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It is impossible to believe in God – the miracle of faith according to Karl Barth

ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to interpret Karl Barth's understanding of faith. The intention is to show that Barth has convincingly refuted all attempts to make the Gospel more believable to modern people. By trying to make the Gospel more believable we are assuming that faith is a human possibility, which it is not. God is completely veiled to humanity. Whereas God is faithful, trustworthy, free and Lord, humanity is unfaithful, disobedient, unfree and self-affirming. Only by the miracle of God's self-revelation in the human, Jesus Christ, is faith made an impossible possibility for humanity. Therefore, for us to believe in God is a far greater miracle than the blind seeing, the lame walking or the dead coming to life.

1. INTRODUCTION

How should the church respond to current day streams of thought, like for instance the "New Reformation" movement(s) in South Africa? By witnessing to Jesus Christ. While these schools of thought place a lot of emphasis on the historical Jesus and are sceptical of many aspects of the miraculous nature of Jesus' life, for example the virgin birth, the miracle narratives and the resurrection (Craffert 2002:161-176; Wolmarans 2002:196-224), it is exactly this Jesus to which the church should give its witness. Barth has already explained many decades ago that faith is the most miraculous miracle of all. Faith in humanity, which I would suggest is most probably the starting point of the "New Reformation", needs no miracle, but faith in *God* is so utterly impossible for humanity and therefore so magnificently miraculous, that faith in any miracle, be it the divine conception or the healing of the blind or the resurrection of Christ, becomes child's play. To believe in the human Jesus may be possible, but to believe in the God who was revealed in Jesus Christ is so impossible, such nonsense, that it is indeed foolishness and a stumbling block for all of humanity and not just for modern people (1 Cor 1:23).

Barth has warned that whenever we flee from miracles like the divine conception, there is a theology at work that wants to deny the mystery and the miracle of the unity of God and humanity in Jesus Christ, which is the revelation of God's free grace for us (Barth 1949:100). Barth was for an example not that worried about Bultmann's famous method of demythologising the Bible narratives, but turned the cards on Bultmann's method. After describing four ways of how Christ's reconciliation is "for us", Barth says: "if the nail of this fourfold 'for us' does not hold, everything else will be left hanging in the void as an anthropological or psychological myth, and sooner or later it will break and fall to the ground." Barth then cracks a joke at his friend by saying that in the light of this divine reality "for us", everything else "must first be demythologised" (Bromiley 1979:182-183). Though humorous, this is exactly the point, namely that it is not we who demythologise the divine reality, but the Lord God who demythologises our human reality – filled with myths of faithfulness, myths of faith, myths of freedom and myths of knowledge, i.e., myths of human possibilities. When God is revealed by the Word to be our Lord, our Mystery; these

human “possibilities” are demythologised and revealed to be no more than sinful human attempts at self-affirmation. The triune God is completely veiled to humanity, not despite God’s grace, but exactly because of God’s grace, because this is what makes God wholly other to humanity, this is God’s mystery. While God is essentially and absolutely faithful, trustworthy, free, and Lord, humanity is fundamentally and continually unfaithful, disobedient, unfree and self-affirming. Because God is wholly other than humanity, not just in quantity, but most of all in quality (Van der Kooi 2002:243), faith in God is a human impossibility. Sinful humanity cannot believe in God. To humanity God always remains a complete mystery. But God has revealed God-self to humanity, i.e., God has given the Mystery and the Miracle of faith to humanity in the Person of Jesus Christ.

2. GOD’S POSSIBILITY OVERCOMES OUR IMPOSSIBILITY

In Barth, we have the interesting phenomenon of a modern theologian who exposed the fundamental error of modern theology, namely that it only succeeded in talking about religious humans and that it did not talk about the God who encounters humanity in revelation. Even theologians who do not agree that this “error” that Barth exposed was truly an error, must concede that this “error” was, and is still, a dangerous theological approach that was not completely innocent in the events in Germany during World War I, the rise of Nazism, World War II, the Cold War and even during Apartheid in South Africa¹. The problem for Barth was that modern theology used religious humanity as its starting point and then proceeded to do its theology, based on what it learns from people of faith. To Barth this was a new form of natural theology that did not take the sinfulness of people and the grace of God seriously enough. When confronted with tremendous ethical difficulties and the shockingly unethical decisions some theologians made, Barth realised that modern theology was no longer theology, but anthropology. Modern theology could not speak about God’s encounter with humanity which fundamentally questions all of humanity’s activities (Van der Kooi 2002:377) and which transforms its sinful nature through the grace of Christ. Barth rejected the liberal theology stemming from the 19th century, because, especially in the light of the events of World War I, Barth could not accept that God’s presence is a given within humanity’s religious culture, or that God is immanently evident in the human race’s history, culture and religion (Webster 2000:22, 25).

Like Barth, many of us who live in a “post-modern” context are becoming disillusioned about modernity. Not only are we sceptical about a theocentric worldview, but we are also becoming very sceptical of an anthropocentric worldview. After the Holocaust, Nagasaki and Hiroshima, Apartheid, September 11th and the War on Iraq, it is becoming harder and harder to buy into a theology which is based on the religious capabilities or the moral consciousness of the human race. The suspicion is growing that by merely buying into the spirit of our time, which focuses on faith as an emotional-bodily spirituality within the individual, whether it be from the view point of “post-modern” theology, charismatic spirituality, New Age or eastern mysticism, and by ignoring the divine object of faith, who transcends all human faculties and who calls our being and action into question, we might be copping out of a confrontation with God. We realise that we need to bring God back into the equation, without it being possible for us to just jump back to a pre-modern, naïve faith in God. In this, Barth can guide us. Barth managed to speak again about God

1 In the theological justification of Apartheid in South Africa, South African theologians linked up with the anthropologically centered, natural theology of divine hierarchy between different nations, coming from Europe.

in God's self-revelation, about the "Wholly Other" that addresses and confronts humanity in the Word of God, not from within a pre-modern worldview that presupposes God in an uncritical way, but as a theologian embedded within a post-Kantian, modernistic society, as a modern theologian who is himself questioned by the God revealed in Jesus Christ (Van der Kooi 2002:376).

From Schleiermacher to Ritschl, Barth accused all the liberal theologians, of the previous and of his century, of making grace out to be the possession, right and certainty of humanity, instead of it being God's free gift, which is outside all of humanity's religion, ethics, language and thoughts (Webster 2000:27). Even the Pietistic tradition in Barth's day made itself guilty, according to Barth, of anthropologising theology (Barth 1975a:20), of locating faith within the enthusiastic experience of the individual. After being at first regarded as part of the new group of dialectic theologians, Barth after a while became fed up of Brunner and Gogarten's I-Thou categories of faith and of Bultmann's enthusiasm for Heidegger. "From my point of view all of you, ... represent a large scale return to the flesh pots of Egypt ... all of you – in a new way different from that of the nineteenth century – are trying to understand faith as a human possibility ... and therefore you are once again surrendering theology to philosophy" (Gorringe 1999:116).

Barth opened up a new way of talking about our faith, without uncritically accepting the tenets of our faith in a pre-modern fashion and without basing our faith on the possibilities of the human race like the modern theologians, but by making the foundationless revelation of God the starting point of his reflection. Barth thus illustrated the possibility of faith by exploring the reality of our faith. One can almost say that in the pre-modern era faith was redundant: believing in God was part of people's worldview, and that in the modern era faith was seen as a human possibility: believing in God was seen as an anthropological achievement, whereas in the theology of Barth faith happens in a divine encounter between God and humans: believing in God becomes the surprising reality wherein the Word of God addresses faithless, unfaithful people. In this divine address sinful people, without the possibility of believing in God, become aware that although they are unfaithful to God, God remains faithful to them, that although they can't believe in God, Jesus Christ believes in their place, and that although they don't want to receive this faith and remain in it, God awakens this faith in them and keeps them in it through the gracious gift of the Holy Spirit. Barth shows us that although faith is impossible for the human race, it is a reality in Jesus Christ, the human who was God. Therefore, although it is impossible for humans to believe in God, it is a reality that we believe in Jesus Christ, the One who revealed the triune God to us and thus established our faith in God.

3. THE CREATOR'S FAITHFULNESS OVERLEAPS OUR UNFAITHFULNESS

Our existential decision of faith can only find existence in virtue of the divine decision (Webster 2000:130). True faith means to be grounded by the faithfulness of God the Father that overshadows our own unfaithfulness. Faith that does not find its origin in the faithfulness of God, revealed to us in the Word of God, is at sea in the ocean of human unfaithfulness, constantly trying to leap out of its own hopeless situation and drowning in the reality of human unfaithfulness. To say that we are grounded by the faithfulness of our God should not, however, create the impression that in faith we are on solid ground. A "leap of faith" does occur. We do not faithfully leap into the divine reality, but God faithfully leaps into our human reality, displacing all the ground under our feet. Being grounded in *God's* faithfulness thus means that we are no longer grounded on human reality, but on divine reality, that we no longer stand on our own useless attempts at faithfulness, but are hanging in God's all-encompassing faithfulness. Being incapable of leaping faithfully and landing in the reality of God, God's faithfulness throws us into the mid-air reality of grace. In this divine encounter we are no longer pulled aground by the gravity of our unfaithfulness, but

gracefully forgiven by the mercy of our faithful Creator. This grace, this divine faithfulness leaping into our human reality and taking the ground from under our unfaithful feet, is the true origin of our faith. Faith can never ever be based on *our* faithfulness, but must always be based on the faithfulness of God.

Since humanity cannot remain faithful to God, our only hope is in Christ, who remained faithful to God, the Father. By acknowledging Christ we partake in Christ's faithful acknowledgment of the Creator. By acknowledging Jesus Christ we acknowledge our unfaithfulness to the Lord of our existence, who is eternally faithful to us. Jesus Christ, Barth says, is essentially *pistos*, i.e., faithful, constant and reliable, even when we are unfaithful. Because Jesus Christ, who is the object of our faith, is faithful, our faith cannot be Yes and No. Jesus Christ is the basis and the source of the unambiguous Yes of our faith. This unwavering Yes is not founded on any certainty or constancy of our faith in God, our love of God, our hope in God, or on any abstract speculation about God, but simply on Jesus Christ, who *is* the Yes of our faith. The promises of God given to us in Jesus Christ are Yes and Amen (2 Cor 1:19). Jesus Christ is the complete Guarantor and Revealer of the faithful God, who remains faithful despite our unfaithfulness (Barth 1981:19).

For Barth, the misery of our subjective human situation exist therein that we, again and again, turn back to our own unfaithfulness, instead of stretching out to God's faithfulness (Gorringe 1999:70). Therefore, on the subjective side of faith, the best thing we can do is to acknowledge our own rejection of Christ. Within this acknowledgment lies an acknowledgment of Christ, because we acknowledge that we *ought* to acknowledge Christ, but that due to our sinful nature, we do the opposite of what we ought to do, by rejecting Christ. Triumphant faith, therefore, is no faith at all, because it abandons the indirect way in which faith knows God, by acknowledging God's unveiled veiledness. True faith, according to Barth, must always "return from finding to seeking, from being inside to being outside, from having to asking, from the triumph of experience and thought to honest and complete spiritual poverty." As victor, the believer is beaten, and as a beaten person, the believer is the victor (Barth 1975a:176-178).

Acknowledging our rejection of Jesus Christ is of no importance at all. It is a mere subjective reality embedded in our acknowledgment of Jesus Christ alone. This is the mysterious ambiguity of the subjective reality of faith, namely that within our acknowledgment of Christ, an acknowledgment of our rejection of Christ is implied, and that within our acknowledgment of our rejection of Christ, an acknowledgment of our dependence on Christ alone is again implied. Saying that we need Christ means that we cannot save ourselves, while saying that we cannot save ourselves, means that we need Christ. Herein lays the revealed mystery of faith. It acknowledges Christ, and within that acknowledgment it also acknowledges that it cannot truly acknowledge Christ on its own. It acknowledges that although we constantly try to leap away from Christ, Christ's singular leap of faithfulness overtakes our all leaps of rejection.

4. JESUS' FAITH REPLACES OUR FAITHLESSNESS

The ambiguity of the genitive, when we read in the New Testament that we are justified through *piste_s 'I_sou Christou* (Rom 3:21-22) – either meaning our "faith *in* Jesus Christ", or the "faith *of* Jesus Christ" – communicates something of the ambiguity that occurs when divine reality encounters human reality. The Word of God reveals to us that the extraordinary thing about our faith in Jesus Christ is not *our* faith in Jesus Christ, but our faith *in Jesus Christ*. What is remarkable about it, is not only that we experience something out of the ordinary *in ourselves*, but actually and truly that we experience the grace of God *in Christ*.

According to Barth *pistis* / *pistos* have many possible meanings in the New Testament, many of which do not primarily relate to a human experience, but to a divine event. In some instances it

signifies the faithfulness of God, the reliability and trustworthiness of God and God's Word. We receive faith from God, because God is *pistos*. God making God-self known through the revelation in Jesus Christ creates a new state of being for humanity, the state of being "in Christ", wherein we come to see the divine decision that God has made for us. Therefore, *pistis* / *pistos* can be described as trust: trust in God's worth, God's readiness, God's might, and God's truth in Christ, i.e., acknowledging and submitting ourselves to the faithfulness of God in Christ (Barth 1975a:228).

Saying we believe "in" Jesus Christ is ambiguous. It refers to our faith in Jesus Christ, as well as to the event of being taken up in Christ and participating in Christ's faith. The incarnation in Christ not only revealed true divinity, but also true humanity. In Jesus Christ true faith was revealed. Without recognition of the substitutive work of Christ, exhibiting true humanity and thus true obedience of faith, faithless humanity is doomed. Therefore, believing in Christ entails recognising Jesus, who believed in our place, who obeyed the will of God "for us". Barth uses Jesus' "for us" ambiguously, saying that Jesus was not only "for us" as opposed to being against us, but also "for us" in the sense of taking our place in the judgment of God, displacing us from our position of faithlessness, from our human reality deserving God's wrath (Bromiley 1979:182).

Believing "in" Jesus Christ does not, however, mean that we are representations, or repetitions, or the extension of the incarnation of Christ, i.e., that our faith is a "reincarnation" of the faith of Christ. Such an understanding could maybe function within a Hindu belief, but not within Christian faith, says Barth. Christian faith means that the believer encounters Christ, in whom we believe, and that there is communion between Christ and the believer, not identification (Barth 1963:99). Believing in Jesus Christ means staying in fellowship with Jesus Christ, i.e., to be in a loving and trusting orientation towards Jesus Christ, who is faithful in our place, in whom the covenant of grace is fulfilled, kept and established, both from God's side and from humanity's side (Barth 1981:41).

Disbelieving our own unbelief forms part of our faith in Christ – the subjective side of our faith in Christ – because within that faith we simultaneously recognise (*dis-believe*) and reject (*dis-believe*) our own unbelief in Jesus Christ. Disbelieving our unbelief means that we acknowledge the fact that although we still experience unbelief within ourselves, this unbelief is not our final reality. Barth interprets Romans 9-11 as the revelation of God's merciful election, which exceeds all forms of unbelief, even that of the Jews' persistent rejection of Jesus Christ:"[Paul] speaks, on the other hand, of the concrete omnipotence of the God who in Jesus Christ has taken the part of and place of man, the omnipotence which has been revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is present in the miracle of the Church's faith, and which will finally be unveiled in the expected second coming of Jesus Christ. Both at this point and in what follows the thought of the future of this man and of the omnipotence of this God is, therefore, a thought of faith, a concrete thought of hope which neither overestimates man nor infringes the freedom of God. But in this very concreteness it has force and precision; it can and must be thought and expressed. In view of the relation of this God to man it is impossible to expect too much from God, to fail to recognise the supremacy of this God and therefore the promise resting upon this man, to despair of man and therefore to believe in a pertinacity of human unbelief. We can never believe in unbelief; we can believe only in the future faith of those who at present do not believe" (Barth 1957:295-296).

Again, this realisation that we must disbelieve our own unbelief is of little importance. The only important thing is to believe in Jesus Christ and to participate in the faith that Christ has for us. The only relevance of disbelieving our unbelief is that we shouldn't be deceived by the mysterious subjective reality of faith into thinking that our faith in Christ is lacking. *Our faith* in Christ is always lacking in everything (Barth 1963:105), but our faith *in Christ*, the faith that we share with Christ, can for all eternity not be lacking in anything. That is why it is unnecessary and

dangerous to ponder too much on the nature of our experience of faith. If we reflect too long on our own experiences, we might become doubtful about the authenticity of our own faith. If that happens, we give too much credit to our own unbelief, and we forget the hope that we have in the faith of Jesus Christ.

Barth illumines two forms of doubt. If unbelief is the No and belief the Yes of faith (Barth 1963:177), between which we are pilgrims, then the first form of doubt that Barth mentions is the mere recognition of this movement, which is part of the reality of every believer. The second form of doubt, against which Barth warns us, is the refusal to continue moving, because we have become comfortable between the No and the Yes of faith. This, we could say, is the ethical dilemma of agnosticism. Realising that we are pilgrims between unbelief and belief, we should not despair or become comfortable, but keep on moving, while crying out to God for the coming of the kingdom of heaven (Barth 1963:132). Barth is of the opinion that anyone who believes, even if it is the most miniscule of faiths, even if it is nothing more than the wish: "Lord, help my unbelief", will be unwilling to swing and sway between Yes and No, between belief and unbelief (Barth 1975b:142).

5. THE HOLY SPIRIT'S FREEDOM RELEASES OUR CAPTIVITY

Barth criticised Bultmann and existential theology in general, because of a wrong understanding of freedom. Freedom for them means freedom of choice, but to Barth freedom is a gift of grace, rooted in God's freedom. To Barth true freedom is freedom in encounter, freedom for (Busch 1975:400). The ultimate freedom, according to Barth, is not freedom *from* all obligations and limitations, in other words the liberty to choose from a multitude of options. True freedom is freedom *for* Christ. True freedom is the free determination to choose Christ. To be able to choose, to have the possibility of making a decision either for or against Christ, is not freedom, but ultimate bondage. And this bondage is a fact of human reality. Without a determination for Christ, humanity remains imprisoned.

The whole event of faith takes place within the free work of the Holy Spirit, who is described by Barth as the mystery of the Word of God, and within the free response of humanity to the Word of God (Barth 1963:96-97). The Holy Spirit guarantees us what we cannot guarantee by ourselves, namely our personal participation in revelation. The work of the Holy Spirit is in actual fact the Yes to God's Word which is spoken by God-self *for us*, meaning not only *to us*, not only *in our place*, but also *in us*. This Barth calls the mystery of faith. It is both the mystery of our knowledge of the Word of God and the mystery of our willing obedience to the Word of God. For Barth, faith, knowledge and obedience are all realities that preside in the mystery of being "in the Holy Spirit" (Barth 1975a:453). The work of the Holy Spirit doesn't precede faith, by freeing us and creating the ability within us to have faith. In the very event of faith, in the moment of hearing and believing and obeying the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, i.e., the mystery of the Word of God, frees us for faith in Christ (Barth 1963:100).

The fact that the Holy Spirit frees us for faith does not make faith purely a work of the Holy Spirit. The free faith that the Holy Spirit gives us, is still our own faith. The fact that faith is the work of the Spirit and also our own faith is not something we can comprehend; it is the totally hidden and purely miraculous nature of faith. To believe, says Barth, is to exist in believing, meaning that although the Holy Spirit frees us for it, it still entails our own obedience and sanctification. Existence as such is not equal to faith, but faith is equal to existing in faith. Thus faith can never ever be without works, just as justification can never happen without sanctification. Without works, which is our *existere* (Latin for "to step forth"), our faith is empty, devoid of content, non-existent. Works, according to Barth, authenticates authentic faith, because sanctification is grace becoming active. While justification is the truth of the grace in Christ,

sanctification is the reality or actuality of the grace in Christ. But even our own works, our own obedience and thus our own existence in faith, is hidden in the mystery of the Holy Spirit and can only take place with awareness of and penitence for our own hubris, disobedience and unbelief (Barth 1993:32-37).

Silence is not a neutral reality, a harmless quietude in the human reality, but rather humanity's explicit No to the grace in Jesus Christ. Not saying Yes to Christ necessarily means saying a loud and clear No to Christ. This silence is the reality to which humanity is naturally drawn. We are not naturally inclined to the good, as natural theology would have us think. Even our silence, even our "harmless neutrality", is filled with a blasphemous No to Jesus Christ. What is so remarkably mysterious about the subjective reality of faith is that even while the Holy Spirit speaks our Yes to Christ; we simultaneously remain silent, screaming with that silence a heaven-piercing No! Not wanting to be liberated from ourselves, not wanting to die within ourselves, not wanting to be freed for obedience, we object to the work of the Holy Spirit in us.

When we realise that we need to be freed from our own self-destruction, we must confess our own silence, meaning we must repent our own No to Christ. Thus within our confessing *of* Christ, i.e., our declaration and witness to the truth of Christ, lies also our confessing *to* Christ, i.e., our repentance of our own falseness. As with the subjective realities mentioned above, this confession is not something we can hide behind, or something that is of much importance to our faith. The crux of confessing Christ is indeed nothing else than saying Yes to Christ, of declaring Christ, of witnessing Christ to the world. This Yes is given to us through the freedom the Holy Spirit creates in us. The subjective reality of confessing Christ, however, is that within this act of faith, within the very words we use to confess Christ, we actually implicate our own sinfulness, our own silence about Jesus Christ. This is the reason for the ambiguous nature of the act of confessing Christ.

Knowing that only in the power of the Holy Spirit can we keep moving towards the kingdom of God, and can we have hope in the eschatological fulfillment of our faith, the best subjective act of faith of all is merely to cry: "*Veni Creator spiritus!*, Come Creator Spirit!" This cry to the Holy Spirit is the Christian life, the spiritual life. Religious life does not need this cry, because it functions on its own possibilities and capabilities, but the Christian life draws on the possibilities of God and lives off God. The Christian life would be null and void, says Barth, without this movement and act of God, without this coming of the Holy Spirit to us. We refuse God, we contradict God, we resist God, but the Holy Spirit frees us to live spiritual lives in the invocation of God. Thus our lives are not grounded in ourselves, but ec-centrally founded in the movement of God to us. Understood in this way, Barth continues, the Christian life, the spiritual life, is social, public, political and cosmic in its actuality, since it witnesses to the mystery and the miracle of the renewal of all things in Jesus Christ, which is coming to its fulfillment in the eschatological nearing of Jesus' second coming (Barth 1981:92-94, 97-98).

The coming kingdom of God does not allow us to be satisfied with the status quo on earth. Faith does not imply a comfortable celebration of religious emotion, but to participate in the struggle against the powers of death, to affirm that Christ is the Lord over the whole of the earth. To have faith is to live in the hope of the resurrection of the body of Christ, to be in the centre of the earthly struggle wherein the resurrection in Christ is the only truth that we can hold onto (Gorringe 1999:50, 94). Therefore our cry to the Holy Spirit is real *crying*. Our invocation of God is a suffering protest against all that is not according to God's will in this world. Still, in confessing Jesus Christ, we do not despair, because in Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega, we have hope (Barth 1981:165-166). Through the power of the Spirit of promise, we cry to God and know that our crying will not be in vain.

6. THE TRIUNE GOD'S LORDSHIP QUESTIONS OUR SELF-AFFIRMATION

Probably the most fundamental error of the interpretations of faith as an existential decision, or as an experience, or as a natural ability of humanity, is that in each case the faith or unbelief of the person is affirmed, instead of Christ in whom that faith or unbelief is based. This anthropological imbalance applies especially also to philosophy, both to idealism and to scepticism. While true faith cannot do otherwise than to affirm Christ as the Lord, idealism and scepticism affirms the self as lord. Idealism does this by claiming to possess knowledge of God and scepticism by claiming to own the knowledge that God is unknowable. Both these rational approaches to faith are fatally mistaken by thinking that Christ's lordship can be questioned from the viewpoint of human reality, whereas human reality is always and ultimately questioned by Christ's lordship (Johnson 1997:3-4).

The mystery of Christ's resurrection and ascension revealed to us the lordship of the triune Mystery over our very existence, turning everything we think we know on its head. It is actually quite amusing how we break our heads about the historical Jesus, wondering about the scientific possibility of the virgin birth and debating over the mythological nature of the miracle narratives, trying to question the divine nature of some minute acts of God in history from the perspective of our human reality, while the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, revealing the lordship of the triune God, the ultimate *Mystery*, put every fibre of our existence into question.

Answering in prayer to Jesus Christ, the revelation of the triune Lord, which puts our whole existence into question, is the climax of faith. Prayer is the basic form of both faith and obedience in so far as it invokes Jesus Christ and thus entails true participation in Jesus Christ. In faith, we embrace prayer and obedience, and in that way faith is wholly God's work and wholly our own work (Bromiley 1979:148). For Barth, answering to Jesus Christ in prayer means thanksgiving and praise, but most of all petitioning. In essence, Barth claims, prayer is asking. In prayer we invoke the living triune God, the origin and object of our faith. Barth even describes this invocation of God, this "*Anrufung*" as *the* act of the Christian life. It is remarkable that Barth in his dogmatics first describes faith as *the* act of the Christian life (Barth 1956:757) and then later on, in his unfinished ethics of reconciliation, called "The Christian life", changes his mind. After thinking about many concepts like faith, faithfulness and gratitude, Barth finally decides on invocation of God as *the* act of the Christian life. Barth then explains that whereas faith is formally *the* act of the Christian life, prayer is materially *the* act of the Christian life. Our invocation of God contains our complete obedience of faith, including our Christian life, our freedom, our conversion, decision, faith, gratitude and faithfulness. In this humble, resolute, frightened and joyful "*Anrufung*", or cry to God, which takes place in gratitude, praise and above all petition, we act out the one act of faith that God demands of us. In this way Barth links very closely with his Reformed tradition, since both Calvin and the Heidelberg Catechism described prayer as the chief exercise of our gratitude towards God, and thus as the centre of our sanctification. Prayer as such is not an act of any significance, yet it is the greatest of human acts, because it invokes the living God, as God has commanded us to do. Therefore, not to pray is rebellion against God and the meaning of unbelief (Barth 1981:38-44, 278).

Thus the very close relation between faith and prayer in Barth's thinking comes to the fore. This, however, is not an instinct that Barth suddenly gets at the end of his theological career. In the very first volume of his "Church Dogmatics", when reflecting on the idea that all theology is in essence prayer, Barth already asks whether prayer cannot be understood as the epitome of our faith (Barth 1975a:23). Barth focuses our attention on the very mysterious reality that the act of faith, when answering to Jesus Christ, is indeed asking Jesus Christ, petitioning the triune God revealed in Christ, to become present in our midst. Even before Barth starts out with his "Church

Dogmatics”, after writing his first commentary on Romans, he gives a lecture wherein he denies Christian existence to be “owning, feasting and sharing” and claims that it is “relentless searching, asking and knocking” instead (Busch 1975:114-115).

Although the Lord God is the Mystery that questions all of our human reality, in our answer to this questioning we still try to question the Truth. Although Jesus Christ *is* our Lord, yet we still answer to our own lordship instead of answering to Christ’s lordship. Following this persistence of us in self-affirmation and self-lordship, of answering not to God, but to ourselves, the best thing we can do as a subjective act of faith, is to ask Jesus Christ to be our answer. Asking the triune Mystery, the true origin and object of our faith, to be our answer, is the climax of the subjective act of faith. In this way, we ask Christ to be our full assurance, rather than trying to assure ourselves with our self-affirming efforts at certainty. As prayer, our faith is pure seeking, knocking and asking: “Come Lord Jesus! Come Creator Spirit!” And through this seeking, knocking and asking our faith is obedience to God; it is an *answer*, a proper *response*, to God’s justifying and sanctifying Word. This prayer is the genuine act of hope that we must do with childlikeness, without hesitation and with complete confidence in Christ (Barth 1975b:203, 210).

Jesus Christ has led the way for us in how to invoke God. We participate in Jesus’ praying by a re-petition of Jesus’ petitioning (Migliore, 2002:99). Jesus has led us in petitioning to God, not only by giving us the Lord’s Prayer, but also by crying: “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” on the cross (Mt 27:46). In this moment of dereliction, which can be seen as the epitome of Christ’s obedience of faith, Jesus answers to God with a lament. D.L. Migliore asks whether Barth worked out the full implications of viewing petition as the essence of prayer. He thinks that Barth, who made a remarkable comment on Job as an example of someone who prayed authentically, did not take that comment all the way into his theology of prayer and thus underappreciated lamenting as a fundamental part of prayer. He asks whether Jesus’ cry on the cross shouldn’t have received more attention in Barth’s interpretation of prayer, as the “Friday voice of faith.” Shouldn’t Barth have seen that in this cry, Jesus protested in our place, against the injustice, violence and oppression in the world, and thus also gave us the freedom to lament God’s absence in the world (Migliore 2002:109-114)?

This is debatable. If one looks at the repeated use of this lament of Jesus in Barth’s sermons nearing the end of his life, it is clear that Barth understood this cry as the ultimate human cry in which all of humanity’s cries are taken up, given voice and forever destroyed (Barth 1979:177, 189-192, 214). The important point is, however, that in Barth’s emphasis on petitioning as the essence of prayer, we are given a clue to understand this cry of Jesus on the cross. In the culmination of Jesus’ submission to the will of God, Jesus answers God’s lordship by asking the presence of God. By lamenting the absence of God, Jesus embodied all our lamenting and invoked the presence of God for us. Following Jesus, not as a good example or the archetype of our faith, but as the origin and object of our faith, as our Lord who believed in our place and in whom we are placed, our subjective reality of faith can only correspond to this act of Jesus. Thus the revealed mystery of our faith is that although in faith we *answer* to Jesus Christ, we subjectively can do no more than to answer by *asking* the presence of our Lord, of the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ.

6. NOT A CONCLUSION

It is rather strange to call the “New Reformation” by this name, since when it is viewed through the eyes of Karl Barth, it seems to be more of a new liberal theology, or even a new Roman Catholicism (in line with Roman Catholicism which preceded the Reformation), since it puts faith once again in the realm of anthropology and achievement-theology, i.e., in the realm of human possibilities. Faith, in the Christian sense of the word, is however always faith in Jesus Christ, and

therefore completely within the realm of grace, miracle and mystery. (Post-)Modern people are not helped by the attempts to make the Gospel more believable, but rather thrown thereby into the despair and hopelessness of human weakness and sinfulness. We should rather try to give an accurate witness to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ, which is attested to in the Bible, and which must be proclaimed in word and deed by the church. This witness will indeed be very good news to (post-)modern people, because it will announce the grace, the miracle and the mystery of Jesus Christ, who is the origin and the object, the beginning and the completion of our faith in God, which is completely and utterly impossible for humanity, and yet a reality in us.

This witness to Jesus Christ should, however, not be a given as a final word that tries to end the conversation with movements like the "New Reformation." True witness to Jesus Christ, like the witness given by Karl Barth, always leads to more witnessing. That is why Barth always attempted to start from the beginning, again and again, almost as if he has said nothing in the past. True witness can never speak from a high ground as if it possesses the truth, for it can only point to the Truth, the living, free, triune Lord, revealed in Jesus Christ. The truth of the church's witness will not depend upon excommunicating other witnesses which it regards to be false witnesses, but only upon God's free decision to be shown and revealed by our witness.

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