel. Ethics means progress and the evolution of society to something better. Barth -- by making the Gospel something spiritual -- separates it from the effect it should have on daily life (H165). The current culture has evolved because of the teaching of the Gospel. Barth theology would destroy the culture and lead back to atheism (H166).

Good exegesis teaches ethics and continues the evolution of society (H172). Christianity is bound to be culture. That is also the reason for Harnack to endorse the first world war as a war of cultures (See APPEAL TO THE WORLD OF CULTURE in Syllabus). Germany was deemed to be superior because of highly developed ethics. The defeat of the inferior

cultures (like England etc) was for their salvation through the superior culture of Germany.

Conclusion

The attitude that the Scripture is basically an instrument of societal evolution is again prevalent today in many North American churches and churches worldwide. Paul Jewett has articulated in the same way that we have to go beyond Scripture in the "progressive character of revelation" or the "Light of the Gospel"². We have to reject primitive time dependent teachings and go on with the development of society. The line of Harnack's theology ended with the Nazis taking over Germany. I wonder what result Jewett-style Theology will have on the churches in the long run. The first results of this theology are evident already in censorship ("Inclusive Language") and destruction of the family by idealization of a male lifestyle for women, despising their accomplishment in family and society at large in the past.

²Paul Jewett, God, Creation & Revelation p. 144-145