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Karl Barth's *Römerbrief*: A Turning Point in Protestant Theology

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Abstract

Karl Barth's theology presents itself as a paradigm shift during the early part of the 20th century. As time went on, the radical nature of his theology manifested in different ways. Not only did it start out as a critique of Protestant liberal theology, but it also transformed the understanding of the church, mission and basic reformed doctrines such as election. This was met by vociferous protest, from liberal as well as more orthodox theologians. Despite all, Pope Pius XII called Barth the greatest theologian since Thomas Aquinas. This contribution reflects on the first of Barth's major publications, his *Römerbrief* which first appeared in 1919. The point is made that Barth's *Römerbrief* could be regarded as an important turning point in the history of Protestant theology. The context of the *Römerbrief* is discussed as well as some of Barth's early theological views present in it, illustrating the radical break between Barth and the liberal theology of the Modern Era.

Keywords: Karl Barth; *Der Römerbrief*; liberal theology; hermeneutics; historical-critical exegesis



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Introduction

This contribution¹ reflects on Karl Barth's first major publication, *Der Römerbrief* (1919 [1963]; 1922 [1933] [1976]).² With its publication Barth took on the dominant theologies of his time. Barth felt himself increasingly estranged from the liberal theological tradition in which he was trained, especially the dominant influence of Schleiermacher (Van der Kooi 2016a, 189). It is in essence a highly polemical work, not so much in terms of his interpretation of the *Letter to the Romans* but rather in terms of epistemology.

Barth presented *Der Römerbrief* to his readers as a commentary on the apostle Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. In his own words, as a country pastor, he was still "only vaguely aware of what ecclesial and scientific matters really mean" (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], v). Despite the fact that Barth was not well-known, had no postgraduate qualification (he never completed doctoral studies) and being inexperienced, response to his *Römerbrief* was such that he decided to rework it. The second edition of 1922 had much greater impact on the theological scene (Van der Kooi 2016a, 189). Barth received an appointment as professor of theology at the University of Göttingen in 1921. He taught at various German universities until his conflict with the Nazi-regime forced him to return to Switzerland as professor at the University of Basel. Van der Kooi (2016b, 196) comes to the conclusion that the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* could be regarded as the "*Ouverture zur westlichen Theologie des 20. Jahrhunderts ...*"

By 1928 the 6th edition had appeared. In the preface of every edition Barth entered into discussion with his critics, pointing out how he had been misunderstood. He also laments the fact that the book needs to be reworked again, but he does not have the time for it. *Der Römerbrief* was seen by many as a new beginning for Protestant theology, others rejected it. Whatever the opposing opinions were, the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Adam expressed the opinion that Barth "dropped a bomb on the playground of European theologians with the

1 This contribution was presented at a conference of the *Church History Society of South Africa* (Stellenbosch 2017). The theme of the conference, in light of the 2017 commemoration of the 16th century Reformation, was "*Turning points in the history of Christianity.*"

2 Barth, K., 1919 [1963], *Der Römerbrief*, EVZ-Verlag, Zürich. A replica of the first edition of 1919 was reprinted in 1963. In this contribution it will be referenced as "Barth 1919." Barth, K. 1922 [1933] [1976], *Epistle to the Romans*, translated 1933 by E.C. Hoskyns, reprinted 1976, Oxford University Press, London. The reworked edition of *Der Römerbrief* appeared in 1922 and saw another four editions between 1923 and 1928. It was translated into English in 1933, with many reprints. In the reprints (also the one used) the prefaces to all six editions were reprinted. In this contribution the 1976 reprint is used.

publication of *The Epistle to the Romans*” (see Cross 2001, 82). Barth argued that knowledge of God from sources other than the revelation of God in Christ was fundamentally flawed. Christian theology should understand God the “*Totally Other*” who cannot be known through reason or human experience. Barth’s dialectical theology presents itself as a radical critique of the optimistic claims of modern science and liberal theology. Departing from a theocentric point of view, the radical nature of God’s grace, Barth resisted every form of “*Kulturoptimismus*” (Van der Kooi 2016a, 191).

As time went on, the radical nature of his theology manifested in different ways. Not only did it start out as a critique of Modernism, but it also transformed the understanding of the church, mission (which evolved into the *missio Dei* concept) as well as basic reformed doctrines such as election. This was met by vociferous protest, from liberal as well as more orthodox theologians.

The publication of *Der Römerbrief* is an important turning point in the history of Protestant theology, a critique of and turn against Protestant liberal theology. This will be illustrated by reflecting on the prefaces to the first and second editions of *Der Römerbrief*.

Historical Context

Since the 15th century Europe experienced radical transformation, a shift from pre-Modernity to Modernity. The movement from a medieval to modern paradigm started with the Italian Renaissance, followed by the growth of Humanism and the Reformation movement. The rise of Modernity accelerated with the colonisation of the East and the Americas, the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, the rise of nationalistic states and the Industrial Revolution. All these changes and growth were driven and facilitated by the exponential growth in scientific knowledge and technology (Ford 2005, 1). Barth, in his *Die Protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert*, quotes Christian Wolff to characterise this era in European history and theology: “Optimismus, Moralismus, Intellektualismus” (Barth 1946 [1960], 17).

As a result, the 20th century started in a very optimistic mood. Miracles were performed by scientists. Automobiles, modern factories, new medicines and aeroplanes left people bedazzled. Western countries reached the zenith of their political and economic power,

convinced of their own superiority (Delfgaauw 1963, 171). By the end of the 19th century many theologians were optimistically convinced of man's natural ability to know God and speak about God. They believed theology needed to be as "scientific" as all the other sciences. They were convinced that it would be possible to speak about God in scientific terms, based on the innate qualities of humanity. Human reason, experience, morality and history became the foundation of religious discourse. There were no doubts about our ability to improve and reshape society with the aid of scientific knowledge. Scientists were convinced that unlimited progress would create a better and brighter future for all people. Not even the sky is the limit, as Jules Verne's (1865 [1890]) novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (*De la terre à la lune*) explains. Jules Verne tells the story of the Baltimore Gun Club and their attempts to build an enormous space gun which could launch the club's president and a French poet to the moon.

During and after World War I (1914–1918) the mood changed completely. Optimism was replaced by fear, by the knowledge that science and technology not only facilitated the progress and well-being of humanity, but also the devastation of society and destruction of humanity. This realisation brought about a major crisis in European society (Hardy 2005, 19).

Karl Barth (1886–1968) was the local pastor of the small industrial town of Safenwil in the Swiss canton of Aargau when he worked on his *Römerbrief*. Barth remembers in his *Vorwort zum Nachdruck* of 1963 that he started working on the text in July 1916, in the middle of World War I (Barth 1919 [1963], v). By the end of 1918 he submitted the almost 500 pages to the publishers and it appeared in 1919. Only 1 000 copies of *Der Römerbrief* were printed in Bern, of which only 300 were sold. Some critics remarked with some sarcasm that it would require some patience to sell all the books.³ That sarcasm was short-lived, because in 1922 the second, reworked and increased edition appeared which shook the theological establishment in Germany to its foundations.

Der Römerbrief was Barth's first attempt to articulate the gospel in a new way in a context of war, growing secularism and modernism. The dramatic events before and after World War I are evident in *Der Römerbrief*. The existential crisis of the church and the loss of credibility of many theologians who supported the war, form the environment in which Barth worked on

3 See text on the dust cover of the 1963 reprint of the 1919 first edition of *Der Römerbrief*.

Der Römerbrief. Barth started his journey as theologian with misery and poverty all around him. Millions of people died and Europe was laid to ruin. Barth was convinced that the Bible had something to say about that (Van der Kooi 2016a, 189).

At the beginning of 1917, a revivalist preacher (Jakob Vetter) appeared in Safenwil. He was an evangelist who conducted revival meetings on the request of members of the church at Safenwil. Barth was horrified by Vetter's description of the journey of the soul towards salvation—awakening, conversion and sealing in the Spirit. The visit by Vetter spurred Barth on to finish the *Römerbrief* and in August 1918 the text was sent to the publisher. Reviewers said of the first edition that it gave evidence of the burning zeal of its author. The purpose of *Der Römerbrief* was to explain that neither God nor salvation could be controlled or possessed by man, and knowledge of God is not founded in human reason, history or morality (McCormack 1997, 135–142).

Due to comments received on the first edition of *Der Römerbrief* Barth decided to publish a second edition. The question he wanted to address was: “How God could be known by human beings without ceasing to be God, to be the master of the revelation between God and humans?” (McCormack 1997, 207). In October 1920 Barth started on revising the first edition. It is said that he wrote “... possessed, staggering between desk, dinner table, and bed like a drunken man” (McCormack 1997, 240). The work was finalised and printed in 1922.

In the preface to the fourth edition (dated February, 1924) Barth remarks: “... further reflection [has] made it obvious that the book needs to be rewritten” (Barth 1922, 20). He laments the fact that he had no time to rework *Der Römerbrief* again, making it clear that it was not without its shortcomings. He later remarked that there was an “almost catastrophic opposition of God and the world, God and humanity, God and the Church” (see McCormack 1997, 244).

Theological Context of *Der Römerbrief*

Bromiley (1978, 362) typifies the context of the 19th century as follows: “If Kant hoped that his moralistic reinterpretation would fill the void left by his epistemological exclusion of God, events quickly showed him to be wrong. His negative assessment of religion had a powerful effect. In particular, his closing of man to the knowledge of God hypnotized his

contemporaries into acceptance not only of God's incompetence in communication but also of his virtual non-existence.”

The 19th century theology was strongly influenced by the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, G. W. F. Hegel as well as Charles Darwin's theories on evolution. Barth engaged these philosophers and scientists, as well as anthropologically-based theologies, including the subjectivism of the Lutheran and Reformed orthodoxy. Barth was extremely critical of every attempt to “humanise” (*humanisieren*) theology (Barth 1946 [1960], 103).

Barth challenged the notion that the human psyche (Schleiermacher), history (Troeltsch) or morality (Ritschl) could be the source or starting point of theological reflection. Barth was of the opinion that knowledge of God is only possible because God revealed Himself. We can only speak of and with God because God spoke to us (Barth 1919 [1963], 1–2). This was a radical move away from the liberal theology of the 19th century and Modernism in general.

Karl Barth's theology could be described as a “Copernican” revolution compared to modern theologies at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries (Van Niftrik 1948, 20). For that reason, we need to look cursorily at some of the important modern theologies Barth had to contend with.

F. D. E. Schleiermacher (1768–1834)

Schleiermacher was strongly influenced by the Romantic Movement. Flowing from this, Schleiermacher wrote poetically about our experience of the Infinite Being. Religious experiences are analogous to the experience of love, beauty, art, music or poetry. For that reason theology has much more in common with art than science. Religion can only be described with analogy to the erotic and the arts, especially music.

According to Van Niftrik (1948, 23), Schleiermacher was of the opinion that the origin of all religion is to be found in the human psyche, stimulated by feelings of dependence on a Higher Being. Jesus Christ is the clearest and most profound expression of a human being dependent on a Higher Being, whom he called “Father.” Jesus is the pinnacle of religiosity. Schleiermacher writes (for example) in his *On Christian Faith*:

We set aside, then, all thought of proof. Even proof from Scripture—not only because of the ambiguity of most of its statements, but because in that way we could prove only that this is the original form of the Christian faith. Even so what we must omit here remains difficult enough; and that is to unfold the way in which faith originated, along with its content. That is, we must show, without recourse to compulsion by means of miracle or prophecy (which is a thing alien to faith), how the conviction could arise, both originally and now, that Jesus possessed sinless perfection, and that there is a communication of this perfection in the fellowship founded by Him ... Thus our proposition depends on the assumption that in the Christian fellowship, outwardly so constituted, there is still that communication of the absolutely potent God-consciousness in Christ as a thing which is inward, and yet, as faith can rest upon nothing except an impression received, capable of being experienced. This experience is made up of two elements, one of which belongs to the personal consciousness, the other to the common consciousness. (Schleiermacher 1830 [2004], 362 & 364)

It is clear that Schleiermacher did not regard Scripture as a source of true religious experience, but rather the “God-consciousness” of the individual human being as formed within the collective of the Christian community. This “God-consciousness” was transferred or communicated by Jesus to the community. Schleiermacher put great emphasis on the authenticity, intensity and originality of this religious experience.

According to Berkhof (1997, 118), in Schleiermacher’s Christology Jesus hardly rises above the “human level.” The uniqueness of Jesus “consists in the fact that He possesses a perfect and unbroken sense of union with the divine, and also realises to the full the destiny of man in His character of sinless perfection.” According to Berkhof, Schleiermacher describes Christ as the “new spiritual head of the race” and as the “perfectly religious man” (see Schleiermacher 1830 [2004]).

The individual is seen as the revelation of God and this led to Schleiermacher’s theology taking a very distinctive pantheistic tendency—the One is in all and all is in One. Everything in the universe is made up of joining together opposite activities (see Bromley 1978, 363).

Schleiermacher rejects the common notion that religion is a way of thinking and a way of acting, which leads to a mess of metaphysical and ethical questions. Real religion is located

in the inner self, in the personal experience of the Eternal. God can only be experienced, which by definition will always be individual experience. All religious experience is personal and as a result God “reveals” Himself in every individual. If there is such a thing as revelation, it is to be found in the religious sense present in every human being. Schleiermacher makes a distinction between inner (real) religion and outer religion, which is a product of history, culture and context (Bromiley 1978, 363). From this point of departure, it is impossible to speak of “the truth,” as if only one, generally accepted and absolute truth about God exists.

In contrast to this, Barth emphasised in *Der Römerbrief* that faith is all about God who reveals himself in the Word (see for instance Barth 1919 [1963], 1–2). What is required is not personal religious experience but faith in God’s mighty works and deeds in Jesus Christ. The attention must be not on the subjective faith experience but on the object of the faith, God in Christ.

Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923)

Troeltsch was of the opinion that God revealed himself in and through history. Truth is to be found in history, which could be studied objectively. Troeltsch rejected the notion that some historical event (i.e. the life of Jesus) should be exalted to the one and all of religion. All religion is relative, dependent on historical context, level of development and a process of change (Van Niftrik 1948, 29). Seen from this perspective, Christianity represents the highest level of development. From a historical perspective, Jesus could be regarded as a symbol of the highest religious development and a symbol of God Himself. Christianity is a historical phenomenon, a movement in which Jesus, Augustine, Anselmus, Calvin and all other religious leaders played a role.

Troeltsch’s historicism was quite influential in Protestant liberal theology. History became the arena of God’s revelation. Revelation is not something which we receive through the Word of God, but is situated within human history. Historical-critical exegesis, the quest for the historical Jesus and the relation between history and faith kept many theologians busy. It also had some impact on the German church and its own self-esteem. The German race and German church was God’s gift to humanity.

For Barth the revelation is God's history but history is no revelation. The Bible is no handbook for history but is the revelation of God's deeds in Christ who brings an end to human history. Revelation is not situated in human history. Revelation is to be found in Jesus Christ, the Word who became flesh within human history. "The resurrection is therefore an occurrence in history, which took place outside the gates of Jerusalem in the year A.D. 30" (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 31). In the Christ event God reveals Himself.

Albrecht Ritschl (1822–1889)

Schleiermacher had much appreciation for aesthetics, Troeltsch placed much emphasis on history, and Albrecht Ritschl was convinced that religion is based on human morality, the ability (freedom) of every person to make sound moral decisions. For Ritschl the starting point of Christ is His work and not His Person. Christ is regarded as a mere man but divinity is attributed to Him due to the work He did. He revealed God in His grace, truth and redemptive power and can therefore rightly be called God. Theology, according to Ritschl, is the realisation of our ethical inner being or morals. This was a theology that seemed to differ from Schleiermacher but still made humanity the focal point.

The philosophy of Kant made a great impression on Ritschl. For Ritschl the love of God is the means to bring about a moral world order. He says: "Love is the constant purpose to further another spiritual being of like nature with oneself in the attainment of his authentic destiny, and in such a way that the one who loves in so doing pursues his own proper end" (see Berkhof 1979, 121).

The kingdom of God is a central motif in Ritschl's theology. The purpose of the Christian church is to facilitate the growth of God's kingdom. Humanity and more specific, Christians, must use their freedom to contribute to God's kingdom (Van Niftrik 1948, 26–27). Barth reacted against Ritschl by stating that humans have no control over God's kingdom. The kingdom of God constitutes through God's acts in and through Jesus Christ, not through moral acts or ethical conduct.

These three examples (Schleiermacher, Troeltsch and Ritschl) help us to understand how modern, liberal theologies had human nature and ability as starting point, even as a source of revelation. During the 19th century human reason, religious experience, morality, history and scientific abilities were regarded as the foundation of theology.

Some of the Early Theological Principles Articulated in *Der Römerbrief*

It is impossible to discuss all the important theological principles we find in Barth's *Römerbrief*. As an introduction, Barth's theological convictions as expressed by himself in the prefaces to the six editions of the *Römerbrief*, are quite helpful. In this contribution I will limit the discussion to some of the remarks in the prefaces.

Preface: First Edition

The preface to the first edition (dated Safenwil, August 1918) of the *Römerbrief* is quite short. In the first preface Barth reflects on the use of the historical-critical method in Biblical exegesis (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 1). Barth points out that historical-critical exegesis has its place, but not in opposition to the doctrine of inspiration. He goes even further: "But, were I driven to choose between it [historical-critical exegesis] and the venerable doctrine of Inspiration, I should without hesitation adopt the latter, which has a broader, deeper, more important justification ... Fortunately, I am not compelled to choose between the two."

It is clear that such remarks flew in the face of theologians who, in the conviction that theology as science could not make any dogmatic claims on something like divine inspiration, should only be concerned with linguistic and historical analysis.

Barth returns to the question of historical-critical exegesis more than once in his prefaces to the various editions. It is quite clear that he was severely criticised for using a more dogmatic method of interpretation, giving too little attention to historical-critical questions. In the preface to the third edition he remarks "the strangest episode in the history of the book since the appearance of the second edition has been its friendly reception by Bultmann and its equally friendly rejection by Schlatter" (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 16). Bultmann wrote several articles in *Die Christliche Welt* during 1922⁴ in reaction to Barth's second edition of *Der Römerbrief*, in which he states that Karl Barth's *Epistle to the Romans* may be characterised as an attempt to prove the independence and the absolute nature of religion (Bultmann 1922, Col 320). Barth reacted to Bultmann's view that he (Barth) is too conservative, and that at some point he would have to criticise Paul's views, because Paul had been influenced by "other spirits"; meaning that Paul was a man of his time. Barth (1922

4 See for instance Bultmann in *Die Christliche Welt* XXXVI (1922), issue 18, Col. 320–323.

[1933] [1976], 17) states that “the commentator is thus presented by a clear ‘Either-Or’. The question is whether or not he is to place himself in a relation to his author of utter loyalty.” Barth’s argument is clear—a real commentator must take the original author seriously and not superimpose his own views upon that of the original author. The responsibility of a commentator is not to correct the Bible or biblical authors.

This hermeneutical principle is found on the very first page of the first edition of *Der Römerbrief*, where Barth (1922 [1933] [1976], 1) remarks: “The understanding of history is an uninterrupted conversation between the wisdom of yesterday and the wisdom of tomorrow. And it is a conversation always conducted with honesty and discernment.” The words of the author, their intention and meaning, must be taken seriously. Van der Kooi (2016a, 190) calls it “*Erneuerung durch Exegese*,” a renewal through a new approach to exegesis and hermeneutics.

It is clear that Barth deviates from very exact, scientific and precise historical and linguistic criticism in favour of a more open process of “conversation”—interpreting Biblical text as sacred texts, inspired by God. Barth had much appreciation for theology as conversation, not only a conversation about God, but also with God, with fellow believers of the past and the present. Barth understood the biblical narrative as “witness” rather than a “report,” and in so doing defied modernist preoccupation with historicist and rationalist Bible interpretation.

Preface: Second Edition

Barth mentions some of the people who influenced him in the rewriting of his *Römerbrief*. These include Plato, Immanuel Kant, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, his brother (Heinrich Barth, professor of philosophy) and his friend Eduard Thurneysen. His understanding of theology as conversation is again evident: “The book does not claim to be more than fragments of a conversation between theologians ...” He also takes Wernle to task because he complained that Barth spoke too easily of the “risen Christ”; riding rough-shod over very, very difficult thought problems. On the other hand, Barth mentions, he had been accused of being too complicated when he spoke of the gospel, ignoring the beauty of simplicity (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 4).

He enters into discussion with his critics, especially those who suspected him of being an enemy of historical criticism. His commentary was, according to the critics, not on the level

of those by Zahn and Köhler. Barth declares: “I have nothing whatever to say against historical criticism. I recognize it, and once more state quite definitely that it is both necessary and justified. My complaint is that recent commentators confine themselves to an interpretation of the text which seems to me to be no commentary at all, but merely the first step towards a commentary” (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 6–7). Barth’s argument is clear: Mere linguistic analysis of the Greek text is not a commentary, not even theology, but rather philology. He then points to theologians such as Luther, Calvin, Schlatter and Godet who actually commented in a constructive manner on the text of the *Letter to the Romans*. He concludes (p. 8): “The interpretation of what is written requires more than disjointed series of notes on words and phrases ... The matter contained in the text cannot be released save by a creative straining of the sinews, by a relentless elastic application of the ‘dialectical’ method ... The Word needs to be exposed in the words ...” What Barth proposes is the use of historical-critical method, but in conjunction with a real interpretation of the meaning of the words, in terms of what the text itself proposes. It seems as if Barth maintains the old exegetical principle of *Scriptura sui ipsius interpres*.

Barth’s theology could be described as a theology of the Word. Barth even remarks in the introduction to the second edition of *Der Römerbrief* that some of his critics call him a “Biblicist” (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 11). However, Barth is by no means a biblical fundamentalist, because in his view the Word of God is never directly available to us. The Word of God is revealed through the incarnation of Christ, the words of the prophets and the apostles as reflected in the canonical Scriptures and through the proclaimed Word (i.e. preaching). That being said, God’s revelation is much more than the “forms” of revelation. It comes to us in a “veiled” manner. We could never control or possess God’s revelation. God maintains His freedom; He is always more than is revealed to us.

God’s Word is also more than just the Bible. God reveals Himself in the incarnate Word, the Word that became flesh in the man Jesus from Nazareth, who is also the Christ. Barth’s whole theology has Jesus Christ as its focal point. His understanding of revelation, the church, election and other doctrine is fundamentally Christocentric.

Barth’s view of revelation and theology stood in direct opposition to the positivist theologies of the 19th century, which were all in different ways fully confident of our capacity as rational human beings to make “true” statements about God. Modern theology had little

appreciation for the distinction between God and man. In his preface to the 2nd edition of the *Römerbrief* Barth explains: “My reply is that, if I have a system, it is limited to the recognition of what Kierkegaard called the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing a negative as well as a positive significance. ‘God is in heaven, and thou art on earth’. The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy” (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 10).

In various passages of *Der Römerbrief* Barth rejects the attempt by Schleiermacher and others to replace God’s grace with human possibilities, calling it “a betrayal of the very heart of the Gospel of Christ” (Barth 1922 [1933] [1976], 225). The gospel of Christ and the grace of God shatter all human religious constructs. Instead, Barth (1922 [1933] [1976], 331) speaks of “God, who is distinguished qualitatively from men and from everything human, and must never be identified with anything which we name, or experience, or conceive, or worship, as God.”

In his preface to the second edition Barth mentions the influence Kierkegaard had on him, which is evident in Barth’s understanding of the qualitative and infinite distinction between time and eternity, between God and man, between heaven and earth. Turchin (2008, 61) points out that this radical disjunction between God and man was the key element in his rejection of the theologies of Schleiermacher, Herrmann, Natorp and Cohen. It also rejects Ritschl’s view that all religion is based on human morality; or Troeltsch who thought that human history could be a source of revelation. Barth condemns all human endeavours to know God based on human possibility. In short: Because God is God, because He is the “Wholly Other,” it is impossible to understand God or to speak of God. As theologians, we always live with this dialectical tension, the inability to say anything about God, yet with the responsibility to speak of God. It means that any theology which has human faculties as starting point, does not take God seriously. We can only speak about God and with God (prayer/liturgy) because God had spoken to us, because in His total freedom He decided to reveal Himself to us through His Word (Van der Kooi 2016b, 197).

Conclusion

Barth's *Römerbrief* is a polemical work, not so much in terms of his New Testament scholarship but rather his epistemological approach. Barth laid the foundations of some of the most influential theological concepts of the 20th century. Despite the creative and magisterial contribution Barth made to 20th century theology, he doubted his own abilities. His distress over the huge gaps in his learning and the fact that he never completed a formal PhD, reflect in some of the letters he wrote to his good friend Eduard Thurneysen. Despite his own misgivings about his competency as a theologian, Barth remains one of the outstanding theologians of all time.

Karl Barth was, and still is, a controversial figure in the history of modern theology. Some theologians regard him as too liberal, some as too rigid and orthodox. Some regard his theology as outdated and irrelevant, for some he is a 20th century church father. A fact which cannot be ignored, is that most influential theologians of the modern era in some or other way engaged with Barth's theology (for instance Rahner, Küng, Von Balthazar, Moltmann, Ebeling, Pannenberg, Torrance, McGrath, Guder, Bosch, Hauerwas, Volf, Zizioulas ...). Centres for Barthian studies were established at major universities such as Aberdeen, Princeton and Basel. Not only in Europe, but also in the USA and South Africa one can find critics of Barth as well as those theologians who are fundamentally Barthian in the way they do theology.

If we speak of turning points in the history of Christianity, there are many. Very often such turning points are the result of theological reflection. The Reformation of the church during the 16th century is a prime example: When Luther and many other started doing theology differently, when the epistemology changed, when they started thinking and speaking differently, it had a major impact not only on theology as such but on the church as well. The same is true of Barth: His radical criticism of Protestant liberal theology not only changed the way theology was practised, but also the way the church understood itself and its calling.

It is quite evident that Barth, with the publication of *Der Römerbrief*, presents us not only with a turning point in the history of Protestant theology but also a turning point in the history of the Christian church.

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