

TO SPEAK OF NOTHING: EXAMINING BARTH'S DOCTRINE OF EVIL

A Research Paper

Submitted to Dr. Mark Rathel

of

The Baptist College of Florida

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Course

TH 403. Apologetics

Theology Division

Caleb D. Smith

December 2, 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Exploring Nothing.....	2
<i>Das Nichtige</i> in Light of Theological History.....	3
Concluding Summary of the Doctrine.....	6
Worth Nothing? Criticism of Barth's Doctrine.....	6
Nothing Good for Something: Insights from Barth's View.....	8
Conclusion.....	11

Introduction

Evil is evil. This tautological statement might sound obvious and pointless but in fact, possesses much gravity. In the work of Christian theology, or more specifically in the work of defending the Christian faith through apologetics, many have undertaken the task of explaining how and why a good God with sufficient power to destroy evil can permit evil to exist and do as many horrors as the human race witnesses each day. Unfortunately, for many of these answers, evil is not *truly* evil. Instead, evil is part of a greater good, whether that good is free will, the glory of God, or something else. Karl Barth, however, offered in his *Church Dogmatics* his own answer (or non-answer) about evil, one in which evil is authentically evil. He named evil *das Nichtige*, and this doctrine has much to offer Christian theodical thought today. This doctrine is topic of my essay. Specifically, I would like to argue that Barth's doctrine of *das Nichtige* arises from a long history of Biblical, catholic thinking on evil, and though there are certainly notable weaknesses, the doctrine must be commended for being truly prophetic against evil, bound and determined by the Word, and characteristically Christocentric. My goal will be to show that Barth may not have the last word on the problem of evil, but his contribution will be valuable when fully understood.

To assess Barth's doctrine of *das Nichtige*, first I will summarize the definition and explanation of the doctrine given in *Church Dogmatics*. Once they are presented clearly, I will compare and contrast Barth's doctrine with various other views throughout Christian history to provide illumination and context. I will then work from this gathered clarity to address the weaknesses of *das Nichtige*, particularly charges of fantasy, tension with Providence, mythologizing, and dualism. They will be set against the doctrine's strengths, and these last considerations will provide me sufficient material to perform a final analysis of the relevance and practical benefits which the Church might mine from Barth on this enduringly important issue.

With this route prepared, then, the man himself may be allowed to speak. What exactly is Barth's doctrine of *das Nichtige*, and what does the term even mean?

Exploring Nothing

“There is in world-occurrence an element, indeed an entire sinister system of elements, which is not...preserved, accompanied, nor ruled by the almighty action of God like creaturely occurrence.”¹ This shocking statement is how Barth introduced his doctrine of *das Nichtige*. The term itself comes from the German title of this chapter of the *Church Dogmatics*. *Das Nichtige* means in English “the Nothingness,” “the Null,” “the Negative,” or something else along those lines. The intention is to signify an absolute void, something which is not some thing but nothing(ness). Barth referred to evil in this way because he saw evil as fundamentally lacking in positive reality, but instead “existing” in antithesis to that which God wills to exist. For Barth, evil does not possess legitimate ontic ground. Evil belongs properly neither to the realm of Creator nor the realm of creature. Mark Lindsay summarized Barth's unique ontology of evil this way: “Properly speaking, we cannot talk of Nothingness as something which ‘is’. In strictly ontological terms, ‘only God and His creature really and properly are.’ This cannot be taken to imply that Nothingness does not exist.”² This paradox is essential to the doctrine of *das Nichtige*. Evil can only be categorized (if at all) as an “alien factor” in the world which seeks to corrupt and undo the creation, to drag the world back into the pure nothing from which God created.

For Barth, God willed and created for a good purpose of election, but *das Nichtige* can only be seen as that which God did not will or elect at all. *Das Nichtige* stands in opposition to both nature and grace, and thus is entirely unnatural and anti-grace. This anti-gracious character

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/3, §50, 289.

² Mark R. Lindsay, “‘Nothingness’ Revisited: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Radical Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust,” *Colloquium* 34, no. 1 (May 1, 2002): pg. 7, accessed November 18, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials [EBSCO].

of *das Nichtige*, its non-willed “existence” under God’s opposition, is precisely what characterizes evil as evil, precisely why God must vehemently abhor and ruthlessly assault the whole system. For Barth, none of this is technically apologetics, either, or a systematic theological account of evil, but merely a dogmatic acknowledgment that true theodicy is basically impossible. In fact, Barth preferred to move past this question of evil’s nature (or lack thereof) to its solution in Christ, who suffered both the fullness of Nothingness and God’s wrath against Nothingness, surviving and doing away with both in His triumphant resurrection, thus finally and entirely eliminating even the not-existence which *das Nichtige* has, leaving only an echo or deceptive memory. What Barth distinctively means by all of this will be made clearer as historical development is traced and as other doctrines of evil in this tradition are juxtaposed with his view.

Das Nichtige in Light of Theological History

To anyone familiar with Augustine’s doctrine of evil, one of the earliest known views, Barth’s view may sound similar. This is somewhat justified and somewhat mistaken. Augustine’s well-known take on evil was *privatio boni*, the absence of good. His famous analogy was that of darkness to light. For Augustine, evil is not something in itself but merely the result of good not being there. Thus only good can be considered the creation of God, while evil is not. This is clearly similar to *das Nichtige*, but there are differences which bear noting. For Barth, evil has something of a rebellious malevolence. Without having true being, evil nonetheless is hostile to God and His creatures. On the other hand, Barth emphatically denies any reality or natural propriety whatsoever to evil’s “non-nature,” whereas Augustine’s view could be seen to allow a

certain degree of “naturalness” to evil akin to way darkness is the nature state of the world without light. Both of them agree, however, that evil has no efficient cause.³

Barth considered the Reformed tradition his own home, and so traditional views of Reformed theology are also good for comparing his doctrine of evil. The classic Reformed position is that God sovereignly controls and ordains all things without exception, including evil. So says the Westminster Confession of Faith:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.⁴

This view appears quite clearly incompatible with Barth’s. The doctrine of *das Nichtige* absolutely refuses any notion that evil properly belongs to the will of God, whereas most Reformed thinkers have affirmed that God intentionally decrees every last occurrence, evil or otherwise. Representatives like Calvin would occasionally use the language of permission, but even this was rare and qualified. Yet for Barth and *das Nichtige*, the language of permission was essential and robust. Nonetheless, these drastically different views share the idea that evil has come into being alongside God’s act of sovereign election, even if the mechanism and divine intention are different for each.

In the modern era, there is certainly worth in comparing Barth’s doctrine with C. S. Lewis, despite the lack of any obvious connection. C. S. Lewis, as is well-known, relied heavily on the notion of free will. For Lewis, human freedom demanded the actual possibility of evil alongside that of good, for “all that is given to a creature with free will must be two-edged, not

³ Wikisource Contributors, "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series I/Volume II/City of God/Book XII/Chapter 6," in *Wikisource* (2010), accessed November 18, 2016, https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Nicene_and_Post-Nicene_Fathers:_Series_I/Volume_II/City_of_God/Book_XII/Chapter_6&oldid=2228839.

⁴ *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics), ch. III, sec. 1, accessed November 18, 2016, http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html.

by the nature of the giver or of the gift, but by the nature of the recipient.”⁵ This kind of philosophical reasoning is hardly a part of Barth’s style, but he also used a kind of free will argument relocated, focused on maintaining the integrity of the Creator/creature distinction.⁶ In this case, the mysterious power of *das Nichtige* manifests itself by taking advantage of the space separating human will from divine will. So both of them seem to bind up the possibility of evil to the creation of the good, though this for Lewis is a symmetrical relationship, whereas Barth views the two as strongly asymmetrical, with evil more of an impossible possibility taking advantage of the real space of possibility generated by creaturely independence.

For a final comparison, this one both ancient and modern, *das Nichtige* may be compared to an Eastern Orthodox doctrine of sin. In an interview with *The Christian Century*, David Bentley Hart sketched a doctrine of evil which seems to parallel Barth’s at several points which representing historic Orthodoxy. The Orthodox view has historical roots similar to Augustine’s and Hart affirmed that evil is “a privation of the good: a purely parasitic and shadowy reality, a contamination or disease or absence, but not a real thing in itself.”⁷ This clearly echoes the kind of obscure, reserved language for evil’s ontology which Barth used. Hart also vehemently denied that, in Orthodoxy, there is any necessity or divine purpose behind the origins of evil. God can use and work past evil, but He fundamentally did not will or deliberately plan for evil to play a role in His purpose of divine-human communion. This strongly favors Barth’s contradiction to classic Reformed thought on evil (though which Hart detests as blasphemous). Thus, perhaps surprisingly, Barth’s post-Reformed, post-liberal account of evil is actually profoundly close to the ancient view of Orthodox theology, which seems a positive sign.

⁵ C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001), PDF, pg. 60.

⁶ Nicolaas Vorster, "The Augustinian Type of Theodicy: Is It Outdated?," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): pg. 37, accessed November 18, 2016, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials [EBSCO].

⁷ David Bentley Hart, "Where Was God? An Interview with David Bentley Hart," *The Christian Century*, January 10, 2006, accessed November 18, 2016, <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-01/where-was-god>.

Concluding Summary of the Doctrine

With Barth's doctrine of evil clarified by comparison to other historic attempts, the results are a doctrine of mystery and absolute affirmation of the goodness of both God and God's creatures. Evil for Barth is not so much an apologetic issue which can be solved, but a disruption of theological thought which can only be described in awkward, negative terminology. *Das Nichtige* is not-being, but more than not-being functions as something of an anti-being, seeking to corrupt and de-create what God has willed, and is anti-grace, devoid of God's grace and seeking to erase all its benefits. God has not chosen to create, ordain, or design any evil substances or mere happenings apart from evil's prior historical appearance as opposition to His creative design. This is a fiercer doctrine of evil than Augustine's *privatio*, a more uncompromising doctrine of God's goodness *vis-à-vis* evil than most Reformed views, a more equivocal doctrine of human evil than Lewis', and a surprising friend to Orthodoxy's approach. With this fuller picture in place, Barth's weaknesses on evil can be brought out with precision.

Worth Nothing? Criticism of Barth's Doctrine

The first criticism which many have raised against the doctrine of *das Nichtige* is that an account of evil as both fundamentally characterized by not-being and truly and utterly defeated in Christ seems patently false, a form of denial about the clear reality of the visible world. Given that Barth specifically wrote during the time of Nazism and was well aware of the deep, inestimable darkness of the Holocaust, some like Lindsay have suggested that Barth's doctrine, which takes no explicit account of such events, is necessarily an anemic account of evil.⁸ Is Nothingness a strong enough concept to explain the atrocities of the Second World War? Can Jesus' once-for-all complete annihilation of *das Nichtige* really be considered realistic in light of the Auschwitz? Of course, there are potential responses to this, but the objection is

⁸ Lindsay, "'Nothingness' Revisited," 16.

understandable. This also seems to tie in with Barth's unequivocal rejection of natural theology and general revelation; the Holocaust is not Christ, and so was never suitable material for doing theological work.

A second objection which might be raised against the doctrine of *das Nichtige* involves providence: if God truly does not will, cause, determine, or ordain evil, then how can His providence be authentically and robustly active over the dark forces of the world? This objection is stronger from Calvinists who might assert that such a doctrine completely dismantles God's absolute sovereignty. While this second form of the objection is not especially compelling given the many weaknesses in a theory of divine determinism, the basic question stands and begs answering. This is compounded by the way in Scripture that God often overruled and guided evil, sending disaster this way and that, and even hardening people's hearts. While there probably are possible ways to answer, not least from more carefully studying Barth's account itself, that work remains to be done.

More serious an objection is the questionable, mythological or speculative nature of *das Nichtige* as an attempted account of evil. At one point Barth implied that the divine conflict against *das Nichtige* goes back in a certain sense (more in a logical than chronological sense, to be sure) behind the time of creation itself, with God's act of creation being directed against the void which would have there be nothing else but Nothingness.⁹ In addition, the ontology of evil, the non-existing existence of *das Nichtige* as that which God rejected and did not create, seems simply outlandish. Certainly, this whole picture is a bit strange and calls to mind many of the pagan myths of a deity triumphing over a lesser deity in order to create the world mankind now inhabits. This is odd for Barth more than others, given his resistance to all human projection and speculation. Any attempt to make *das Nichtige* into a workable Christian account of evil would

⁹ Barth, CD III/3, §50, 290.

have to address why and how such a bizarre account could be justified. This, again, can likely be done, and later a possible way will be suggested.

A final objection, and quite possibly the most serious of them all, is the way that Barth's view of *das Nichtige* seems to construct an uncomfortable and questionable partial dualism in the heart of Christian theology. If indeed the struggle with *das Nichtige* goes back to the beginning of the act of creation itself, and if evil's paradoxical existence of not-being ultimately traces back to God's election of creation and covenant as the rejected alternative of desolation and anti-grace, then one has to ask whether some principle indeed made evil inevitable and necessary after all. Has Barth bound even God's creative power to some higher principle which requires evil, even if the dualism is asymmetrical (and thus partial) due to Christ's final and decisive eradication of *das Nichtige*? Lindsay addressed the problem in this way:

Hick raises a similar point when he queries why God, in the positive act of creation had, in logical necessity, also to create the "third factor" of Nothingness. Why can we not conceive of a God who is able to create a good universe "that is not accompanied by the threatening shadow of rejected evil?" Why must God choose good and reject evil, as though these realities were existences "which already [stood] in some way before Him...?"¹⁰

This is perhaps the most difficult and problematic question for the whole doctrine, and unless a remedy can be proposed, the Church may one day simply need to plunder Barth's view for its benefits and move on to something else. So just what are these benefits?

Nothing Good for Something: Insights from Barth's View

Despite the various weaknesses of Barth's doctrine of *das Nichtige*, there are several commendable features from which the Church catholic may greatly benefit. The first of these worth mentioning is the way *das Nichtige* can serve Bible reading. While at first glance this doctrine hardly seems much relevant to any specific statements in the Scriptures, there are a few

¹⁰ Lindsay, "Nothingness' Revisited," 13.

places where its relevance appears. One of the more interesting applications is in the Old Testament passages which depict creation in terms of mythological conquest.¹¹ Barth knew that the mythological-sounding language he used was not at all univocal, but such descriptions do correspond with something that Scripture says about God's supremacy in creating and preserving the world. What if the Biblical reader thought of Rahab as *das Nichtige*? That may not be identical to the original intent but ironically may very well give the modern reader a similar impression to what the ancient reader heard.

Another strength of Barth's doctrine is its prophetic character with respect to the absolute nature of evil as evil and not good. In too many other Christian accounts of evil, evil truly cannot but be part of the good, either the necessary possibility which makes free will and human love real or the darker half of God's plan of self-glorification. The doctrine of *das Nichtige* neither requires nor permits such a concept of evil's existence as inherently justified by its role as means to any end. Instead, being neither proper to the good God nor His good creatures, evil is fully wicked, unjustified, and unacceptable, allowed to truly be evil without merely being the balance to the Force. *Das Nichtige* is not truly a theodicy, for as McDowell explained, Barth knew that any such project had to in some sense or way trivialize evil and offer cover for its sources and activities.¹² Thus following Barth on this point gives the Church solid ground to call out evil in an entirely uncompromised and uncompromising way.

In response to the charge above that *das Nichtige* represents a theology of denial and insufficiency by claiming evil is truly a dead void post-Calvary, there is, in fact, the entirely reasonable defense that Barth may be simply following Luther in submitting to a theology of the

¹¹ E.g. Job 26:12.

¹² John C. McDowell, "Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, no. 3 (November 2002): pg. 324, accessed November 18, 2016, Academic Search Premier [EBSCO].

Word and of faith. Never mind what the world may appear to be; what God has declared alone matters. The reality men think they perceive is not ultimate, but only the reality which God has spoken by His omnipotent Word. Barth would certainly agree with Luther when he said, “He who believes God, recognizes Him as true and faithful, and himself as a liar; for he mistrusts his own thinking as false, and trusts the Word of God as being true, though it absolutely contradicts his own reasoning,”¹³ and so ought the Church today. In the face of the whatever reality appears to contradict the Gospel of Christ, the Gospel must be allowed to take precedence and declare the truth. If therefore, Barth is right to say that Christ declares Himself the absolute and unqualified victor over *das Nichtige*, consigning the beast entirely to the empty past, the Church ought to learn to have faith in the Word and not doubt.

Finally, though, the most important strength of Barth’s doctrine is the way Christ stands central. The *das Nichtige* was exposed and climactically annihilated on the Cross in the flesh of Jesus. Jesus survived, along with His divine-human union, but *das Nichtige* has been banished forevermore, stripped of even its old quasi-reality. All that remains is but an echo of a shell of a memory, but the risen Christ stands triumphant. From the beginning to the end, in ways also unexplored here due to space constraints, Barth’s doctrine of evil is viewed through the lens of Christology, and even if the exact results are less than perfect, the focus and methodology must be commended. If Jesus really is the true center and subject of all the world and God’s activity in the world, then there is no excuse for even attempting to describe an account of evil which makes sense without reference to Him. Barth successfully avoided that error and knew nothing about evil except Christ crucified. If nothing else is worth following in Barth’s doctrine of *das Nichtige*, this theme is.

¹³ Martin Luther and John Theodore Mueller, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1954), pg. 87.

Conclusion

What, then, is the result of all this? Is the doctrine of *das Nichtige* of benefit? By all means, it is! Nothingness is definitely a productive angle for approaching the problem of evil, one which had precedent and support in the thought of the Church catholic well before Barth ever wrote a word. Augustine and the Orthodox are especially close to this view, but similarities may even be found in the Reformed tradition and C. S. Lewis. In all of these cases, Barth's catholicity and uniqueness shine through his flawed but fundamentally helpful account of evil, an account which, like all of Barth's theology, found a compass in the person of Jesus Christ. Any doctrine which exalts and serves Christ in this way deserves at least a seat at the discussion table. Indeed, this doctrine can serve Christ, and a few reasons on why and how are in order.

There are a few possible useful implications of Barth's doctrine of evil. In Christian preaching, the preacher is freed to call out evil and unqualified evil without equivocating or fearing the question, "Why would a good God allow evil, and what if He uses evil?" No conflicts of conscience, questions about God's purposes and character, are necessary since evil is assigned a role of pure and complete opposition to divine willing and creating. Those wrestling with the problem of evil, both within the Church and without Her, may be pointed not towards philosophers and constructed systems but to Christ and Him crucified. Regardless of how and why evil came to be in actual metaphysical detail, the minister may proclaim that God has used His omnipotent power to mortify the phenomenon. This can also be an impetus to evangelism, the Church thus energized to take on the world, the flesh, and the Devil with its witness, knowing the forces to have already been destroyed in Christ. Hope may be allowed full reign, even in the darkest of times, and the Gospel can be proclaimed in force to all people: Jesus is Lord, over and against the evil forces, even *das Nichtige*, which He has vanquished.

Bibliography

- Barth, Karl. *Church Dogmatics*. Vol. 3.3, *The Doctrine of Creation*. Edited by G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance. Translated by G. W. Bromiley, G. T. Thomson, and Harold Knight. London: T&T Clark, 2009.
- Hart, David Bentley. "Where Was God? An Interview with David Bentley Hart." *The Christian Century*, January 10, 2006. Accessed November 18, 2016. <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2006-01/where-was-god>.
- Lewis, C. S. *The Problem of Pain*. New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001. PDF.
- Lindsay, Mark R. "'Nothingness' Revisited: Karl Barth's Doctrine of Radical Evil in the Wake of the Holocaust." *Colloquium* 34, no. 1 (May 1, 2002): 3-19. Accessed November 18, 2016. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials [EBSCO].
- Luther, Martin, and John Theodore Mueller. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1954.
- McDowell, John C. "Much Ado about Nothing: Karl Barth's Being Unable to Do Nothing about Nothingness." *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 4, no. 3 (November 2002): 319. Accessed November 18, 2016. Academic Search Premier [EBSCO].
- Vorster, Nicolaas. "The Augustinian Type of Theodicy: Is It Outdated?" *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5, no. 1 (2011): 26-48. Accessed November 18, 2016. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials [EBSCO].
- The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics. Accessed November 18, 2016. http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html.
- Wikisource Contributors. "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers: Series I/Volume II/City of God/Book XII/Chapter 6." In *Wikisource*. 2010. Accessed November 18, 2016. https://en.wikisource.org/w/index.php?title=Nicene_and_Post-Nicene_Fathers:_Series_I/Volume_II/City_of_God/Book_XII/Chapter_6&oldid=2228839.