

# **The Notion of Mission in Karl Barth's Ecclesiology**



# The Notion of Mission in Karl Barth's Ecclesiology

By

Wessel Bentley

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P U B L I S H I N G

The Notion of Mission in Karl Barth's Ecclesiology, by Wessel Bentley

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## DEDICATION

This book is based on a thesis, which I prepared towards the degree Philosophiae Doctor in the Department of Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics at the University of Pretoria. I would like to thank my promotor, Prof. Conrad J. Wethmar for his guidance and support during my studies and for his continued friendship and stimulating conversations.

To my family, Natalie, Matthew and Nathan, I would like to express a sincere word of thanks for their encouragement and love. I dedicate this book to the memory of my grandfather, Hubertus van Goeverden who, I know, is having interesting conversations with Professor Barth.



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>Catechism</i>	The Roman Catholic Church. 1992. <i>The Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> . Nairobi: Pauline Press.
<i>CD</i>	Barth, K. 1956-1975. <i>Church Dogmatics</i> . Edinburgh: T&T Clark.
<i>KD</i>	Barth, K. 1932-1967. <i>Die Kirchliche Dogmatik</i> . Zürich: TVZ Verlag.
<i>L&amp;D</i>	The Methodist Church of Southern Africa. 2000. <i>Laws and Discipline of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa</i> . Tenth Edition. Cape Town: Methodist Publishing House
<i>Kairos</i>	The Kairos Theologians. 1985. <i>Challenge to the Church: A theological comment on the political crisis in South Africa (The Kairos Document)</i> . Braamfontein: The Kairos Theologians.



## FOREWORD

It is common knowledge that both globally and in South Africa, the past two decades were characterized by immense and decisive changes. It is equally well known that such radical changes in the political, cultural and economical spheres impact dramatically on the way in which the Christian church perceives its own identity and task: “What is the nature and mission of the church in these radical new circumstances?” becomes an urgent and inescapable question. This is the question to which the present book by Dr Wessel Bentley, a South African Methodist, is devoted. The method which he employs in dealing with this question is analyzing the ecclesiology of Karl Barth and determining its relevance for coping with burning issues in present-day church ministry—issues like ecumenical relations between Christian churches, relations to other religions as well as relations to secularized people and the public spheres of politics and culture in general. Bentley’s choice of Barth as dialogue partner in dealing with these issues will come as no surprise to anyone who recalls that more than twenty years ago Geoffrey Wainwright, in his Cato lecture at the 1985 Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia, convincingly showed how closely John Calvin and John Wesley agreed on key aspects of Christian faith and life. It is therefore understandable that a present-day Methodist theologian uses a critical analysis of the ecclesiology of Karl Barth, the twentieth century’s most prominent representative of the Reformed tradition, as the basic framework in terms of which to discuss the vital ecclesiological questions just mentioned.

In this process the author participates in the vital development inspired by Barth’s rediscovery of the relevance of the trinitarian concept. The ecclesiological implication of this development is the emphasis on unity as communion in diversity rather than on separation. And the further implication of this idea for the ecumenical endeavours of the church speaks for itself.

In this regard Dr Bentley’s book also contributes to a debate that had been in progress in South Africa for quite some time. Already in

1988 a volume with the title “On reading Karl Barth in South Africa” had been published<sup>1</sup> and in August 2006 a conference was held in Pretoria on “Reading Karl Barth in South Africa today”. This longstanding debate plays an unobtrusive but nevertheless meaningful role in the transition and reconstruction process that has been taking place in South Africa.

Any attempt to determine the implications of Barth’s ecclesiology for the present-day context is confronted with a daunting task. It is well known that Barth produced an oeuvre of immense scope while the plethora of secondary literature dealing with his work has taken on such proportions that a complete overview thereof has become impossible. Dr Bentley should therefore be commended for providing such a lucid, coherent and challenging account of the relevance which the ecclesiology of Barth has for describing the nature and mission of the church in present-day circumstances. The book deserves many attentive readers.

Conrad Wethmar  
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University of Pretoria

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<sup>1</sup> Edited by Charles Villa-Vicencio.

## PREFACE

The Church<sup>1</sup> is entering its twenty-first century of existence. It has a history that tells the story of how time, politics, leadership and theological understanding have shaped the way in which it engaged with the world under the well-meaning banner of mission.

A great deal of both good and evil has come from this divinely instructed work. Testimony of the Church at work varies from it being an instrument of political and social liberation struggles to being the authority behind the slaughter of many, especially during the Middle Ages. The testimony of contradicting behaviour in the "universal church" is not over. In fact, the criticism of the church's inconsistency will only become harsher as secular society refuses to be intimidated by the church's claimed moral high ground.

I believe that one of the most relevant theological questions that should be asked of the church today be "What is mission?". What is the Church's mission? What is God calling the Church to be in the twenty-first century? Obviously we find many models emerging in the world today (specifically from so-called mega-churches<sup>2</sup>) attempting to make congregations bigger, stronger and more effective, but these may not answer the fundamental doctrinal questions relating to the Church's identity and its work.

We need to look at history and determine the Church's origins. More importantly, we should examine the relationship between the Church and the One who created and steers it. This study aims to do exactly this. By investigating the identity and role of the Church, we

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that in this text I use "church" to refer to the church as institution and "Church" to refer to the theological concept of the Body of Believers.

<sup>2</sup> By using this term I refer to churches that have a great numerical membership compared to that of the traditional main-line churches. These churches mostly gather in auditorium-type venues and emphasise the place of small-groups. In small-groups, members receive specific pastoral care, teaching and guidance. Examples of such churches in South Africa are Rhema Bible Church and Hatfield Christian Church.

may be able to present a clear understanding of what it means to be part of the church, the church at work and the church in mission.

## 1. Theoretical framework

It is difficult, if not impossible, to formulate an understanding of mission without an historical perspective. It would be irresponsible to do so, because the Church belongs to history and therefore has assumed certain definitions regarding its identity and role.

I have decided to focus on the ecclesiology of Karl Barth. I have chosen Barth, because it is my opinion that the ecclesiology Barth offers is one of the most relevant concerning the questions that are asked of the church today. During Barth's lifetime we find a dynamic understanding and implementation of different definitions of mission. The rise of the Reich in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, using its support of a significant section of German churches, tabled its agenda not merely as a political one, but as an agenda devoted to its obedience to God's will. Needless to say, all Christians did not accept this definition of mission and Church identity. So, German Christians found themselves divided in their faith, and practice of this faith in a world which was slowly breaking apart.

In search of unity, we find a monumental attempt to define the Church's role in society in the Barmen Declaration. This declaration was indeed the turning point in Church history as it was a consensus document between different denominations and paved the way for the Church's response to the historical-political era it was about to face (Busch 1976:236). Karl Barth undoubtedly played a major role in the formulation of the Barmen Declaration (Busch 1976:236)<sup>3</sup>. It was his opinion that the Church's sole responsibility was to be engaged in mission (Mebust 1981:15-17) and had a responsibility to find the true meaning of this concept.

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<sup>3</sup> Krötke (2006:271) affirms this point. The Barmen Declaration, in his (Krötke 2006:271) opinion, also displays classic traits of Barth's theology. The way in which the Word is emphasised as the decisive form of God's self-disclosure, therefore downplaying the notion of Natural Theology, is a good example.

The Barmen Declaration cannot be seen as a complete description or summary of Barth's theological mind, but it does give us an indication of a true and authentic struggle to make sense of the identity and role of the church. Barth wrote many papers and books, referring directly or partially to the mission that God has called the Church to, so this may show that this question was important in the formulation of his theological understanding. It is refreshing to see that Barth's theology was not born out of solely academic research, but that Barth's theology developed primarily as a response to real theological questions posed by both the Church and the world.

The twenty-first century holds many parallels with Barth's world. Superpowers in the world today, such as the United States of America, rely on the support of conservative, fundamentalist Christian understandings in order to push their agenda. Once again, the Church finds itself divided and does not portray unity in the understanding of its identity and/or role on issues, such as the war in Iraq, stem-cell research or abortion on demand. The list goes on.

In this thesis, it is my quest to identify Mission-themes in Barth's ecclesiology, to describe the relevance in modern theological discussions and then to formulate an understanding of mission that would describe the church's identity and role in the times in which we live.

## **2. Research problem and objectives**

The research problem is posed as: "Does Barth's understanding of the church's relationships propose a defined missionary focus?" The hypothesis is that Barth's understanding of the Church's relationships to different entities will give us clear guidelines in understanding the Church's mission. It may seem as if it should be the other way around: that the church's mission comes first and then shapes the nature of its relationships, but I suggest that this is not the case.

Although the argument follows Barth's ecclesiological understanding from a very specific context, it would only be proper to question the validity of using Barth's understanding to teach us something in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Here are questions and proposed answers:

## **2.1 Is nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany a valid era for comparison with the current Ecclesiastical dilemma?**

These two eras are almost a century apart. The historical-, social-, and political contexts vary greatly. From an objective perspective it hardly seems fair to compare these two contexts. Despite their differences, I aim to prove that the ecclesiological concepts Barth suggests are relevant to the church today. The gift of Dogmatics is that it aims to find truth. The greater the doctrinal contribution, the more one will find that glimpses of universal truth appear in their discussion.

It is therefore implied that there exists a difference between divine truth and truth perceived and expressed in creation. The assumption is that the former constitutes universal truth. Karl Barth is aware of this difference and therefore describes truth as being analogous (CD II/1:238). If the divine perspective acts as the *analogans* and the human perspective as the *analogate* (Hunsinger 2000b:218), then creation can at best reflect a truth that exists beyond itself, while not being able to lay claim to this truth as its own making. The more creation, and in this case Dogmatics, opens itself to receiving divine truth, the closer its expression of truth will be to that which is revealed.

Barth's theology has certainly stood the test of time, as one finds continuing research into his theology on an annual basis. It is my view that Barth's ecclesiological proposals will do the same, offering us new insights into the church's position before God and in the world. As stated in the hypothesis, the Church's relationships speak the loudest concerning the church's missionary function.

## **2.2. How significant is Barth's contribution to the modern debate?**

I believe that there is resurgence in Barth's theology in modern theological debate. Although Barth was greatly influenced by the history that he formed part of, we find aspects of his theological understanding that are relevant to situations and contexts that differ from his own. It is the task of this thesis to identify these and to measure them against present theological thinking.



### 3. Research design

This study is a literary conceptual analysis as it studies the concepts conveyed in Barth's work on the Church. This book is divided into seven chapters, each of which will focus on a specific aspect of the church's relationship both with God and with different structures in the world. By investigating Barth's description of each of these relationships, this thesis will then deduce the missionary responsibility of the church to each of these.

Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter, posing the question concerning the Church's role and identity. A brief description of Karl Barth will be given as well as reasons for the focus on his thinking. This chapter will also give a general structure for the rest of the book, so that the reader will be able to follow the progression in theological thinking towards formulating an understanding of mission.

Chapters 2 to 6 will individually focus on Barth's understanding of the relationship between the Church and its "partners". It is from these relationships that we will be able to establish an understanding of the Church's identity and role.

Chapter 2 will look at the relationship between the Church and God. The way in which the Church relates to God must determine the way in which it understands itself and implements its faith. We believe that God has called the Church into existence and therefore can be described as the author of the Church's identity. To neglect the Church's relationship to God would omit the foundational structure of both the Church's identity and its purpose.

Chapter 3 will focus on the relationships within the Church itself. To what extent is the Church universal and catholic? How does one find a common identity and role in a body with such diverse ideas and ideals? Barth's description of the ecumenical nature of the Church must therefore also give guidance for understanding the dynamics of mission-concepts in a denominationally diverse body.

Chapter 4 describes the relationship between the Church and other religions. Does the Church have the sole divine mandate to be God's instrument of revelation and salvation? In an increasingly

secular world where post-modern philosophy seems to suggest that all different views carry equal weighting in terms of truth, the Church is challenged in finding its missionary purpose. Is the Church but one voice among many speaking the same truth, from divergent perspectives?

Barth's view in this regard is extremely valuable as history is important to him. He is anti-modern in a sense that he did not allow "...post-modern methodological criteria, or the content of any of the modern academic disciplines, to influence the substance of theology." (Hodgson 1989:25).

Chapter 5 focuses on the relationship between the Church and the "lost", or as are termed later, the "faithless". What is the Church's role in the lives of those who do not identify with the divine? Here aspects such as Barth's understanding of election and salvation are examined.

Chapter 6 searches for answers in the relationship between the Church and the State. Does the Church have a responsibility towards the State? What is the responsibility of the Church and what is the responsibility of the State? Perhaps the most important question lies in the nature in which God is in relationship with both the Church and the State.

Chapter 7 then serves as a concluding chapter, weighing all of the research above and formulating a description of the identity and role of the Church in mission in a meaningful way.

This study makes a unique contribution to the body of knowledge by researching the notion of mission in Barth's ecclesiology using Barth's understanding of the Church's relationships as a backdrop. By defining the relational character of Barth's ecclesiology, the way in which the church engages with its context becomes clear. This relational perspective gives insight, not only into the doctrinal understanding of mission, but also into the implications of mission when the church takes these relationships seriously.

## 4. Research methodology

My primary source of input will come from theological books and journals. Barth wrote a substantial amount. Not only did he write academic theology, but his theology is a response to several philosophical, political and social contexts. The main source that I have used, written by Barth, is his *Church Dogmatics*<sup>4</sup>. Using Barth's *Church Dogmatics* as the main reference has an advantage. *Church Dogmatics* offers a very mature Barthian ecclesiology, an ecclesiology that is the result of inter-disciplinary and socio-political debates.

To use Barth's earlier works exclusively without referring to *Church Dogmatics* would have been confusing as Barth changed his theological opinion at least three times. There are thoughts that remained significantly consistent in his work and these are explored as far as possible. Where reference is made to Barth's understanding, if he had a change of mind, this will then be indicated in the text.

Because of the large volume of work, I have had to refer to numerous secondary sources that have focussed on specific aspects of Barth's ecclesiology. I have always verified claims made by secondary sources by referring to the primary texts and by comparing them to perspectives from other secondary sources. By dedicating myself to this project, I am also aware of the time constraints within which this project needs to be completed. It is therefore not possible to consult all the material pertaining to Barth's ecclesiology. The sources that I have consulted and the time I have dedicated to this project will, in my view, add to the body of knowledge concerning this topic. Using these sources and the structure described in the previous section, I am convinced that a meaningful understanding of mission will emerge.

Lastly, it is necessary to note my own context as the writer. I am a South African, serving as an ordained minister in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. This has allowed me to be in conversation with lay-Christians and to hear their questions and frustrations concerning the church's role and identity. I am also a

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<sup>4</sup> Referred to as CD or KD. See bibliography.

part-time lecturer in Systematic Theology and Theological Ethics at the University of South Africa. This privilege has given me the opportunity to reflect on and engage in academic theological conversations concerning these issues.

This study contributes to both these contexts. In the academic context, it raises critical questions concerning the Church's dogmatic understanding of mission by suggesting that mission must be understood from the premise that the church exists within relationships and cannot speak about God without taking these seriously. It also encourages the local congregation to understand its role as both a church in relationship and a church in mission. When the church understands its place in relationship with the world, then the church will be able to testify effectively concerning its Lord.

Effective communication is one of the prerequisites for the church to be relevant and accessible in the world. I believe that the model of mission proposed in this book will promote the church's awareness of its relationships, thereby improving the way it engages with different parties in the world.

## CHAPTER ONE

# KARL BARTH AND THE CHURCH: A THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM

### 1. Introduction

Karl Barth is undoubtedly one of the greatest theologians that the world has ever seen<sup>1</sup>. Agree or disagree with Barth's theology, but expect to be challenged with clearly defined arguments, an obviously deep spirituality and an unparalleled understanding of Scripture.

Although Karl Barth is the author of over 30 000 pages of theology, one finds in his writing a personal journey of faith, a faith perhaps best described in the phrase coined by Anselm of Canterbury as "Faith seeking understanding"<sup>2</sup>. Barth certainly does not have all the answers, but moves one to think in dimensions previously unexplored. His own humility concerning his work is clearly indicated in statements such as the following: "...I am afraid I don't understand some of the questions or, alternatively, understand some of them only too well and am afraid I may say something that might lead to new questions." (Barth 1954a:94).

Asking questions is nevertheless at the heart of Barth's theology. When reading his theological contributions, one is struck by the manner in which Barth asks questions about his God, the world he lives in and the Church in which he serves. Many of these questions will be used as focal points in this thesis. We find in Karl Barth a theological genius, a theologian ahead of his time, but yet also an ordinary Christian struggling with the meaning of God in a volatile period of world-history. His struggle expands into the place of the Church in the context of human suffering and calls for a faith in God that hopes for the day when all creation will find completion and harmony in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> This is my personal opinion.

<sup>2</sup> See Migliore (1991:2).

I wish to focus on one aspect of Barth's theological struggle and debate, namely his personal wrestling with the meaning and function of the community of Christian believers, called the Church<sup>3</sup>. In reading Barth, one soon determines that Barth did not construct or write his theology in isolation from the rest of the world, but that his theological views speak directly to the heart of human experience. His struggle with the church had to endure the torturous events of both the World Wars. He heard the church make statements in the Name of God to both align itself with, and to disassociate itself from, the rise of German National Socialism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries<sup>4</sup>.

There is an underlying question in his work: "Where is the real Church?". One truth remained consistent in his thinking about the Church – that it is certainly not something constructed by human initiative, the human mind or human hands! Hart (2000:49) summarizes Barth's theological understanding in a single sentence: "The Father sends the Son into the world and creates a community of response in the power of the Spirit".

Hart's view as quoted, proves that Barth's theology does not involve only the Person of Jesus Christ at the expense of the Persons of the Father and the Holy Spirit. As we journey through Barth's quest, trying to make sense of the phenomenon of the Church, the strong emphasis on Trinitarian participation in Barth's theology will become more evident.

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<sup>3</sup> Please see footnote 1.

<sup>4</sup> The contextual application of faith is evident in the following quote: "Religious Righteousness! There seems to be no surer means of rescuing us from the alarm cry of conscience than religion and Christianity. Religion gives us the chance, beside and above all vexations of business, politics, and private and social life, to celebrate solemn hours of devotion – to take flight to Christianity as to an eternally green island in the grey sea of the everyday. There comes over us a wonderful sense of safety and security from the unrighteousness whose might we everywhere feel. It is a wonderful illusion, if we can comfort ourselves with it, that in our Europe – in the midst of capitalism, prostitution, the housing problem, alcoholism, tax evasion, and militarism – the church's preaching, the church's morality, and the 'religious life' go their uninterrupted way. And we are Christians! Our nation is a Christian nation! A wonderful illusion, but an illusion, a self-deception!" (Barth 1957:19-20).

Like a master-artist, Barth has the ability to convey deeper messages in the text that is presented. Taking into consideration that Barth's theological approach was in dialogue with world-history, in Barth's description of the Church, Barth offers an underlying definition of mission that describes, and possibly even prescribes, how the Church should interact with its context. It may seem as if Barth describes the Church and Context to be in a dynamic relationship where some truths are irreplaceable. Context will change, the Church's role will change, but the Revealed Truth to which the Church testifies must remain the same.

This study investigates the dynamic relationship between the Church and its context and seeks to determine the unchangeable Truth of Christ as perceived by Barth. This chapter will focus on Barth's general Ecclesiology, serving as a backdrop to the more detailed interactions between the Church and its context as described in the chapters to follow.

## **2. Who was Karl Barth?**

Karl Barth was born in 1886 in Basel, Switzerland. His father, Johann Friederich (Fritz) Barth, was a theologian in his own right and lectured at the University of Berne (Mangina 2004:1). From a very young age, Karl decided that he wanted to be a theologian. He entered the vocation of ordained ministry in the Reformed Church, but was to find very early in his ministry that parish-life was not his main calling. Although he had a high interest in academia, it is very surprising that Karl never completed a doctoral degree (Grenz and Olson 1992:66). His theological genius was a natural gift, but something that he nurtured and challenged by means of dedicated reading, disciplined writing and continuous debate with his contemporaries<sup>5</sup>.

The significance of his contribution to theology was not so much to be found in what he was taught in academic circles, but the way in

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<sup>5</sup> Barth engaged in serious theological discussion. Among others, he debated issues concerning interpretation of Scripture with Bultmann (Bromiley 1981), the nature of revelation with Schleiermacher (Barth 1982) and the problem of Catholicism with Przywara (Busch 1976:182). The list goes on.

which Barth applied theology to daily existence. Perhaps the greatest catalyst that sparked Barth's contribution came in his decisive break with the prominent Liberal Theology<sup>6</sup> that existed in that day. Barth found that Liberal Theology did not contribute to the theological journey of "normal Christians" who seek to meet with God. This truth became very apparent in his first appointment as minister in a small town called Safenwil (Grenz and Olson 1992:66).

In August of 1914 Barth read a document that was compiled by 93 German intellectuals, many of whom were his former teachers, supporting Kaiser Wilhelm's war policy, therefore promoting German imperialism (Grenz and Olson 1992:66). This was another factor that convinced the young Barth of the inaccurate witness proclaimed by Liberal Theology. In response to this declaration, Barth engaged on a mammoth exegetical task, searching the truth for himself. The result of this work is to be found in what was to become one of his most profound works: "Der Römerbrief". Although "Der Römerbrief" was to be edited and revised later by Barth himself, this work carried a theological message that was to resound in Barth's work in the future. It was only after revising "Der Römerbrief" in the summer of 1921 (Busch 1976:117) that Barth's views rose to prominence in the academic world (Grenz and Olsen 1992:67).

The conclusion he came to is this: Liberal Theology fell into the age-old trap of emphasizing the possibility of human perfection, using human means. Liberal Theology's focus was on the possibility of creating a process whereby the divinity of some can be recognized and celebrated while the obvious humanity of others was to be condemned, if not destroyed. This is stating the crux of Liberal Theology in very simplistic terms.

Although the theory of Liberal Theology is more complex, of importance in this chapter, is how Barth responded to this theology which was becoming more dominant in the world in which he lived. In fact, it became so dominant, that for a while it carried full political

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<sup>6</sup> "A trend in Protestant theology, dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, that advocated rationality, disregarded those Orthodox opinions which were not compatible with rationality and a scientific outlook, fostered an optimistic view of man's inherent mortality, was inclined towards historicism and stressed God's direct indwelling in man rather than his objective existence." (Deist 1984:143).



endorsement and itself became a driving force in the rise of National Socialism in Germany (Busch 1976:286-291)<sup>7</sup>.

In short, Barth could not see either the logic, or the integrity of such an approach, hence his disagreement with theologians such as Brunner, Bultmann and Herrmann (Mangina 2004:4-5). Where Liberal Theology promoted the idea of the intimate and inseparable intrinsic nature of the beings of the divine and the created, Barth (1933:28) responded in "Der Römerbrief" with an understanding of the total "Otherness of God", later to be labelled as "Dialectical theology" (Grenz and Olson 1992:67).

The initial reaction to the confrontation between sinful humanity and the perfection of God had to, in Barth's (1960:48) opinion, result in a "Divine No!". If God is perfect (in every way) and the human condition is imperfect, then there is a natural tendency to move to the suggestion of a Platonic view (McGrath 2001:274) of the relationship between God and humanity. The theme in "Der Römerbrief" therefore carries the enquiry further: If there is such a distinct and significant difference between the nature of God and that of humanity, not even taking into account the difference in their existence, how is it logically possible for humanity to even think of itself as being capable of reaching the Divine through its own doing? Surely God should see the illogical approach of God's creation and respond with a definite "No!". Creation cannot become God, even more so, creation cannot use its own devices to reveal any form of divinity within itself (Barth 1933:1).

It is for this very reason that Barth rejected Natural Theology<sup>8</sup> and proclaimed that the only revelation of God must come from Godself. From this point, Barth ventured down a different road in the relationship between God and creation. The shift in theological approach may seem small, but it proved to have significant consequences in how Barth described the inevitable encounter between God and humanity. Liberal Theology had, as a response

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<sup>7</sup> Barth became involved in the anti-Nazi Confessing Church that opposed both Nazism and the underlying theology of Liberal theology (Grenz and Olson 1992:69).

<sup>8</sup> "Reflecting on God independently of revelation..." (Deist 1984:167).

from Barth, a “Divine No!”. If the encounter between God and creation ended here, then surely the relationship between God and creation, specifically humanity, would have reached a stalemate? Logically, this stalemate implies that if humanity offered any attempt to become righteous and godly, God would simply respond with disapproval. If humanity is faced with this Divine rejection, then it finds itself in a place where righteousness is not an option. What is needed in this equation is the possibility for God to approve of humanity. The only way, in which this could then find realization would be through God’s own intervention in the human situation, establishing the possibility of reconciliation between the Creator and the created. This is where Barth’s theology made a significant contribution.

In 1930, possibly with Barth’s move from Münster University (where he served as professor of theology from 1925) to Bonn, Barth’s focus shifted and his theological position was moving away from being a response to Liberal Theology to a theology in its own right, affirming the initiative by God for a restorative process in the relationship between God and God’s creation. If God gave a “No!” to human attempts to become righteous, then where would the “Divine Yes” originate? Is it at all possible that God and humanity could be reconciled? The answer, to Barth came in the Person of Jesus Christ (CD IV/2:3-377; Grenz and Olson 1992:68). Jesus Christ was the full revelation of God, making it possible for God and creation to meet and have communion. In Jesus, we find God “humiliated” and humanity “exalted” to the point where communion and community is possible. It is important to note that both the acts of revelation and that of salvation were initiated by God and only possible through God’s Freedom (Mangina 2004:64).

Theology still has to converse with context. Barth was very aware of this fact. During the 1930’s Barth moved toward the anti-Nazi Confessing Church. With the rise of German National Socialism with its theologically endorsed agenda, the need arose for the Church to stand on its own and be able to speak objectively to the context in which it found itself. At this stage, it became very difficult to differentiate between the voice of the Church and the voice of the Reich. The Confessing Church

was a reaction to this situation and sought to speak independently without being influenced by political will.

As a result, the Confessing Church produced a document called “The Barmen Declaration”, professing its understanding of the Church, the relationship between Church and political power, but most of all the bond between the Church and its Lord. Karl Barth was the main contributor to this document, and although one cannot confine his theology by merely referring to the Barmen Declaration, it is easy to see the Barthian influence in its expression. We will investigate Barth and Barmen in greater depth in a chapter 6.

After the fall of Germany at the end of World War 2, Barth continued to investigate the Scriptures, write profusely and debate vigorously. From his pen, one of the most monumental works of theology was produced under the series title: “Kirchliche Dogmatik”, a work that was never completed. Barth died in 1968 in Basel. It would be accurate to state that only his body ceased to live. Barth’s work and contribution to the Christian faith is undoubtedly one of the most profound in the modern era. It would take an enormous effort, dedicating one’s entire life to the scrutiny of Scripture, interaction with one’s context and dedication to God in order to provide a similar contribution.

### **3. What is the Church?**

Considering the abovementioned points in the development of Barth’s theology, one could suggest that Barth’s theology focused on selected doctrines. Barth was concerned mainly with the Doctrine of God, Christology, Anthropology and Soteriology. A careful reading of Barth’s work will reveal an underlying theme where Barth attempts to define and redefine the Church so that the theology developed in his mind may not lie dormant on the shelves of academia, but that the Truth of God through theology may find life and expression in God’s created order.

What is the Church? There is one short answer that Barth offers: “...The body and society of believers whom God has predestined<sup>9</sup> to

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately the word “predestined” may be interpreted incorrectly. The

eternal life.” (Barth 1958:113). In one of Barth’s earlier works, “The Church and the Political problem of our day” (1939), we find a definition that is more comprehensive and to which I chose to refer:

The Church is a people consisting of those who have found in Jesus Christ their own comfort and hope of the whole world, and who therefore have discovered their service in bearing witness before the world, which without Him is lost, to Jesus Christ in His offices of Prophet, Priest, and King (1939:5).

From this definition, Barth extracts certain issues that need to be considered when defining the character and phenomenon of the Church. These will be used as a basis for discussing Barth’s general Ecclesiology in this section of this chapter.

### 3.1 “The Church is at all events a people...” (Barth 1939:5)

Barth immediately differentiates between the Church as finite institution and the Church as community. Although there are those who are so devoted to a particular Christian denomination that they will consider themselves as God’s sole community of faith, that is not the Church but a Christian sect. Barth’s definition of Church stretches beyond the boundaries of denominationalism or sectarianism. The Church must be a people. In other words, a community.

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assumption can be made that Barth refers to the predestination of individuals as reflected in Augustinian or Calvinist traditions. According to Augustine of Hippo, God has the right to grant the gift of grace to whomever God pleases (McGrath 2001:466). By default some may not receive the gift of grace and so not inherit eternal life. Calvin’s double predestination drew the understanding further. Some would receive the gift of grace, while God would deliberately withhold grace from others (McGrath 2001:467). So what does Barth mean? Does he merely follow either an Augustinian or Calvinist approach? It is my understanding that Barth proposes a different route. Through Barth’s doctrine of election, (CD II/2:3-508) the whole of creation is “predestined” to eternal life. The Kingdom of God concerns community and, according to Barth, the Church is the community whom God chooses to fulfil the aim of the Kingdom of God (CD II/2:205). Barth does not speak here of the Church as institution, but the Church as community. We will explore this relationship in the next chapter. Also see (Mangina 2004:73-75).

What makes this community any different from existing communities that we find in the world today? Hartwell (1964:41) describes the essence of the Christian community in Barth's theology succinctly when he states that there are four characteristics that make this community unique. The first is that God calls this community into existence. This point is significant as it describes the community coming into being through God's initiative. This community is not formed through human genes, nor does it find its identity in human traditions and customs as shaped and defined in time. One clearly hears Barth's emphasis on anti-Liberal Theology in this point. How does God call this community into being? Hunsinger (2000b:178) states that the Church in Barth's understanding can only exist through two vital and inseparable Divine actions, namely Revelation and Reconciliation<sup>10</sup>.

The second point is that the Church is a community concerned with the relationship between God and humanity (Hartwell 1964:41). This relationship determines the Church's place regardless of the context. The third and fourth points go hand-in-hand: The Church finds its identity in Jesus Christ and then finds the expression of its life through the power of the Holy Spirit (Hartwell 1964:41).

Using Hartwell's points, it is then easy to understand why Barth urged his readers not to confuse the Community of Faith called the Church with the institution that claims to be the voice of the Church.

The word 'community', rather than 'Church', is used advisedly, for from a theological point of view it is best to avoid the word 'Church' as much as possible, if not altogether...What may on occasion be called 'Church' is, as Luther liked to say, 'Christianity' (understood as a nation rather than a system of beliefs). (Barth 1963:37).

The human nature within the Church should nevertheless not be forgotten. Although the Church has its origin in Divine self-revelation and Reconciliation, it can never assume to be the manifestation of perfection. It consists of human individuals who are recipients and believers in God's self-revelation through Jesus Christ and no more than that. The Church is indeed called to be the Body of

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<sup>10</sup> We will explore this notion in the next chapter.

Christ (as we will see later), but cannot exist independently from these acts of Revelation and Reconciliation (Barth 1958:115).

### **3.2 “Furthermore, the Church is a continuation of Israel...” (Barth 1939:6)**

Here we touch again on Barth’s notion of predestination. The question may now be asked: “If the Church is God’s predestined community to receive the gift of life, and if the Church exists through the acts of self-revelation in Jesus Christ and reconciliation which follows, did God not have any relationship with humanity before the Incarnation?”. If Barth answers “No”, then the consequences are severe. Barth would then have ignored the whole Old Testament.

In Barth’s work, there is a relationship between Israel and the Church. Both of these entities on their own profess to be the elect people of God, but can we play the two realities presented down to a situation of either/or? No. There is no doubt in Barth’s mind that when we speak of the election of people, that we must speak of the divine election of community (CD II/2:195). Mangina (2004:74) correctly states that Barth sees the Divine predestination of Community even in the Old Testament. From Genesis, God enters into a Covenant with God’s people. The Covenant becomes the means by which Israel becomes God’s community and God becomes their God.

Surely then we can disregard the New Testament? Again, we must say no. Israel’s journey builds up to the possibility of God’s self-revelation to creation through Jesus Christ. The post-incarnation community, that is the community which responded to God’s act of self-revelation in Jesus, is called the Church.

The Church and Israel are inseparably linked to the same focus: Jesus Christ. Without the Old Testament community of Israel, the Incarnation would not have been understood. Without the New Testament community of the Church, the Incarnation would have been meaningless and would have faded into the archives of history.