

Interpreting the theology of Barth in light of Nietzsche's dictum "God is dead"

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Abstract

Karl Barth responded with his theology to Nietzsche's dictum "God is dead" by stating that God is the living God. God does not need the human race to exist. God reveals God self to humankind whenever God wills. Barth agreed with Nietzsche that the god of the nineteenth century was a "Nicht-Gott". The article aims to discuss Karl Barth's response to Nietzsche's impulse towards the development of a concept of God that would lead to neither atheism nor theism. The article argues that Barth paved the way for talking about God by defining God as the "communicative God".

1. INTRODUCTION

In his book, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, originally written in 1882, Nietzsche tells about a mad man who runs around in a marketplace looking for "God" (Nietzsche 1973:159). Since he cannot find God, he can only reach one conclusion. God is dead!

Nietzsche did not *per se* deny or affirm the existence of God. He announced the death of the god of modernity (Ward [1997] 1998:xxix; Groenewald 2005:146). He had a problem with the notion of "Fortschritt" according to which history has proven that human beings develop to greater heights of their own accord and that the potential for progress is intrinsic to humankind (Nietzsche 1969a:169; 1972: 304, 309, 310; see Jensen 2006:47, 51). "God's existence and providence could then be proven on account of this optimistic progress in the course of history" (Groenewald 2005:146). Nietzsche was reacting to the Christian concept of God which prevailed during his time (Nietzsche 1969a:183; cf Küng 1978:452; Madelon-Wienand 1998:302, 306-309; Ward [1997] 1998:xxviii). Nietzsche's "atheism" must be

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seen relative to a particular definition of God (cf Haar 1998:157). He wanted to show the people of his time what the terrible consequences of the death of God, whom they had killed, were (cf Haar 1998:158; Roberts 1998:187). He was in actual fact looking for a concept of God that transcends modern atheism and theism (see Golomb 2006:24).

Nietzsche's dictum challenged Christian theology to respond to the nihilistic consequences of the death of God (Groenewald 2005:143-164; cf Köster 1982:615-685; Aschheim 1988:218-249; Booth 1992:290-307; Fleischer 1991:17-19). I intend to discuss the reaction of Barth who, in my view, is a response to the problem Nietzsche had with the concept of God, as it was propagated in the modern period (Groenewald 2005:145-146; cf Küng 1987:157).

I will focus on Barth's theology that confronted this challenge. Barth responded to Nietzsche's impulse towards the development of a concept of God that would lead to neither atheism nor theism. Barth paved the way for talking about God by defining him as the communicative God who came in Jesus Christ to reconcile God with the human race (Küng 1987:229; Nimmo 2007:10-12; cf Berkhof [1982] 1991:87; Fraser 2002:8-10).

Barth (1951:446) also experienced the consequences of the ideology Nietzsche warned against, namely the idea of the power of history moving to greater heights. He experienced the consequences of World War I and II, having been expelled from his teaching position in Bonn for speaking out against the regime of Hitler (Barth 1969:47). Barth, while agreeing with Nietzsche that the god of the nineteenth century was a "Nicht-Gott" (Barth [1922] 1924:96), also reacted to the god of Natural Theology and later also to the god of Schleiermacher (see Barth 1962:17).

2. KARL BARTH'S CHALLENGE TO THE DICTUM OF NIETZSCHE

2.1 Introduction

Barth ([1919] 1985:164) agreed with Nietzsche's view that the nineteenth century was the era of progress (see Ten Kate 1999:9-31). To Barth the important issues of his time were not the notions of progress and teleological development, but the fact that the Kingdom of God had come near. The real promises were not those created by the ideas of progress, but the new possibilities that the new life in Christ brought about. "Das Reich Gottes ist nahe herbeigekommen [Mk.1:15]. Das ist der Grund, darauf wir uns gründen. Nicht der Fortschritt und die Entwicklung innerhalb der bisherigen Möglichkeiten, sondern die neue Lebensmöglichkeit, die im Christus geschaffen ist, die neue

Kreatur in ihm" (Barth [1919] 1985:164-165).¹ He agreed with Nietzsche that God could not be made a prisoner of history (Barth [1924/25] 1990:68-70). Therefore he attempted (with his Eschatological theology) to provide an answer to the challenge of Nietzsche's quest for a living God (see Barth [1924/25] 1990:68-70). Like Nietzsche, he realised that the god of teleology in history (progress in history) was dead. For Barth the god of teleology in history was nothing more than the projection of people's own injustice. Such a god is nothing but an idol. In the face of such a god, we must become sceptics and atheists (Barth 1924:9-14).

2.2 Barth and the period before World War I

When reading the works of Barth, it becomes evident that his student days at Marburg played a decisive role in his theology. His thinking was influenced by the likes of Ritschl, Herrmann, Cohen and Natorp. Herrmann was an ethical theologian. He in turn was deeply influenced by Kant, interpreting and criticizing Kant's work in his quest to solve the problem of religion. Ritschl stressed the importance of the self-revelation of God in the historical Jesus who became the Christ. According to the Marburg philosophers three valid spheres of knowledge were to be found. The question was to which of these, the logico-scientific, ethical, or aesthetic, if any, religion belonged to. These philosophers could not accept a God who stood outside the thinking rationale of human beings. Natorp tried to solve this problem by modifying Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as a "Gefühl" (Fisher 1988:73). It was evident that no God existed for Natorp. Religion was only possible in the sphere of aesthetic feeling. Cohen put religion in the sphere of ethics. The relation between God and the world rested on logical and not personal reasons. These insights influenced Barth's thinking later on when he was a pastor in Safenwil.

Barth (1911] 1993:387) stated that the social movement was the will of God in the beginning of the 20th century. He believed that Jesus taught humankind a way of life and not merely a number of ideas. One could be an atheist and still be a follower of Jesus (see Barth [1911] 1993:390-391). Barth added that the way of life which Jesus propagated, was to care for the poor, to establish the Kingdom of God on this earth, to renounce any idea of self-enrichment and to make one's fellow men and women one's brothers and sisters in faith. Political theology and the questions it raises in the form of Liberation Theology challenges modern atheism that deals not with faith as such, but with the practices of faith. These theologies see modern atheism as

¹ "The Kingdom of God is near [Mk 1:15]. That is the basis upon which we ground ourselves. Not the progress and development within the possibilities up to now, but the possibility of new life created in Christ, the new human being."

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a practical and political problem that can be solved by a new practice, which Barth propagated.

When World War I broke out, Barth was convinced that it was the judgement of God (cf Fähler 1979). It was God's judgement for the sins of the human race. He did not realize the consequences of such a statement – namely that he was interpreting the events in history as the ways of God. Nietzsche reacted to this notion of depicting God as a prisoner of history, for it could only lead to atheism. Later on Barth, as Nietzsche did, rejected the idea of interpreting world events as the way of God. This was evident in his questioning of the Germans' "Kriegstheologie", according to which God was on the side of the Germans (Barth 1957:6). Barth eventually reached the conclusion that this was a decision God alone could make.

To challenge modern atheism, Barth stressed the importance of God as the self-revealing subject, as the "Wholly Other". At a later stage he was to reject this description, adding that with this depiction it was not his intention to imply that God was distant (Barth 1953:5; 1956: 9, 14, 15; 1962:17; cf Shults 2005:108-109). Barth would never return to idealism. According to Pannenberg (1988:244-245), Hegel had influenced Barth and although Barth said that he would never return to idealism, he could not fully escape from it as is evidenced in his discussion of Hegel (cf Barth 1960:343-378). Price (2002:55-60) is of the opinion that although Hegel's "dialectical idealism" shaped Barth's theology, Barth rejected Hegel's idea of God as a "dialectical method". He believed that the only certainty, above and beyond history, was the kingdom of God. Barth realized that the Kingdom of God was a present and a future (already and not yet) reality. Barth believed that socialism was the most important sign of the coming of the Kingdom of God. God, as the righteous One, had to decide what the position of the unrighteous human beings should be. Human beings could never be righteous. To be righteous means to be God. At this stage of his life, Barth agreed with Nietzsche that Christianity, as a following of Christ, was an illusion (cf Barth 1924:12). God is God in opposition to the humans, who are the unrighteous. He also stressed the coming of the Kingdom of God and that human beings did not have the capacity nor the means to know God. God is not a possession of the human race. In his book, *Der Römerbrief*, (1919) much criticism is levelled at liberal historicism, idealism, Christian religion and religious socialism.

Barth ([1919] 1985:53) makes use of Nietzsche's "Umwertung aller Werte" (re-evaluation of all values) as a heading for his interpretation of Romans 2:14-29. To Nietzsche (1970:27) it was important that all values be re-evaluated (see Daigle 2006:14-15). He did not reject or deny values *per se*. His critique against morality was ethically inspired on the grounds that present

values were no longer sustainable. They have become a danger to life itself. He opted for a position beyond the morality of life. He wanted to unmask the value system that made the human animal sick. An element of his project to reevaluate all values, was to examine the genealogy of morals in order to discern the origin of values (Nietzsche 1970:10-11). In his quest for the origin of values he found the ancient morality of the aristocrat, a pre-Socratic ethic of good and evil in contrast to the morality of the slave of good and evil (Nietzsche 1970:16, 28-30; Schoeman 2004:22-23). Barth ([1919] 1985:64) interprets verses 28 and 29 as the “Umwertung aller Werte”. According to him, it is evident that God does not support or recognize the righteousness of the human, but acknowledges the unrighteousness’ disobedience in the light of his righteousness for the righteous and the unrighteous in order “that he might have mercy upon all” (Romans 11:30)

Like Nietzsche Barth ([1919] 1985:164-165) also criticized the belief in progress in history. In order to maintain the dualism between God and humankind, Barth applied the terminology of eschatology and history. This theme of the eschatological reality of God became more important in his later works (cf Dalferth 1989:20-27). He distinguished between two kinds of history: the “eigentliche Geschichte” (true history) and the “sogenannte Geschichte” (so-called history) (cf Barth [1919] 1985:46). The “sogenannte Geschichte” is our history of this world, our history of unrighteousness and sin. Then there is the “eigentliche Geschichte”, which is the history of God. The main problem according to Barth was to reconcile these two histories. This he tried to achieve by stating that the “eigentliche Geschichte” entered the “sogenannte Geschichte” in Jesus Christ. “Eine *neue Weltzeit* ist angebrochen: das Ende aller Zeiten” (Barth [1919] 1985:86).² Another way of referring to these histories is by means of the relation between eschatology and history. What Barth wanted to achieve with this dialectical relating of “eigentliche Geschichte” and “sogenannte Geschichte”, is clear. He wanted to put the movement and action of God in history beyond the reach of historical investigation. To say that an event which does not belong to space and time has occurred in space and time, is the same as an event of which the source lies outside the space-time continuum. This becomes especially clear when Barth speaks of the history of God as “verborgene Gottesgeschichte” (hidden/concealed/mysterious history of God) (see Smith 1983:27; see Mueller 1972:25).

In *Der Römerbrief* (1919) Barth stresses the necessity to speak of God as the one who possesses us through his Spirit. There is no way by which we as humans can know God. “Unsere Sache ist unsere im Christus realisierte

² “A *new world* time has arrived: the end of all time.”

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Erkenntnis Gottes, in der uns Gott nicht gegenständlich, sondern unmittelbar und schöpferisch nahetritt, in der wir nicht nur schauen, sondern geschaut werden, nicht nur verstehen, sondern verstanden sind, nicht nur begreifen, sondern ergriffen sind" (Barth [1919] 1985:158).³ Barth believed God revealed God self to us in the life, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God gave us a new life in Jesus. We were buried with Christ through baptism in memory of his death, so that as Christ was resurrected from death through the Glory of the Father, we may cross into a new life. Our "no" comes from a "yes" (Barth [1919] 1985:214). In the resurrection the revelation of God becomes apparent. Faith is not an experience or a psychological reaction of human beings. It comes only from God.

2.3 Barth and the period after World War I

The postwar time in Germany was chaotic, and the effect it had on Barth's theology, especially as expressed in the second commentary on Romans, was somewhat problematic. It should be noted that whenever he referred to "Kampf" in *Der Römerbrief* (1922), he did not refer to the struggle in postwar Germany. The "Kampf" he was referring to, is the judgment of God as it pertains to all people, as well as the crisis resulting from the fact that we did not know this loving God. "Der Kampf der Guten mit den Bösen ist aus. Die Menschen treten in eine Linie. Ihr Verborgenes steht im Gericht vor Gott, aber vor Gott allein. Aber das Gericht Gottes ist das Ende der Geschichte, nicht der Anfang einer neuen zweiten Geschichte" (Barth [1922] 1924:51).⁴ This indeed is "Kampf", as no one will escape the judgment of God. To Barth, this "Kampf" is also embedded in a Christological understanding, namely in the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Christus ist "für uns gestorben". "Für uns", sofern dieses Sterben Erkenntnisprinzip unsres Sterbens ist, sofern in diesem Sterben der unanschauliche Gott für uns anschaulich wird, sofern dieses Sterben der Ort ist, wo die Versöhnung mit Gott stattfindet (3, 25 5, 9): wo wir, das vom Schöpfer abgewandte Geschöpf, ihm liebend wieder zugekehrt werden, sofern in diesem Sterben das Paradox der Gerechtigkeit Gottes (die Identität zwischen seiner zürnenden

³ "What matters to us is our knowledge of God that is revealed to us through Christ, in which God approaches us, not in an opposing way, but directly and in a creative way and in which we do not only observe, but are observed, understand, but are understood, do not only comprehend, but are comprehended."

⁴ "The struggle of good against evil is over. People are being lined up. That which is concealed deep within them, stands trial before God, and only God. However, God's judgment is the end to history, not the beginning of a new second history."

Heiligkeit und seiner freisprechenden Barmherzigkeit) für uns Wahrheit wird.

(Barth [1922] 1924:137)⁵

The “Kampf” occurs when we realize that we do not know this God, the God who is totally different from all other gods we may know, which, referring to this uncertainty, may in the end, lead to atheism. Through Kierkegaard Barth gained some insight into the problematic understanding of the incarnation of God (cf Zellweger-Barth 1986:22). The incarnation of God comes only from Him and can never be a human possibility. It was also from Kierkegaard that he got to know the style of indirect communication and developed a critical understanding of Christianity as a religion. According to Barth, God as the unknowable must become knowable to the human race. This is only possible when human beings receive God’s revelation, presence and reality. But the knowledge human beings have of God is always dependent upon God’s sanction and enterprise (cf Mueller 1972:29).

It is noteworthy that *Der Römerbrief* (1922) contains a critique against religion, a theme also explored by Nietzsche in his book *Der Antichrist* (1888). Neither Barth nor Nietzsche criticized religion, *per se*, but every religion that seeks selfish goals (cf Landgraf 1994:48). According to Henriksen (2001:156-157) Nietzsche’s main criticism of religion pertained to the conditions “that lead to the formation of a modern understanding of God”. Barth recognizes positive qualities in religion. It teaches humans that they can never be God, for their own unrighteousness is exposed in every deed of human behaviour. It can never be a method of self-justification. It is merely a road sign, a way of entering into a relationship with God. When Barth speaks of the church, he regards it as the place of God’s judgment. It is not to be understood in a negative way. God’s judgment is an act by which He shows his grace towards humankind. Therefore, the church must be understood as the place where God shows us His grace, in the same way that He has done in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The church’s main task is to proclaim this salvation to all humankind. When the church stops proclaiming the salvation of Christ, it stops being church. Should this happen, atheism is the result.

⁵ “Christ died “for us”. “For us” insofar as this death is the acknowledgment of our mortality, insofar as in this death the unseen God becomes visible to us, insofar as this death is the place where reconciliation with God takes place (3, 25 5, 9): in which we as the created ones who has sinned/erred, is lovingly brought back to Him, insofar as in this death the paradox of God’s justice (the identity between his wrathful Holiness and his forgiving mercy) becomes truth for us.”

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Barth ([1922] 1924:78-79) tried to deal with the revelation of God in history without mentioning that it came from history. He said that Jesus was a historical figure who lived together with and like other people on earth. Although the knowledge of God in *Der Römerbrief* (1922) stands in the shadow of Kant, Barth was not speaking of God in metaphysical terms, or of the god of his time, who, as he states in *Der Römerbrief* (1922) is a "Nicht-Gott". Rather, he was referring to a humanly constructed idol. He again agreed with Nietzsche that the God of their time was indeed *dead* or "Nicht-Gott" (Barth [1922] 1924:96). In many ways Nietzsche was Barth's ally against liberal theology (Prossman 2007:213; see Schoeman 2004:67). When Barth ([1922] 1924:112-113) deals with Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, he says that Nietzsche as well as the other protesters against Christianity cannot provide a counter religion with the same anchor. In Barth's view destroying temples was not better than building them. He calls Nietzsche a "Prediger des Todes" (a preacher of death) (Barth [1922] 1924:75-76).

Barth stated the importance of the concept of God. God could not be used as a predicate to describe the infinite or to describe that which is not human. It has to be admitted and accepted that it is actually impossible for humans to adequately describe or speak of God

Immer ist Gott dem Menschen jenseitig, neu, fern, fremd, überlegen, nie in seinem Bereich, nie in seinem Besitz, immer sagt Wunder, wer Gott sagt Sofern es menschlicherseits zu einem Bejahen und Verstehen Gottes kommt, sofern das seelische Geschehen die Richtung auf Gott, die Bestimmtheit von Gott her empfängt, die Form des Glaubens annimmt, geschieht das Unmögliche, das Wunder, das Paradox.

(Barth [1922] 1924:96)⁶

If it is impossible for humans to know God, how then can God be known? Barth's polite answer to this is that God can only be known through God self. Therefore, in the act of revelation, God remains God. God is the Truth. God is the Answer, the Redeemer, the Helper and the Judge. No one else can achieve this, not even Nietzsche's "Übermensch" (Barth [1922] 1924:54). God does not surrender God self to human beings. If God were to be fully known by human beings, God would not be God anymore. According to Barth God's godly nature

⁶ "For humankind God is always on the other side, new, removed, foreign/unknown, superior, is never within his reach, never his possession, whoever utters God, always says miracle ... Insofar as a confirmation and understanding of God by the human is concerned, insofar as a spiritual happening is determined and receives direction from God and takes on the form of faith, the impossible, the miracle, the paradox takes place."

does not depend on his revelation. God is God before, during and after the act of revealing God self. But how is such revelation possible? Barth ([1922] 1924:260) answers that we must see Jesus as the “Mittelbarkeiten” through which God revealed God self. We can know God only indirectly.

2.4 Barth’s answer to Nietzsche

Barth (1947:338-339) would later explicitly state that God is free to reveal God self or not to do so. When God reveals God self in a form, it is important to realize that this form does not replace God. It is God in the form that reveals, speaks, comforts, works and helps. Although God reveals God self, God remains the unknowable God (cf Barth [1924/25] 1990:18-20; see Holmes 2007:53-55). It is clear that Barth wanted God to remain God, even in his act of revelation. For this reason, the deed of revelation had to be made more concrete. In *Der Römerbrief* (1922) he states that the resurrection of Jesus is *the* revelation. In this deed Jesus becomes the Christ. Barth believed that the event of Jesus’ resurrection was bodily, corporeal and personal. Revelation is always *in* history, but not *of* history (cf Landgraf 1994:14). God reveals God self through God’s Word that became Scripture and Proclamation, from where He communicates with the human race, for example through nature and history. This idea, Barth adopted from Calvin.

Calvin kennt keinen Stufenunterschied etwa zwischen natürlicher und übernatürlicher Offenbarung, keinen Weg, der von hier nach dort führte, sondern wenn er später tatsächlich beide unterscheidet, so ist die letztere doch eigentlich nur die *Explikation*, man könnte auch sagen: die *Aktualisierung* der ersteren, die Bibel z.B. die *Brille*, um das Wort Gottes in Natur und Geschichte zu lesen, wie er später ausdrücklich sagen wird.

(Barth 1993:217)⁷

He stressed the fact that God made God self known in Christ. The god-forsakenness of Jesus on the cross was a negative experience which God turned into a positive experience by lifting the veil that divided him from the human race. It is interesting to note that Barth concludes his contemplation of the resurrection with the statement that we can indeed know God. The power of

⁷ “Calvin knew no difference in degree between natural and supernatural revelation, knew no way that led from here to there, however, when at a later stage he indeed made such a distinction, namely that the latter was only the *explanation*, in other words the *actualization* of the former, the Bible being for example the *glasses* by which God’s Word can be read in nature and in history, as he would later explicitly state.”

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the resurrection is however the knowledge of this new human, the knowledge in which we recognize God, and even more so by which we are known to God (Barth [1922] 1924:187). In Jesus' death our own death becomes visible, and in his resurrection our new life in him becomes a probability (cf Fergusson 2003:69).

When we consider Barth's understanding of revelation, it becomes obvious that his interpretation is coloured with Trinitarian notions. It was only later that he would speak in a totally Trinitarian manner about God. To him, God as Father reveals God self in God's Son Jesus Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. Barth's ethical viewpoint is rooted in his Christology. It is in the event of Christ's death on the cross that humans realize their sinfulness and hopelessness. God is the only one who could bring about a relationship between the human race and God self. Without his grace and love, humans would be condemned and lost forever. For Barth this constitutes ethics. It is not about what we can do, but about realizing what God has done for us. Barth ([1922] 1924:416-417) distinguishes between two ethical activities, namely "primäre ethische Handelns" (primary ethical activity) and "sekundäre ethische Handelns" (secondary ethical activity). Primary ethics are all those deeds of humans undertaken in carrying out the Will of God, such as worshipping and sacrificing everything for God. "Opfer bedeutet Preisgabe, Verzichtleistung des Menschen zugunsten der Gottheit, bedingungslos gemachtes Geschenk" (Barth [1922] 1924:416).⁸ Secondary ethics are those actions, of which the evaluation takes place according to the Will of God.

Wobei folgendes wohl zu beachten ist: Ein Opfer ist nicht etwa eine menschliche Handlung, in der sich der Wille Gottes vollstreckte in dem Sinn, daß der Opfernde durch sein Handeln ein Organ Gottes würde. Ein Opfer ist vielmehr eine Demonstration zur Ehre Gottes, von Gott gefordert (denn Gott will geehrt sein), aber an sich eine menschliche Handlung so gut oder so schlecht wie irgendeine Andere. Gott bleibt allein Gott auch dem größten Opfer gegenüber, und sein Wille geht nach wie vor seinen eigenen Weg.

(Barth [1922] 1924:417)⁹

⁸ "Sacrifice means to relinquish, the human relinquishing himself in favour of divinity, an unconditional gift."

⁹ "Whereby the following has to be heeded: A sacrifice is not really a human action, in which God's Will is fulfilled in the sense of the sacrificing one becoming an instrument/a part of God through his action. A sacrifice is much rather a demonstration in honour to the glory of God as He so demands (for God wants to be glorified), but is intrinsically a human action, as good or as evil as any other. God remains God even over against the greatest sacrifice, and His Will follows its own course as before."

To Barth theology is an act of daring. Theology cannot be seen as a doctrine of the subject matter that functions as a traditional handing down from generation to generation. Theology must always be an act of rethinking, reformulating and restating the truths about God and his relationship towards humankind (cf Barth 1924:158). This is what Barth means when he speaks of theology. Barth distinguishes between three ways of speaking about God, namely the dogmatic, the critical and the dialectical way (cf Barth 1924:166).

Speaking of God can be done firstly by attributing dogmas, doctrines and characteristics to God. However, this method fails because it speaks *about* a god, and not *of* God. The second way of speaking about God is by “negating humanity” (McCormack 1997:309). But this method is not effective, because it achieves only the negation of humanity. The dialectical way is the third way, which Barth considers as the best way of speaking of God (see Barth 1924:171-172).

Barth’s aim with theology was to speak about God as if God God self spoke (*Deus dixit*) (cf Barth [1924] 1985:68-75). It is in this regard that we find the different meanings Barth attributed to the Word of God. He distinguishes between three meanings, namely the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ; the spoken Word of God, as it is found in Scripture; and the *kerygmatic* Word of God, as it is preached (cf Barth [1924] 1985:18-19). It can also be called the Word in eternal, historical and present form.

These thoughts enabled Barth ([1924] 1985:18) to speak of the Christ event as the subject of the *Deus dixit* in history, which has to be proclaimed continuously. Barth saw the true nature of God in the revelation event. It is after God has revealed God self in Christ, that it becomes clear who God really is. Therefore, all reflections on the revelation of God must be of a *posterior* nature (cf Barth [1924] 1985:185-186). The revelation becomes visible in the process of God’s incarnation (cf Barth [1924] 1985:189-190). The Son becomes human, but not identical to the human flesh. Barth did not agree with the old concept of God having elected people long before time. He did not want to divide people into two classes. He did not see this election by God as static, but as something that can change depending on the situation. The decision of what God wants to do in each and every situation, vests wholly with God. In the deed of election, there cannot be any certainties for human beings. The only certainty there is, is that God elects. After having contemplated God’s love and grace, Barth came to a new understanding of God’s judgment and election (cf Barth 1940:266). God elects everyone who accepts God’s revelation in Christ.

Barth wrote a book with the title *Fides quaerens intellectum* (1931), referring to Anselm’s definition of theology. Anselm wanted to prove the

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existence of God by means of a certain method. The method Anselm used, greatly coincided with Barth's own thinking about God. According to Anselm, knowledge of God begins with faith (cf Barth 1982:131). It is through prayer that faith is gained. And in every moment of faith we come to realize who God really is. Hence this faith leads to knowledge of God (*Credo ut intelligam*). Therefore, the theologian cannot know God without faith. And even if he or she has faith, they must wait for God to reveal God self, as God has done in Jesus Christ (Barth 1982:136).

Barth's theological agenda had some important goals. The most important one was his ultimate aim, namely to state that God is God – that God exists. In order to state it explicitly, he adopted the principle of infinite qualitative difference. Through this principle Barth stated the difference between God and humankind, the total otherness of God in comparison to humankind, and the infinite God in opposition to the finiteness of humankind (Barth 1947:321).

But God bridged this abyss between God and human beings by revealing God self (cf Barth 1947:338). Barth emphasized the importance of understanding the revelation of God as God self-revelation, as a self-offering and self-manifestation – as a mystery. God is always a mystery (see Barth 1947:339). God decided to reveal God self to humankind. God did not have to do it. God deliberately decided to come to the humans. This does not mean that God surrendered God's existence. God is God and can reveal God self without relinquishing God self, God's existence. God is the Almighty and is sovereign in decisions. Revealing God self is God's and only God's prerogative. And that is what the revelation of God means. Otherwise it would not have been revelation, but rather the exposed God as a possession of humankind. God veils God self as the unveiling God to human beings through God's Word (see Barth 1938:32). God speaks to humankind through God's Word in three different ways, namely:

- as the *kerygmatic* Word in sermons (Barth 1947:89-101);
- as the spoken/written Word in Scripture (Barth 1947:101-113);
- as the revealed Word in Jesus Christ (Barth 1947:114-124).

However, the Word of God is not a static, historical event of the past, upon which we can merely reflect by looking back. God's Word is an everyday reality for humans where or when they accept it in faith (see Barth 1947:136). The Word of God means that God speaks. This speaking of God is true and known in and through the event that God says it, that God is present in person in and with what is said by God (Barth 1947:141).

Deus dixit does not imply that God must speak to humans. God is free to speak to us when and wherever and however God wants to. God's actions must be understood in the sense of God's compassion and love. God decided to speak to us in our world, in all the forms Barth mentions. This, the notion of the *Deus dixit*, is a very important key for understanding Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. He sees the triune God as one God with three modes of being. Barth does not want to speak of persons in the Trinity. He (1947:379-381) prefers to speak of the "drei Seinsweisen Gottes". Jesus is the reality of the revelation of God. Jesus is the One who has come and will come again. This reality is the fulfilment of time. On the question of what Scripture says about Jesus, Barth maintains that Scripture does not say the same as the Christological dogma the Christian church confesses. The Christological dogma and the doctrine of the Trinity are not explicitly found in Scripture. He says that we must interpret the dogmas of the Trinity and of Jesus as a commentary on the church's understanding of Scripture. We can also say that the revelation of God leads to the doctrine of the Trinity.

To Barth God is the eschatological God, the new Creator of the new world without sin and suffering. In this God lies the future of humankind (cf Barth 1926:127-129). This presents the biggest challenge to atheism.

In his *Kirchliche Dogmatik III/2* Barth (1948:276-290) criticized Nietzsche's view of the ideal human being (see Prossman 2007:218-219). According to Barth (1948:285) Nietzsche did not deny the existence of God, but rejected Christian morality (cf Nietzsche 1969a:179-180; cf Nietzsche 1969b:365, 369-371; see Henriksen 2001:156-157; see Daigle 2006:6-8; see Plaisier 1996:60, 237). For Nietzsche (1970:18) the ideal type of a human is an aristocratic, generous, self-centred, passionate, self-controlled and thankful being (Schoeman 2004:98; see Golomb 2006:31-37). To this list Barth (1948:287) would add a human being who exists without other people, one who is alone and is beyond Good and Evil. To Barth (1948:289) this depiction is not biblical. Jesus Christ as the Crucified and the Lord of the Gospel is the true example for humanity. Nietzsche's critique against Christian morality must be seen as his reaction against this type of humanity or in his own words "Dionysos against the Crucified ..." (Nietzsche 1969b:372; see Plaisier 1996:75).

2.3 Reflecting on the challenges Barth offered to modern atheism and theism

Barth was trying to restore the concept of God in the light of modern atheism and theism. He agreed with Nietzsche that the god of their time, the god of history and progress, was an idol. He was a "Nicht-Gott". Barth's aim was to

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free God from the views of the modern period – by saying that God could not be a prisoner of the human race. He wanted God to be God again. However, to believe that Barth would have agreed with all of Nietzsche's views and vice versa would be a misconception. If Nietzsche could have read Barth, he would have appreciated Barth's attempts at saving the concept of God, but would also criticize Barth's methods of thinking of God in a new way. According to Nietzsche's thinking, these would again produce idols. Barth must, however, be credited for the attempt he made to provide an answer to the challenges of Nietzsche's prophecy regarding the death of God.

Wir können, auch indem wir jetzt fragen: Was ist Gott? sein göttliches und also ihn als Gott Unterscheidendes? nur noch einmal fragen: Wer ist Gott? Denn er hat, was er ist, nicht nur in sich, an sich, bei sich, sondern indem Er ist, ist Alles, was er ist. Es gibt genau genommen kein gottheitliches Prädikat, keinen Gottesbegriff, der im besonderen das zum Inhalt haben könnte, was Gott ist, es gibt genau genommen nur das göttlichen Subjekt als solches und in ihm die Fülle seines gottheitlichen Prädikates.

(Barth 1940:337)¹⁰

To Barth it was important that God as the unknowable must become knowable to the human race. This is only possible when humans have an idea of God's revelation, presence and reality. God is the God who decided to reveal God self to humankind in Jesus Christ. God lifted the veil that divided God from the human race. In Jesus' resurrection God became the knowable God. Faith leads to knowledge of God (*Credo ut intelligam*). Barth believed in the eschatological God who would create a new world. Human beings must realize that this world will make way for a new world without pain, suffering and sin.

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¹⁰ "Insofar as we are now asking: What is God, His divinity, and thus also what distinguishes Him as God?, we can once again ask: Who is God? For He has what He is, not only in itself, by itself and as such, but insofar as He is and is everything that He is. There is, to be precise, no divine predicate/affirmation, no divine concept that contains in particular that which God is, there is to be precise only the divine subject as such and in Him the fullness of His divine affirmation."

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