**Karl Barth’s Contribution to the Theology of Work**

**Introduction**

As a Reformed theologian, Karl Barth fallows the classical Protestant understanding of work as a “vocation”. Nevertheless, he develops his own specific theology of work. According to the author of *Church Dogmatics* the subject of work is strictly associated with the doctrine of creation whichbasically deals with issues of ethics. Trying to avoid the tendency of overemphasizing the significance of human works for salvation, Barth puts the absolute stress on the priority of divine work. With a strong conviction he believes that works do not merit salvation but rather follow from God’s works. The Swiss theologian argues that all discussions on human work should begin from the commandment of the Sabbath. *The Sabbath commandment* as – Barth writes – *explains all the other commandments <…> It reminds man of God’s plan for him, of the fact that He has already carried it out.*[[1]](#footnote-1)The theologian explains that the Sabbath day provides the true meaning to the whole working week and should occur prior to the necessity of production as a result of human labor. The Sabbath is not the day of man’s inactivity, but rather it is the day when humankind is invited to join with God in His rest celebrating over Creation.

At this point the crucial issue is the question on what bases Barth locates his knowledge of the world. Essentially, there are two possible answers. The first one assumes that knowledge derives from within human inherent abilities such as: sensual observation, intuition or rational reasoning. The other answer suggests that knowledge comes from the outside of human beings and somehow is revealed to people. Although, respecting the scientific knowledge as the source of information and relevant data, Barth argues that Christian knowledge of the world should unconditionally derive from within the Revelation of God. It is worthwhile to emphasize that Barth has developed his late theology under a strong opposition and criticism towards the historical, theological, cultural and social development of his times. The second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became the years of a spectacular optimism in human development and civilization, especially in the context of progress reflected by the achievements of science and technology. Although, socially and politically Europe was found in a moral decline. There was no exception in theological academia, either. Some of the liberal theologians, such as Harnack or Herrmann whom Barth strongly respected, became the enthusiastic followers of Wilhelm II Kaiser’s war policy and his ideology of German empire.[[2]](#footnote-2) Moreover, the awfulness of the two world wars, the rise of Nazism and its support from some of prominent Church leaders made Barth rethink his theological method. Wrestling with the political, economic and social issues Barth proposed a theology which was to be *understood as rethinking and restating of reformed theology after the immense philosophical and scientific developments of modern times.*[[3]](#footnote-3) In consequence his theology, attuned to those realities, has gained an ethical significance.

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**Barth’s theological method**

The essential for Barth’s new theological orientation, in opposition to the old way of doing theology, was completely different outlook of theological method. Trying to describe it, Barth writes: *If I have a system, it is limited to a recognition of what Kierkegaard called the “infinite qualitative distinction” between time and eternity, and to my regarding this as possessing negative as well as possessing positive significance: God is in heaven, and thou art on earth*.[[4]](#footnote-4) For the author of *Church Dogmatics* the starting point of the new theological method was to be the recognition of the infinite qualitative difference between creation and Creator. The Barth’s theological method begins with the respect for the “otherness of God”.[[5]](#footnote-5) He often emphasizes this qualitative distinction between time and eternity, God and humanity, biblical period and present time. In the preface to the first edition of the commentary on *The Letter to the Romans* Barth writes: *<…>* *my whole energy to interpreting has been expended in an endeavor to see through and beyond history into the spirit of the Bible, which is Eternal Spirit.[[6]](#footnote-6)* He comes to the conclusion that the Revelation is the only way humanity can comprehend God.

Here the second feature of the Barth’s methodology appears. It is his dialectic. The Swiss theologian argued that the main task of Christian theology is not just a simple emphasize put on the “otherness of God” but something much deeper which deals straightly with the Revelation that God himself makes available to man. According to Barth all mankind, because of sinfulhuman nature, has been found under the judgment of God and this is God who utters it to man. So, the matter is not what man thinks of God but rather what God thinks of man. In such a situation God always pronounces “No” to every human attempt of knowing Him in order to reveal His divine “Yes”. The “No” of God always comes before His “Yes”.

To understand this dialectical tension between the “No” of God and His “Yes” the author of *Church Dogmatics* introduces his method of analogy. Though, for Barth it is not the same approach what has been called the “analogy of being” (*analogia entis*) as a philosophical way of understanding of God. In the opinion of the pastor from Safenwil to understand this qualitative distinction between God and man the “analogy of faith” should be regarded.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to Barththe “analogy of faith”is the foundation for a “theological language” in which God, and not man, can provide a true meaning of the words. *The “analogy of faith”* – as Bruce L. McCormack writes – *refers most fundamentally to a relation of correspondence between an act of God and an act of a human subject; the act of divine Self-revelation and the human act of faith in which that revelation is acknowledged*.[[8]](#footnote-8) There are three interconnected aspects of the “analogy faith”. First, and the most important, it is this type of analogy that cannot be inherited by creation. The crucial emphasis should not be put on being but rather on the concrete event – the event of Revelation. Second, in such an analogy there is no necessary precondition for bringing about that event. The only condition for this analogy is one which only God can graciously provide as a gift, that is faith. And finally, the “analogy of faith” endures so long as the Revelation-Event endures. It means that the “analogy of faith” is not given under human control forever.

The third feature of Barth’s theological method is the Word of God. For the Swiss theologian it is the root of all Christian preaching and teaching. Christians can understand God only when they are invited to stand before the Word of God. To stand before the Word of God means to be obedient to the Command of God. Although, inseparable with ethics the Command of God is not a simple moral principle, but the Command of living God. *The Command of God* – as Barth argues – *is not a principle of action revealed to man and imposed upon him <…> God in His Command, however, tells him very concretely what he is to do or not to do here and now in these or those particular circumstances*.[[9]](#footnote-9)This Command is the Command of a gracious God made known in Jesus Christ.[[10]](#footnote-10) For that reason the Word of God is both Gospel and Law. It is first Gospel and then Law. The Gospel is the content of the Law, and the content of the Gospel is the grace in Jesus Christ.[[11]](#footnote-11) Only from this perspective can the Law be comprehended and fulfilled. According to Barth all human ethical actions should be done in relation to the Command of God regardless of whether those actions have social, political or economic meanings.

**Work as the Command of God.**

Dealing with the issues of work Barth places this subject in his *Church dogmatic* (vol. III, part 4) under the title of the “Active life” which is a part of the “Freedom of life”, under which he also develops such topics as “Respect of life” and “Protection of Life”. The section on the “Active live” begins with the words: *Our present concern is to see life as a task which God has imposed on man, and therefore to see the freedom to which he is summoned as the freedom for an active life.*[[12]](#footnote-12) The active life, which human work is part of, must be an analogy or a correspondence to the activity of God. First of all, *work* – as Barth writes – *simply means* *a man’s active affirmation of his existence as human creature.*[[13]](#footnote-13)It is the Command of God that calls man to serve as a witness in the Kingdom of God. As man offers himself at God’s disposal, he must affirm himself as being challenged by God and as human creature. In doing so man sets himself for work. Of course, a stone, a plant or an animal can serve God, but certainly they do it only in their own way. Man serves God as a human being. So, work as the Command of God is the thing that describes and distinguishes man from the rest of all creation. In that case Barth comes closely to Karl Marx’ conclusions that work is a typical feature which characterizes and makes a difference between the human and nature. Besides that, the pastor from Safenwill seems to follow the Hegelian concept of dialectics.[[14]](#footnote-14) According to the Swiss theologian the phenomenon of work is the synthesis of the human person as a component of soul and body, of external and internal, of subjective and objective experience. *The synthesis does not simply exists* – Barth writes – <…> *it has to be initiated. And the initiative is first from above downwards, from the subject to the object, from the inner to the outer, from the soul to the body <…> As [man]affirms, wills and realizes himself in his totality, he sets to work and performs his work*.[[15]](#footnote-15)Man would be like a stone, or vegetate like a plant, or behave like an animal, if he did not act according to the hierarchy which has been prescribed to his own specific being, and therefore did not realize himself in this synthesis. Work makes man express and prove before God as His human creature. But work does not make man any better. He cannot boast himself that he is not lazy. Human work does not make man a second of God, and it does not mean the continuation, or completion of God’s work. It is only a form of man’s obedience to the Command of God, and a fulfilment of the Law of human nature.[[16]](#footnote-16)

When Barth approaches to the subject of the contemporary capitalism, first of all, he turns to the analyses of honest work. Here the problem of the objectification of work arises especially in the context of its aims or motivations. For Barth there are two evident contradictions of aims in the economy of capitalism. First, it is the question of “capital” which is totally subjected to the hands of relatively few, who control the vast majority of people and therefore decide on wellbeing or poverty for whole nations and generations.[[17]](#footnote-17) Second, it is the problem of employees whose recognition of the aims is irrelevant. The only choice they have is to accept any work, often meaningless and badly paid.[[18]](#footnote-18) Such a work degenerates and undermines society at its roots. Barth writes: *If it is true* *that man grows with its higher ends, it is also true that he degenerates if the ends for which he labours become progressively futile*.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The next crucial issue of the Barth’s critique of capitalism is the problem of humanity of human work. *Hence there can be no doubt* – he argues – *that in our work, if it is the work which God has commanded and therefore right, we must ask the question whether and to what extent it is human*.[[20]](#footnote-20) There are two unconditional features which should describe human work. First, it must be ununderstood as a social act involving association and companionship. [*Man*] *deceives himself more than anyone else –* Barth writes – *if he refuses <…> this. Without his fellows, man is not man at all but only a shade of man. If he seeks to earn his bread and therefore to work in abstract isolation, his existence is that of this shade*.[[21]](#footnote-21) Second, work cannot be understood only in the terms of profit-motivation. It would always bear the conflict in which one man encounters another with the force and cunning and therefore lead to the corruption and exploitation of the labour. Every kind of work, if it is to be undertaken and carried out objectively and usefully, requires a reasonable organization which would create optimal conditions for work with stated and accepted reward.[[22]](#footnote-22)

In that case Barth again comes close to Karl Marx’s understanding and his critique of capitalism, and it cannot be ignored. Here the Swiss theologian, in some sense, agrees with Marx on his critique of work within capitalist order. According to the German philosopher the work of the worker, because of the private ownership of the means of production, becomes the main source of human alienation. First, the worker who is related to his labor performs something alien to him. It reminds an “independent power” of the producer. The labor’s realization appears as “loss of reality” for the workers and results in objectification of labor.[[23]](#footnote-23) Second, since the labor is something external to the worker, it makes him alienated to himself. He cannot affirm but rather deny himself within the producing activity. Therefore the worker feels not only outside of his work, but his work makes him outside of himself. Following that reasoning Marx writes: [*Worker*] *is at home when he in not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labor is <…> not voluntary, but coerced, it is “forced labor”. It is not the satisfaction of a need, it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it.*[[24]](#footnote-24)Third, labor which does not support man’s species being, leads in fact to the worker’s estrangement from the others. *An immediate consequence of the fact –* as the German philosopher writes – *that man is estranged from the product of his labor, from his life-activity, from his species being is the “estrangement of man” from “man”*.[[25]](#footnote-25) All those argumentations are what Marx refers to when he identifies private property of the means of production as the main reason of the crises within the capitalist economy. He clearly states, <…> *if the product of labor does not belong to the worker, if it confronts him as an alien power, this can only be because it belongs to some other man than the worker. <…> No gods, no nature, but only man himself can be this alien power over man.*[[26]](#footnote-26)

Although Barth approaches some aspects of Marx’s ideas, yet he maintains his strict theological and Christological perspective in his understanding of human work. It becomes obvious when he argues that any human revolution would never resolve problems of alienating labor, because the roots of alienation are much deeper – they take place within the sinful human nature. The Swiss theologian clearly states: <…>  *the root of the troubles lies deeper, namely, in a human aberration which necessarily gives rise to the exploitation of man by man in ever-changing forms*.[[27]](#footnote-27)Sin has made human attempts completely corrupted, finding all the creation, including man’s work, under the curse of alienation. The Genesis curse has become the theological source of alienated labor. This does not mean that the transformation of social order, understood as the attempt of overcoming the *status quo*, must not be made, but that means it should be completed within the Christian community as the “vanguard” announcing the revolution of God.

When Barth deals with the labor as an alienating power he turns to the Sabbath as the Command of God which provides the relief from the toils of working life. The Sabbath rest points to certain things. In creation God works before He enters into the Sabbath rest. But humans enter into the Sabbath rest before they start to work. The rest of God signals the limitation of God’s active creativity which reveals He sovereign will towards His creation. The Sabbath rest signals God’s self-limitation for His creative activity and thus sets His will towards the creation. First of all, God’s rest reveals the freedom of God. Without self-limitation of His creative activity God would not be free like He really is. *A being is free only* – as Barth writes – *when it can determine and limit its activity. <…> God is being like this. His creative activity has its limit in the rest from his works determined by Himself.*[[28]](#footnote-28) Neither God nor His creature in the Sabbath rest is not determined by any necessity that enforces its will from outside that can drive forever onward. Second, the rest of God on the seventh day reveals His Love. Without God’s self-limitation to His creative activity, as Barth writes [*God*] *would not be loving God, but would be a being without love, never ceasing, never finding time for any creature, never satisfied with any, always positing other beings in infinite sequence. Although it might seem to be an ocean for love, it would not really be love at all <…> Love has a definite, limited object*.[[29]](#footnote-29) The limitation of God’s creative activity anticipates the incarnation of Christ who is God with us. So the Sabbath rest is the revelation of the deity of God, His freedom and love. The freedom of God which allows Him to rest from His works, to set the limitation to His creative activity and to define the object of His love stands in an evident contrast to the tendency of the endless pursuit for material growth, progress and consumption in the contemporary market economy.

**Conclusions**

By recognizing human work as part of the *active life*, not as a whole of it, Barth discloses the myth of modern Western civilization with its ethos of work which is evidently different from the Command of God. The work should never be over-spiritualized and lifted up to the level of worship. Work is not a prayer. Human work has its own place among other things which man is commanded to do, and surrounded by other things work gets its dignity and importance. The author of *Church Dogmatics* believesthat there is a vital connection between God’s calling and man’s responsibility for his calling. Such a responsibility must never be reduced just to the fulfilment of man’s professional duties. It requires a total obedience to the concrete call of God in particular circumstances. In that sense human labor in connection to the Genesis account of work should be understood as corresponding to tilling of the Earth and stewardship of the creation, without which life on the Planet would be impossible.

1. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation*, Vol. III/4, T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh 1979, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. J. Webster, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2000, pp. 212-213. In one of his opinions on this situation Barth writes: *When ninety-three German intellectuals published their approval of the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm and his advisors, among them I found to my horror the names of almost all my theological teachers I had greatly venerated. I suddenly realized that I could no longer follow either their ethics and dogmatics or their understanding of the Bible and of history. For me at least 19th century theology no longer held any future.* See: K. Barth, *Humanity of God*, John Knox Press, Louisville 1960, p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Th. F. Torrance, *Karl Barth: An Introduction to His Early Theology 1910-1931*, SCP Press, London 1962, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1968, p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. E. Bush, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing House, Grand Rapids 1976, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans …*, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Read more: A. J. Spencer, *The Analogy of Faith. The Quest for God’s Speakability*, IVP Academic, Downers Grave 2015, pp. 180 – 238. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. B. L. McCormack. *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development 1909 – 1936*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, Oxford 1997, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. Christian Life*, Vol. IV/4, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 1981, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. D. L. Miglione, *Commanding Grace: Studies in Karl Barth’s Ethics*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids 2010, p, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. K. Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays*, Peter Smith, Gloucester 1968, p. 80. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation …*, p. 470. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibidem, p. 518. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibidem, p. 519. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibidem, pp. 519-520. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibidem, p. 520. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibidem, p. 532. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibidem, p. 533. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibidem, p.335. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibidem, p. 537. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Ibidem, p. 541. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. K. Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Prometheus Books, New York 1988, p. 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibidem, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibidem, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibidem, p. 78. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation …*, p. 545. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics. The Doctrine of Creation*, Vol. III/1, T.&T. Clark, Edinburgh 1958, p. 215 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ibidem. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)