

John Calvin and Karl Barth – Free and obedient theologians

ABSTRACT

This article explores the parallels between John Calvin and Karl Barth, not mainly with regards to the content of their respective theologies, but rather with regards to the way in which they practiced theology. It is argued that both John Calvin and Karl Barth were theologians who were free from church tradition and public society, which enabled them to speak prophetically to the church and to the world. This freedom enabled them to speak freely and clearly about the Word of God, which reveals God's grace in Jesus Christ. But for both of them this freedom meant to be obedient to the free God, Who commands us to be the light in this world, so that the world might see the coming kingdom of God.

1. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE REFORMED?

What does it mean to be a Reformed believer and theologian? It is significant that within the Reformed tradition, we do not call ourselves "Calvinists" (Burger, 2001: 24). Thus it is already implied that being Reformed, cannot mean to be a staunch follower of Calvin. Due to Calvin's life, his sometimes harsh treatment of opponents and some of the very clear transgressions in judgment that he made, the allure of being called "Calvinists" is much less than for the Lutheran church to be called "Lutherans." But what does it mean then to be Reformed?

One possibility could be that being Reformed is linked with specific theological contents, i.e. with certain dogmatic formulations, perhaps those captured in the Dutch Faith Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Confession of Dordt. Certainly, these documents contain a very significant part of the Reformed tradition. But it is the argument of this presentation that being a Reformed believer and theologian does not entail a mere repetition of these dogmatic formulations. Being Reformed has much more to do with the way in which these truths are believed and lived, with the manner in which this theology is preached and practiced.

To indicate this, some parallels will be drawn between John Calvin and Karl Barth. If anybody was a Reformed theologian, it was Karl Barth. He mentioned on various occasions that his theology was very much informed by John Calvin. For many years a picture of Calvin hung in his study, next to a picture of Mozart (Busch, 2004: 4-5). And yet, Barth was certainly no "Calvinist." Barth never considered merely repeating John Calvin's theology in an anachronistic manner, but like Calvin, he remained throughout his life a theologian that is free from church tradition and from public society, free to witness to the revelation of God's grace in the Word. Like Calvin, Barth was not bound by church or state, but bound by the Word of God, and obedient to the Word's command, to give a true witness of Jesus Christ to the world, so that the world might see and believe that God has saved the world by grace and is making all things new in the age to come.

2. FREE THEOLOGIANS

Barth listened to Calvin, not to repeat his theology, but to be able to speak freely to his own time, just as Calvin listened to Luther, not to repeat Luther's theology, but to speak freely to the

problems of his time. Any good teacher expects of his best pupils to move beyond himself and to give their own response to his teachings. This, however, does not mean that we can deceive ourselves into thinking we know better than Paul or Luther or Calvin. Being the pupils of these great teachers, we should treat them with a certain humility, while remaining free from them, and assume that they are right in some way, even when we think they are wrong (Barth, 1995: 4-6). Rather than "following" Calvin, Barth was struggling, arguing, even fighting with Calvin throughout his life. To Barth, Calvin was an unexplainable enigma, a strange mystery, a devilish saint, who can never be reduced to or grasped by any systematic theology, but who demands to be heard in all his complexity (De Koster, 2004: xiii-xiv). The same goes for the way in which we listen to a theologian like Barth. Barth abhorred the idea of "Barthian" pupils who merely repeat his theology, or what they think is his theology, in a dogmatic, simplistic and lifeless manner, without finding their own theological voice with which to struggle and argue and fight with Barth.

Calvin's freedom extended even further than his following of Luther. When Caroli demanded that Calvin and his friends subscribe to the early confessions of the Christian faith, Calvin refused. Why on earth would Calvin refuse to subscribe to the early confessions of faith?! Because it was demanded. Being obedient to God and God alone means remaining free from any tyranny by church or state, even when that tyranny demands something as good and noble as subscribing to the confessions of faith. Thus Calvin regarded himself as even being free from the early confessions of faith, not because he refuted the content, to the contrary, precisely because remaining true and obedient to its content – the living God! – he could not be bound by these historic and contextual formulations (Barth, 1995: 329-330).

In order to be free from great and powerful tyrannies, like the tyranny of Adolf Hitler, you also have to be free from small and subtle tyrannies, like the tyranny of being demanded to subscribe to the confessions of faith, like Calvin was. Barth's life showed this. It was because he could write a scathing attack on the theology of his friend, Emil Brünner, with the terrible title "Nein!," denying Brünner's argument that there is still a very small "point of contact" between God and humanity that is inherent in the human nature, that he could also refuse to salute to Hitler before he started his lectures in Bonn, which ended his theological career in Germany in 1935.

Although Barth was perhaps more of a joyous man than Calvin, who was known for his hearty laughter and sharp sense of humour, it would be fair to say that it was no pleasure to be a theological opponent of either Calvin or Barth. The reason being that they were not "and-and" theologians, but "either-or" theologians. They did not wish to argue in circles, giving in to every possibility or opinion. They took a theological stance and followed its consequences to the very end. Rather than changing the direction of their argument one degree, they would, for fear of losing their way, start again from the very beginning. Desiring to be free from any form of deception, and not wanting to linger in the indecisive and compromising world of "balance" and "at the same time," they were hardheaded and often blunt. "The question might have been put to [Barth] by his contemporaries, as Calvin's contemporaries put it to Calvin: 'Could you not be ... rather more palatable, rather more like ourselves?' " (Busch, 2004: 4-5). But it is precisely this freedom, which enabled Calvin and Barth to stand up to the powers of their respective times.

An interview that a British Methodist journal had with Barth in 1937 is especially enlightening in this regard. By this time, the world had become aware to some extent of the tyranny of Adolf Hitler, and sympathised with the German church's lack of religious freedom. When Barth was asked if England could do anything for the German church, Barth responded by saying that they can guard against the tyrannies in England. The greatest crisis for the German church, Barth explained, was not to be free from state control, but to give a true witness to the Christian faith, free from all the subtle and explicit tyrannies that distort the gospel of Jesus Christ. This danger

was just as much a reality in England as it was in Germany, perhaps even more so, since the tyrannies in England were not as explicit as those in Germany. The spiritual submission of the church to the world-spirit did not threaten their lives in England as it did in Germany, but was all the more dangerous for that reason. It is perhaps easier to deny that Hitler is a revelation of God next to Jesus Christ, than to deny that humanism is a revelation of God next to Jesus Christ. Barth said that in order for England to have the freedom to give a true witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to rid the gospel of all and any tyrannical heresies, they must return to the reformers Luther and Calvin, and must ultimately return to the Bible. Only the truth as it is revealed by the Word of God is able to free us from all the illusions that deceive and imprison us (Barth, 1937: 3).

What the reformers, and especially Calvin, teaches us, is not to listen to them, but to listen to the Bible, even more, to listen to God through the Bible and the Spirit. Barth told theologians in the Netherlands in 1939 that the "Calvinism" in the Netherlands left a taste of the Roman Catholic church, or even worse, of sectarianism in his mouth. In 1 Corinthians 3 Paul warned against being "for Paul," "for Apollos" or "for Sefas." To be a "Calvinist" or a "Lutheran" is from the devil. Being Reformed means to be free to listen to the reformers, in order to hear the Word of God (Barth, 1939: 9).

3. THEOLOGIAN OF THE WORD

There are most probably not two theologians who deserve the title "theologians of the Word" more than John Calvin and Karl Barth. Great theologians like Augustine and Aquinas had a very high regard for the Bible, but were very much influenced by the dominant philosophies of their day. Calvin and Barth, although also children of their time, were in the first and the last instance *Biblical* theologians (Davies, 1992: 95). Torrance even goes so far as to describe Calvin as "the father both of modern theology and modern biblical exposition," since he introduced the disciplined work of interpreting the Bible in a theological and systematic way, thus establishing for the first time a positive, comprehensive theology, not based on philosophy or history, but integrating philosophy and history into a theology based thoroughly on the Word of God (Torrance, 1992: 222).

The Reformed believer and theologian is not so much concerned with *what* God is, or with speculations about what God might have been, but only with *how* God is, as God has chosen to be revealed to humanity (Calvin, 1967: 41). And the place where God's revelation comes to humanity is the Bible. And yet, Calvin never spoke about God's revelation through the Bible without also referring to the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, both in the Bible and also in the believer (Barth, 1995: 167-168). God is a sufficient witness of God, according to Calvin. To try to speak about God further or outside of that which is given in the Bible, is arrogant. We must look for God in the Word; we must think about God as God speaks in the Word and say nothing more or less than is given to us in the Word (Calvin, 1967: 76).

Knowledge of God is *limited* knowledge. Calvin describes the Word as the mirror wherein we can see God reflected. Positively this implies that when we commit ourselves to this mirror, we will see God's reflection. Negatively this implies that when look at other objects outside this mirror, we will not see God's reflection (Van der Kooi, 2002: 111-112). This limitation that Calvin describes, however, is not due to the modern, Kantian understanding of the limits of human knowledge. Rather, it is due the fact that God set up a limit for humanity. God has decided that it is not necessary or good for humanity to know more than that which is revealed in the Bible. It is therefore not an epistemological limitation, but a religious limitation (Van der Kooi, 2002: 119).

Through his boundedness to the Bible, Calvin remained free from two threats. On the one

hand the threat of church tradition becoming the main authority again, from which the Bible deducts its authority. And on the other hand, the threat of the spiritualistic movement, which claimed that we do not need the Bible, since it is the dead letter of the Word of God, and that the living Word of God is enlightened in our hearts by the Spirit. By always binding himself to the *Bible*, although never without church tradition or without the work of the Holy Spirit, Calvin guarded against the Word of God being coerced by the church tradition or being corrupted by the arbitrary allegorical exegesis of the individual (Van der Kooi, 2002: 94).

Saying that God is revealed through the Scripture, does not mean that this revelation tells us everything that we might be curious to know about God. It is significant that Calvin uses the metaphor of a mirror to describe the revelation of God in the Bible, especially if we remember that mirrors in his day were not nearly as clear and did not give such a detailed reflection as they do today. Barth also did not believe that the Bible is an oracle from heaven, so to speak, but rather the main written witness of Jesus Christ, Who is the revelation of God the Father, confirmed in faith by the Holy Spirit (Davies, 1992: 128).

Barth insisted that it is not we humans, be it the church or the individual, that decide that the Bible is the Word of God and thus give the Bible its authority. The Bible witnesses to God's Self-revelation in Jesus Christ, and when the church proclaims this true witness truthfully, the Holy Spirit creates the faith in us that believes in the Word of God. Only when the Bible is heard in an attitude of prayerful and humble obedience, can the miracle take place that we believe in this Word. As it is stated in Barmen's opening article: it is Jesus Christ Himself, as He is attested in the Bible, who is in fact the Word of God (Davies, 1992: 131-133).

Hearing and believing the Word of God, is not to penetrate the Godly sphere from humanity's side, but God that penetrates the sphere of humanity. We humans hear all kinds of voices and we believe all kinds of things. But in Jesus Christ, God's Word is gracefully spoken by God and faithfully heard by humanity. Jesus Christ is the Word of God, revealed and obeyed. The revelation of God to which the Bible attests, is pure grace (Van der Kooi, 2002: 241-242).

4. THEOLOGIANS OF GRACE

Due to Calvin's efforts to establish religious, moral and public renewal in Geneva that often gave his life and theology a moralistic and judgmental tendency, he is not regarded today as a theologian of grace, which he undoubtedly was.

For Calvin the God that is revealed in the Bible, the God in Whom we believe, can be no other than the God of grace. We humans often doubt the grace of God. We struggle anxiously with unbelief, with the fear that God is not merciful. But when God is revealed to us through the Bible; when the Holy Spirit awakens faith in our hearts, the God that is revealed, the God in Whom we believe, is indeed the God of mercy and grace. To believe in God is to believe in the God of grace. To believe is to trust that God is merciful. When God's grace and mercy is doubted, it is God-Self Who is doubted, which is the very meaning of unbelief. Faith is to accept and trust the grace of God and to be comforted by it. Faith happens when the Holy Spirit, through the Word, lays all our anxieties and fears that God might perhaps be a God without mercy and grace to rest, and assures us of God's mercy and grace, also for me. Of course every believer will go through times of doubt and unbelief in the mercy and grace of God, due to all the troubles and suffering that we experience in this world. But faith is to run with all our fears, anxieties, doubts and unbelief into arms of our merciful Father and to trust that God is as gracious as is promised in the Word of God (Calvin, 1967: 212-214). Even faith is not a meritorious work of humanity, but is awakened in us by the Word and the Spirit. It is Christ Himself, through the Word and the Spirit,

that enlightens our hearts so that we might believe in the grace of God. Thus faith, also, is grace (Gerrish, 1992: 39).

Although both Calvin and Barth can most certainly be described as theologians of grace that emphasised salvation as a gracious gift of God to humanity, the element of the wrath and judgment of God is far stronger in Calvin than it is in Barth, particularly in the doctrine of predestination. Grace is demonstrated as even mightier by Barth in his radical reinterpretation of predestination, wherein he described Jesus Christ as both the electing God and elected humanity (Davies, 1992: 129). For Barth, God's first and last word is Yes and not No, and therefore Calvin's doctrine of predestination is not tenable according to Barth. Calvin's doctrine is for Barth a confusion of Yes and No, which is an ambiguity that weakens the grace of Jesus Christ proclaimed by the gospel. Furthermore, Barth believed that this doctrine begins with man and the experience of unbelief in the world. In order to explain the human phenomena of unbelief and disobedience, which troubled Calvin greatly, Calvin ended up with an abstract god and not the gracious electing God which the gospel proclaims (Davies, 1992:135).

Therefore Barth had to reinterpret Calvin's doctrine of predestination, since this doctrine in its traditional form was not true to the Reformed understanding that God is only revealed by the Word of God, and always as the God of grace. There is no hidden, abstract god behind revelation that we can or may speculate about. The God revealed by the Word is indeed the God of grace that saves the world by the grace in Jesus Christ. Calvin was very much concerned with the reality of people living recklessly in face of the Word of grace, and tried to grapple theologically with the question why some hear and believe the Word of grace while others ignore or reject this gracious Word. Barth, however, refused to let the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gracious character and history of God-Self, be compromised by this human reality.

Perhaps the role of the covenant was not emphasised enough in Calvin's theology, because his doctrine of predestination seemed to be concerned with the salvation of individuals, rather than the relationship between God and Israel; between God and the world. This was unacceptable to Barth. In the Bible election is a term that is related to the history of salvation, wherein God chooses Israel to be a blessing to all nations. And at the heart of this history, according to Barth, is God's Yes to Israel and God's Yes to the nations of the world. Election and rejection are in service of God's salvation of the world. God's gracious saving of the world is the focal point of the doctrine of election. That is why Barth, unlike Calvin, discussed the doctrine of election within the doctrine of God, since the doctrine of election is not in essence about the election or rejection of individuals, but about God, i.e., about the fact that God is a God of grace, Who freely chooses to say Yes to humanity (Van der Kooi, 2002: 325).

Be that as it may, both Calvin and Barth were undoubtedly theologians of grace. It must be remembered that Calvin's doctrine of predestination did not spring from an office, but from a life lived as an asylum seeker, as well as from a ministry among asylum seekers. The doctrine of election provided comfort for people who lost their homes, possessions, families and homeland due to their faith. It told them that they are God's chosen people. Whoever loses his life for Christ's sake, will gain eternal life, and whoever holds onto his own life, will lose it. The cross that they carry, is in discipleship of and obedience to the cross of Christ, whose grace is sufficient for them (Selderhuis, 1997: 28-29).

The God of the Bible is the God of grace. Faith in God means faith in the God of grace. The fact that God is a God of grace, does not, however, imply that humanity is not claimed and called into action by God. To the contrary, for Calvin and Barth, to believe in the God of grace, always meant to obey God as well.

5. THEOLOGIANS OF FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Even if Barth emphasised the grace of God more than Calvin did, both never separated the grace of God from the Christian life lived in obedience to the will of God. Both Calvin and Barth could at times be almost annoyingly stubborn in the way that righteousness is always mentioned together with holiness and faith is always mentioned together with obedience.

If Luther emphasised that the righteous live by *faith*, then Calvin emphasised that the righteous *live* by faith (Barth, 1995: 79). Knowledge of God, for Calvin, is to allow oneself to be addressed by God, to be called upon by God, to be claimed by God and to respond in obedience to the Word of God. Thus the Word of God always has the character of an appeal and is never mere information or statements of fact. The Word of God creates new things, it performs certain acts, it establishes – and this is its ultimate purpose – a relationship between God and humanity (Van der Kooi, 2002: 20).

The original sin of Adam, according to Calvin, was to reject God's Lordship over his life. Adam's unbelief in and disobedience to the Word of God, were at the root of all sin, sins like pride and ingratitude. To Calvin, Adam's unbelief in the Word of God preceded his disobedience to the Word of God, but still they went hand-in-hand (Calvin, 1967: 112). Faith and obedience always go hand-in-hand. It is impossible to believe in the Word of God, but to deny that the Word of God makes a claim on the whole of your life, which asks your full allegiance and obedience. In the theology and ministry of both Calvin and Barth – *and this, perhaps, is at the core of what it means to be Reformed* – the fact the God alone deserves all the glory, that God alone should be worshiped and no other gods or idols, that one cannot serve two masters but only one, were like a golden thread weaved through the whole of their lives. It is this conviction that gave both Calvin and Barth freedom from the powers of this world and freedom to obey God.

The relationship between faith and obedience is linked to a very specific – *Reformed?* – understanding of freedom. Calvin asserted that humanity is only made free by the grace of God. Through the corruption of humanity by sin, our created freedom has been destroyed (Calvin, 1967: 118). God does not offer grace to humanity, which we can choose to accept or reject by our own free will. God's grace frees us to believe and obey God. We do not receive God's grace through freedom, but through God's grace we receive God's freedom (Calvin, 1967: 130-131).

In very much the same way, Barth understood freedom not as the freedom to choose something from a long list of options, but the freedom to choose God, Who has already chosen us. Having the option to choose God among a long list of other options is not freedom, but to be imprisoned by our own corrupt and sinful will. True freedom is not the freedom *from* obligation, but the freedom *for* God, to believe in God and to obey God. This freedom is a gift of grace that Holy Spirit gives (Busch, 1975: 400).

Faith has a content – God. And when God is encountered, the whole of our life is altered and transformed. Therefore faith in God implies obedience to God (Van der Kooi, 2002: 92-93). Today, however, obedience has become something which people are suspicious of, and rightly so, especially after the concentration camps of World War II, which was in part due to a culture of obedience in the German nation. The same can be said to a large extent of Apartheid in South Africa. Would these atrocities have occurred if people were not so very obedient? There is, however, a difference between obedience and sheepishly following instructions. During the Reformation Calvin attempted to loosen people from their blind obedience to the authority of the church. For Calvin, obedience meant to follow the way that the Word and the Holy Spirit shows, the way to Christ (Van der Kooi, 2002: 100).

It is also helpful to remember that Karl Barth, as well as Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who placed great emphasis on the importance of obedience, both live their lives in protest against the tyranny of

state power and made use of civil disobedience in order to be obedient to God and God alone. In the Barmen declaration, whereby the German Confessing church proclaimed that Jesus Christ is the only Word of God which the church must believe and obey, and that no other party or leader can pretend to be a revelation of God which also claims the church's faith and obedience, specific mention is made of John Calvin in the third article. It is from Calvin that the church has learnt that righteousness and holiness, faith and obedience, gospel and law, go hand-in-hand. And therefore the church cannot believe in the Word of God and at the same time obey some other claim on their life, other than the claim of the Word of God itself (Barth, 1934: 30-31).

Thus Calvin and Barth did not wish that people should blindly obey the authorities of church or state, or that they should obey their own corrupt and selfish will, but that they should obey the only One who deserves our complete obedience: God and God alone. Through our obedience to the Word and Spirit, God will transform our lives and make us the light that shines in the world, giving witness to the Saviour and only true Lord of the world, Jesus Christ.

6. THEOLOGIANS OF THE WORLD

The Reformed tradition initiated by Calvin and Zwingli, never ever, not even for one moment, wanted to talk about the Christian life as a meritorious work that contributes in any way whatsoever to our salvation. Nevertheless, for Calvin and Zwingli, it was not enough to focus on the vertical relationship between God and humanity, but crucially important to focus on the horizontal relationship between fellow human beings. The living of the Christian life was on Calvin's agenda in a way that it never could be for Luther (Barth, 1995: 77-78). Right from the start, beginning with the first chapter of the first book of the *Institutes*, Calvin surely knew that everything that he writes and preaches concerning salvation, is leading toward the Christian life, as described in Book IV of the *Institutes*. Calvin could not be content with the writings of Luther, nor with Books I-III of the *Institutes*, since it would not do justice to the full extent of salvation. Calvin explicitly reminded his colleagues and congregants that salvation is not about the soul fleeing this world in order to reach heaven, but heaven penetrating and transforming the soul, the human, the society and the world (De Koster, 2004: 63-64).

This emphasis of Calvin, the emphasis on the Christian life, on sanctification, on purity of faith and holiness in life, is exactly what most modern people do not appreciate about Calvin. It is exactly this aspect of Calvin that reeks of a dogmatic, judgmental and even vindictive intolerance. It reminds us of Calvin's brutality towards people like Castellio, Bolsec, Gruet, Servet and many others, which lead to their banishment or death. However, without excusing the mistakes that Calvin made, it would be inaccurate to view this aspect of Calvin's faith and life as mere dogmatic rigidity. What Calvin attempted to achieve, was to free people from churchly rituals and practices, but also, from a reckless and irresponsible society (Van der Kooi, 2002:27). What was at stake for Calvin was the quality of public life, the standard of living within Geneva. We should be mindful that religious life was not as compartmentalised then as it is within modern society today, but that it was the corner stone of public life. That is why the *Institutes* was addressed to the King of France, and why Calvin could say the task of the state was to give God the glory and to further the kingdom of God (Van der Kooi, 2002: 28).

It is very important to recognise that both Calvin and Barth were men of the world and men of remarkable courage. For Calvin, to return to a hostile Geneva only three years after his banishment, or for Barth to refuse to salute to Hitler at the beginning of his lectures in Bonn, which ended his very fruitful and happy theological career in Germany, was brave and daring behaviour. They were not arm chair theologians, but theologians who were very much in touch with the realities of the world. They knew and felt firsthand the risk of obeying God within a

harsh and brutal world (Davies, 1992: 128-129).

The way in which Calvin and Barth saw the kingdom of God becoming visible and real within the world, differed however, largely due to their differing views on the relationship between church and state. Calvin lived in a pre-modern world and was still optimistic about the possibility of the state and the church to serve God and to further God's kingdom. Therefore Calvin's eschatology in the fourth part of the *Institutes*, is not about life after death, but about public and churchly life, about state law and church order.

Even if a bloodthirsty tyrant should govern, Calvin asserted that we should be mindful of our own sin that deserves such a punishment, and remember that it is God who will judge the living and the dead, not us. This was unacceptable to Barth, who severely criticised modernity's overly optimistic view of the church's, the state's and humanity's capability to further God's kingdom and who spent his life fighting against powers and ideologies that presumed to be an embodiment of God's will and kingdom. But Barth did understand that when Calvin was talking about state law and church order, he was in fact concerned about the governance, not of human structures, but the governance of *God* over the world. Therefore the heading of the fourth part of the *Institutes* is "Christian freedom" (Barth, 1995: 223). Barth finds it quite understandable that in Switzerland, there could be made an appeal to Calvin both from the left and from the right, from Ragaz and Wernle, the one for revolution and the other for reaction. Barth understood this, since the same was in a sense true of him. During the years Barth has been accused of being both a-moral and other-worldly on the one hand, and too moralistic and this-worldly on the other. Barth believed that Calvin, like himself, was in fact neither the one nor the other, but only concerned with Christ, with Christian liberty, with the kingdom of God which is transforming the kingdoms of this world through the presence of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit (Barth, 1995: 226).

For Barth, however, the relationship between church and state should be severed completely, largely due to the failures of the church and the state in the 20th century. It would be unthinkable for Barth to address a theological work to the state, as Calvin did. For Barth, the church is a very small community on the periphery of society, which serves as an important counter-movement, and which contributes in this way to the well being of society as a whole (Van der Kooi, 2002: 232). By seemingly ignoring the outside world, and doing theology "as if nothing has happened," Barth believed the church could remain more faithful to its message and thus more critical to the state, and in that way more relevant to the world. While Hitler and the Nazi party tried to merge all political, social and church organizations into one regime wherein no criticism would be possible, and while his theological contemporaries were blinded to the faults of the Third Reich by their renewed enthusiasm for the unification of church and state like the days of old, Barth saw in all these attempts the poison of 19th century theology that sold the message of the gospel out to philosophy. Therefore Barth went on his life long quest to rethink all theology, which at times seemed very tedious, other-worldly and irrelevant to his peers, but which was in actual fact Barth's way of speaking the old message of the Bible to the current world in which he lived. It was not a timeless theology. When, in *Church Dogmatics* II/1, Barth rejected all forms of natural theology, he was opposing the glorification of the Nazi party in Germany as divinely instituted. When Barth was radically reinterpreting the doctrine of predestination in *Church Dogmatics* II/2, saying that God will not forsake any group of people, and especially not his chosen people, Israel, it was in answer to the rejection of the Jews in Germany. For Barth, the main attitude of theology should be listening to God's Word and not listening to the world, since God's kingdom always precedes world events. But if we listen faithfully and obediently to God's Word, we will always be able to speak the most relevant word to the world (Van der Kooi, 2002: 233).

Barth explained that when he made this decision, to rethink all theology by listening not

to the world but to the Word of God, to rethink all theology as the doctrine of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, which is the basis of the church and the church's task within the world, he was helped tremendously by the Reformers, also Calvin. Their theology was much clearer, unambiguous, simpler, truer to the confessions of faith, and yet much freer, free-thinking and fully developed, than the systematic theology and philosophy of the 20th century, that often strained rather than helped his task (Barth, 1948: 272). Barth was very much aware that many of his peers did not appreciate this change in direction that he made. They accused him of retreating behind a Chinese wall of theology and becoming utterly uninteresting, but he found this critique curious. Since it was exactly during this time (the 1930's) that Barth not only felt more free to speak to the world, but also travelled extensively and read more secular books and had more diverse and ecumenical conversations than ever before in his life. It was precisely in this time that Barth, personally, became more and more worldly and lived with a freedom and a joy in the world like never before. Although his theology seemed monastic to some, he experienced it as more focused and more worldly relevant than it was ever before. For Barth, the autobiographical truth of the matter was that he became simultaneously more churchly and more worldly during these years (Barth, 1948: 272-273).

But it was not just a autobiographical reality for Barth. During these years he wrote almost every word of his theology with the name Jesus Christ in the front of his mind and the name Adolf Hitler at the back of his mind. Barth even thanked the "Führer" for revealing the lies and brutality, as well as the stupidity and anxiety of humanity, and thus helping Barth to focus even more clearly on the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Barth insisted that he did not undergo more politically involved phases (during the time of the Barmen declaration in 1934 in Germany) and more politically apathetic phases (during his years in Basel from 1935 onwards) in his life and theology. What happened was that the space within which he spoke and repeated the same gospel of Jesus Christ changed and thus echoed differently (Barth, 1948: 273-274).

Thus both Calvin and Barth, albeit in very different ways, were theologians of the world, who believed that Jesus Christ is not only the Saviour of our souls, and that the church is not merely concerned with heaven, but that Jesus Christ is the Saviour and Lord of the whole world and that the church is called to be the light in the world by giving witness to this fact. Since Jesus Christ is the Saviour and Lord of this world, the coming of His kingdom is the only source of hope for the world.

7. THEOLOGIANS OF HOPE

Barth believed that Calvin, like himself, could speak relevantly to this world, because he always kept the next world in mind, and could speak truthfully about the next world, because he always kept this world in mind. Calvin's ethics were eschatological by nature and his eschatology was ethical by nature. Time and eternity are two sides of the same coin and must be taken equally serious. Without the one, the other will not come to its own (Barth, 1995: 156).

For Calvin the Christian life is lived in hope. Communion with God is experienced in hope. Living the Christian life is a life of pilgrimage – holding on to the promise of the land of milk and honey. Perhaps because he was a displaced refugee, Calvin identified very strongly and personally with the pilgrims of the Old Testament, who only had the promise and the hope of God's Messiah. Faith and hope were intertwined for Calvin. Faith believes the promise that is hoped for (Van der Kooij, 2002: 111). We are all homeless strangers, pilgrims in this world, who seek asylum in God, in the grace of God (Selderhuis, 1997: 28). Hope is the motivation that makes faith active and alive, because faith is not merely a belief in something neutral and static, but in the coming kingdom of God which is approaching us and pulling us in, and to which we are

stretching out and working towards (Barth, 1995: 279).

But although faith is always by nature hope, this does not mean that faith is characterised by uncertainty, hesitation or doubt. The certainty in faith and hope lies precisely in the fact that we no longer place any certainty in ourselves but in God and God's promises. Faith in God, hope in God's kingdom, is the certain and steadfast point which enables us to live within this uncertain and fluctuating world (Barth, 1995: 168). Therefore, an essential part of the Christian life is to contemplate the next life, according to Calvin. Otherwise, our love for this world will drown out our expectation of the next world and thus deliver us into the uncertain flows of this world, with all the suffering that is a part of it. A decision must be made, either love for this world, or living for the life eternal, and no midway is possible for Calvin (Calvin, 1967: 266).

Many commentators, historians and theologians have asserted that Calvin was not as aware of human anxiety, distress and disillusionment as Luther was. This hardly seems plausible, given the life that Calvin lived as an outcast, a refugee and one that was banished for years. We often find it difficult to read Calvin from a modern (or postmodern) paradigm, especially when he asserts that even the most horrible events in history form part of God's providence. In the light of the catastrophic events of the 20th century, this seems an unbearable way to view God's relationship to the world. But what we forget, is that we today view and judge almost all theology, not only from the viewpoint of the individual, but also from the viewpoint of the suffering subject. Ironically, however, we often judge Calvin's theology from an academic stance. Existentially, subjectively, Calvin knew and understood suffering – anxiety, distress and disillusionment – perhaps far better than many of us can claim to do today. But for Calvin, the human subject, no matter how severe the hardships are that he or she undergoes, cannot determine the way we believe and hope in God. Human beings have only a very limited place within God's creation – heaven and earth. To believe in God's providence, is not to blindly give yourself over to fate, but to trust that God is the Creator and Recreator of this world, and that God will not forsake his creation (Van der Kooi, 2002: 134; Selderhuis, 1997: 26).

Believing in God's providence, does not mean that we know exactly how God will sustain and recreate this broken world. We believe in hope. There is a fundamental not-knowing that is part and parcel of faith and hope (Van der Kooi, 2002: 132, 135). While from a modern viewpoint we may find Calvin's theology disconcerting, we must understand that Calvin was trying to give people the comfort and assurance that despite the seemingly unstoppable horrors of world events and the personal hardships that each person undergoes, nothing can tear this creation from God's hand and nothing on earth or in heaven can separate us from the love of God (Van der Kooi, 2002: 136).

Perhaps we should also be free enough, liberal enough, to allow Calvin's pre-modern worldview to criticise our modern (or postmodern) worldview. Is it only possible for us to view the world from the stance of the suffering subject – always believing that we are lacking in something? Or is it perhaps also possible to view the world from the stance of grace – that the whole world, the creation, the fact that there is something and not nothing, life as such, is a gift from God? Perhaps if we can catch a glimpse of Calvin's worldview, we will be able to look more hopefully at that which is unjust and lacking in the world, believing in the hope that the Creator Who gave this gift of life will also sustain and renew it.

That Barth was also an ethicist as an eschatologist and vice versa, is affirmed on almost every other page of his theological works, but perhaps illustrated best by the fact that when he attempted to write a volume on the Christian life nearing the end of his own life, which he never had time to finish, he did so within the structure of the Lord's prayer. Therefore, the life and work of the church within this world is given shape by the prayer that God's name be hallowed, God's kingdom come and God's will be done, on earth as it is in heaven (Barth, 1981). Both Calvin and

Barth emphasised prayer as the essential element or attitude of Christian faith and life. Barth followed Calvin very closely with regards to the centrality of prayer, because in prayer, faith does not hold onto itself, but to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and in prayer, hope does not hold onto this world, but to the coming kingdom of God (Bakker, 1991: 104-107).

Even in 1933, at a time when Barth was very much involved in the events and happenings of the world, he could write an entire book on the resurrection of the dead. Because the resurrection of Jesus is *the* event that fills the faith and life of the church with hope. Just as surely as Jesus has risen from the dead, so we will rise from the dead; just as surely as Jesus is the King, his kingdom is coming. Whatever we do here and now can never be the full meaning of Christian faith, because we believe in and live for that which can only be grasped in hope and expectation: the coming, the promised kingdom of God (Barth, 1933: 180). For Barth, eschatology, which is usually understood as the doctrine of the "last things," is in actual fact not about the *last things*. It is rather the doctrine of the *ultimate things*, i.e., that which gives this life its meaning, significance, purpose and hope. You might just as well speak of the "first things." It is that reality which lies outside of time and which gives every event within history its meaning (Barth, 1933: 110).

Even as a rather young man, in 1919, with his theology still very much developing and battling to find shape and form, Barth spoke about the Christian's life within society, and made much of eschatology. Although Barth had a close affinity for socialism in these days, he could not, like many of his peers, identify socialism with the kingdom of God. The last word will not be said by humanity, but by the kingdom of God, which is the recreation, redemption and perfection of the world through God and in God. The last word will not be: "Draw near to Me!," but "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten son." The last word will not be that we are dust and will return to dust, but that Jesus lives and therefore we will also live (Barth, 1928: 297). Barth wrote: "We believe there is an inherent meaning in relations already existent, and we believe also in evolution and revolution, in the reform and renewal of relations, and in the possibility of comradeship and brotherhood on our earth and under our heaven, *for the reason* that we are expecting wholly other things, namely, a new heaven and a new earth. We throw our energies into the most humdrum tasks, into the business nearest to hand, and also into the making of a new Switzerland and a new Germany, *for the reason* that we look forward to the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of heaven" (Barth, 1928: 323).

8. CONCLUSION

To be Reformed is not to be a "Calvinist" or a "Barthian," but rather to be a free and obedient theologian and believer. Free from worldly influence and power, as well as from church tradition and authority, in order to be obedient to God, Who commands us to give a clear and pure witness to the grace of God in Jesus Christ, whereby the world is being renewed and transformed. It would be foolish, however, to think that we can achieve this freedom and obedience by sidestepping Reformed theologians such as Calvin and Barth. Although we should not attempt to follow them in every step or position, we should take due note of them, and as Barth said of Paul and Luther and Calvin, assume that they were right in some way that we cannot fully comprehend from our viewpoint, even when we are certain that they are wrong and should be rejected (Barth, 1995: 4-6).

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