Donald W. Norwood


Donald W. Norwood, a veteran of ecumenical work, has written an earnest and incisive plea for renewed engagement with the theology of Karl Barth as a means to the renewal of the entire Christian communion, specifically through a re-engagement with the renewal initiated at Vatican II. Norwood draws on a wide range of Barth's work, including letters, speeches and accounts of conversations, as well as the major works. He pleads his case convincingly. Throughout the book, in his attempt to amplify the questions Barth posed to theologians, including Pope Paul VI, on his trip to Rome in 1967, Norwood offers his own assessment of the state of play in Roman Catholic life and theology, and suggests how Barth might contribute to its reform.

Chapter One addresses in convincing fashion three basic questions that might be addressed to Norwood's project. The first question is naturally, Why Rome? Norwood cites three reasons. The Roman Catholic Church is universal in extent and its membership makes up at least half the world's Christian population. The medieval church is the mother of all western Christians, the Reformers themselves being originally Catholics. Thus, in the West, Rome is the debating partner. Second, why the concern with 'reform' of Rome? Norwood's short answer is, because Rome needs it. Vatican II itself acknowledged the need for constant reform in Unitatis redintegratio 6 and John Paul II reaffirmed it in Ut unum sint 16: 'Christ summons the Church to continual renovation [Latin: renovatio] as she sojourns here on earth.' Thus, Norwood wishes to let the 'reformers' of the Council itself set the agenda, as Barth did when he made his visit ad limina apostolorum. But, Norwood adds his own issues to the agenda as well: contraception, priestly celibacy, and especially the role of women. Finally, Why Barth? In response to this question, Norwood cites Barth's stature, even, indeed especially, among Catholics. Barth is an excellent dialogue partner because he engages Catholicism through specific authors, not with simple generalizations. Viewed from the Roman Catholic side, Barth is the most consistent and penetrating representative of the Reformation with which to engage, and the Protestant theologian who made the closest rapprochement with the Catholic view, at least according to Hans Urs von Balthasar. Above all, Barth is a catholic, ecumenical theologian, concerned not simply with his own Reformed tradition, but with the whole church. Barth pursued the path of ecumenism primarily by way of a direct confrontation. Barth's frequent and sharp criticisms of Rome were intended 'to aid her reform'. Chapter Two asks, 'Was Vatican II the reforming Council that the Reformers asked for but never lived
to see?’. Norwood asserts that ‘it was better by far than any of us, non-Roman Catholics or Roman Catholics, had come to expect.’ Norwood argues that the influence of the observers was substantial, and cites a number of examples, and also claims, on the authority of Joseph Ratzinger, that Barth’s influence is apparent in the Constitution on Revelation, Dei Verbum.

Chapter Three examines Barth’s response to The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum, and The Dogmatic Constitution on The Church, Lumen Gentium. Norwood draws on Barth’s own writings to show the source of his approval of Dei Verbum, though with some reservations regarding the role of Tradition in its second chapter. He emphasizes Barth’s stress on maintaining the distinction between Christ and the church. He then takes up questions that arose after the Council, chiefly that of the priority of the local or universal church. Chapter Four deals with ‘Popes and Polities’. Norwood here stresses that, for Barth, the church is most fundamentally the local congregation, and ministry and mission are fundamentally carried out by the community. He rejects any hierarchy other than a flexible structure responding to direction from the Lord. Norwood stresses that the questions raised by the Council documents on the church concern all Christian bodies and denominations. Chapter Five engages the Roman Catholic critics of Barth. Norwood cites ‘six fundamental Roman Catholic concerns’ about Barth’s ecclesiology: ecclesial mediation; sacraments; human cooperation in salvation; the church as institution as well as event; the work of the Holy Spirit in the church; the church universal; the question of women. For the most part, Norwood gives the critics their say, and restricts himself to clarifying possible misunderstandings of Barth’s views. On the question of women, Norwood addresses questions to Barth and Rome together, seeing both Barth and Rome as falling short of the need of the times. He draws on a variety of feminist critics of Barth, as well as Roman Catholics critical of the restriction of the priesthood to men.

Chapter Six asks, Are there still ‘differences that divide?’. Norwood’s assessment is that ‘the only church-dividing difference is the church itself. This is also what Barth and Küng thought. We can reach agreement on faith, can live together despite different emphases in ethics but remain divided in our understandings of what the church is and is called to become’ (p. 165). He then addresses three areas: Justification by Faith; Natural Knowledge of God and the Analogia entis (analogy of being); and Mary and Joseph, the Immaculate Conception, and the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin. On Justification, the author leans heavily on the Joint Declaration of 1999. ‘On [the analogia entis] Roman Catholics and Protestants can be reconciled’ (p. 182). On the Marian doctrines, Norwood argues that critics such as Barth helped shape the fundamental decisions of Vatican II to treat Mary in the document on the Church. He finds great